

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GETHSEMANE - IMPORT AND RESULT

I CONFESS that whenever I am called upon to treat of the sacred mysteries of Gethsemane, I cannot divest myself of a certain degree of awe. I feel as if there stood at the gate of that garden a cherub, who, if not with a flaming sword, yet with a repelling gesture refused admittance, and emphatically repeated our Lord's injunction to tarry outside, while He retires to pray. A feeling always seizes me, as if it were unbecoming to act as a spy on the Son of the living God in His most secret transactions with His heavenly Father; and that a sinful eye ventures too much in daring to look upon a scene in which the Lord appears in such a state of weakness and abandonment that places Him on the same footing with the most miserable among men.

Besides, I know that I am expected to introduce the reader into depths which make the head turn giddy to look down upon; to solve enigmas, the complete deciphering of which I must despair of on this side of eternity; to explain mysteries, for the unsealing of which my own soul vainly languishes; and to draw aside veils which, as often as I attempt it, seem the more to thicken. But the Gospel brings the mysterious narrative before us for consideration, and hence it is incumbent upon us to enter into its sacred gloom, and seek to comprehend as much of it as human apprehension is capable of.

The events in the garden of Gethsemane, with their scenes of horror, have passed in review before us. If we are not entitled to regard the position in which we find the Saviour there as altogether extraordinary, superhuman, and singular, we should do better to close the gate of that enclosure, and withdraw the Holy One of Israel from the eyes of the world, if we wish to save His honor, and that of His Father.

If, in Gethsemane, we have to do with Jesus only as a prophet or teacher, His office, as such, there suffered the most complete shipwreck; since we cannot then avoid the conclusion that He must, Himself, have been at fault with regard to His doctrine, and have lost the courage to die for it.

If He is to be regarded in Gethsemane only as the model of unconditional resignation to God, we must say that He scarcely attained even to this, since Stephen and many other martyrs have appeared greater than Jesus, with His bloody sweat and agonizing prayer that the cup might pass from Him.

If we are to look upon Jesus only as a Man desirous, by his example, of sealing the truth that in the time of distress, the Lord God is near His people with His help and consolation - the question again recurs, where does such a tranquilizing fact appear, since the very opposite shows itself, and the holy Sufferer languishes from being forsaken of God?

If, finally, He must be viewed as a proof of that overcoming peace which never departs from the just, but accompanies him in every season of distress: we look around us in vain, even for such a testimony; for instead of peace, a horror seizes upon the Holy One of God which gives Him the appearance of one who is on the brink of despair.

We must, therefore, have to do in Gethsemane with something essentially different from what I have just mentioned, or Gethsemane becomes the grave of the Lord's glory. Heaven must fall, the order of the divine government be annihilated, and Christianity be forever destroyed, if the Holy Scriptures compel us to regard the cup which Jesus drank, as essentially the same as that of which Job, Jeremiah, Paul, and many others partook. Jesus' cup contained something far more dreadful.

Know, however, that the Combatant in Gethsemane loses nothing in our esteem by His being **"sore amazed and very heavy."**

We do not stumble at seeing Him tear Himself loose from His disciples, and then, prostrate in the dust, hear Him exclaim, **"My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death!"** Even His thrice uttered anxious petition, **"Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me!"** and His taking refuge with His weak disciples, as well as His requesting them to watch with Him one hour for His consolation - nay, even the bloody sweat, which flowed from His veins, and dropped from His sacred body to the ground - however much we may feel astonished, whatever sorrow it may cause our hearts, and however deeply it may horrify us - it does not make us take offense, nor cause our faith to suffer shipwreck.

In our view, brilliant stars shine over the darkness of Gethsemane.

We possess the key to its mysteries and the depth of its horrors; and we find it in the sentiment, which, in every variety of form, pervades the whole Bible: **"God hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."**

As long as Christ's position as Mediator is not acknowledged, the events in Gethsemane will continue a sealed mystery. Every attempt to explain them otherwise than by the fundamental article of His vicarious mediation, must be forever unavailing. Only through the light which it affords us, is everything rendered clear and intelligible to us in that appalling scene.

The most striking contradictions are then reconciled, and that which is the most strange and apparently incomprehensible disappears, and seems perfectly natural. The divine Sufferer in Gethsemane must be regarded in His mysterious relation to sinners. He here appears as **"the second Adam,"** as the Mediator of a fallen world, as the Surety, on whom the Lord **"hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."**

Three causes lay at the basis of Jesus' mental sufferings - the one more awful than the others.

His agony was caused, first, by His horror of sin, by amazement at the abominations of our misdeeds.

The transgressions which were divinely imputed to Him, that He might suffer for them as the Representative of sinners, crowd into the sphere of His vision in the most glaring light. He beholds them very differently to the view taken of them by man in his darkened state. They present themselves, to His holy eyes in their naked deformity, in their unutterably abominable nature, and in their soul-destroying power. In sin, He sees apostasy from the Almighty, daring rebellion against the Eternal Majesty, and base revolt against the will and law of God; and surveys, at one view, all the horrible fruits and results of sin, in the curse, death, and endless perdition. How was it possible that the pure and holy soul of Jesus, at the sight of such horrors, should not tremble and shudder, and be seized with a nameless abhorrence, of which we, who are so deeply infected by sin, have no conception? Only imagine personified holiness placed in the midst of the pool of the world's corruption! May it not be supposed, how a sinless messenger sent to Him from the Father, needed only to enter into such a horrible sphere of vision, in order, by his mere appearance, greatly to comfort and refresh the Saviour?

But do not let us conceal it from ourselves, that the sore amazement and heaviness which the Saviour experienced in Gethsemane, would still remain an inexplicable mystery, were we not permitted to conceive of Him as standing in a still nearer relation to our sins than that of merely beholding them.

We not only may do so, but are even compelled to it by the Scriptures.

The Redeemer as Mediator would have been able to suffer the punishment due to our sins only by having a consciousness of them. The personal feeling of guilt - that worm in the marrow of life - certainly renders punishment what it is, and forms its peculiar essence and focus. But if the doctrine of the satisfaction rendered by Christ is opposed on the ground that He was holy, and that, therefore, it was a contradiction and an impossibility for Him to have inwardly felt the condemning sentence of the law like a criminal - those who do so would become guilty of a very hasty and presumptuous procedure.

They would then be overlooking the supernatural and mysterious union, into which the God-man and second Adam entered with us, as our Head, and by which He received into Himself - not our sinfulness, for He remained immaculate as before-but our consciousness of guilt, together with its terrors.

You ask how this was practicable? Something corresponding with it, though in a remote degree, may be met with even in our human affinities and relations.

A father may take his son's faults and improprieties to heart, or a friend those of his friend, in such a manner as to be compelled to sigh, mourn, humble himself with brokenness of heart, and wrestle with God for mercy on account of them, as if they were his own.

When we remember the energy of love and sympathy with which Christ regarded us in our guilty state, and the further fact that He became actually identified with our race, the doctrine that He was made intimately conscious of our guilt is not unreasonable. We comprehend how the Psalmist could exclaim concerning the Messiah: **“My iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of my head;”** nor any longer wonder at Christ’s behavior in Gethsemane. The mystery of His horror, amazement, and dismay is solved.

Besides the abominable nature of sin, the Lord experienced its curse; and in this we perceive the second explanatory cause of the terrors of Gethsemane. He feels Himself as a culprit before God.

All that is implied in being separated from God, deprived of His favor, estranged from His affection, and a child of wrath, He feels as deeply, inwardly, and vitally, as if He Himself were in that situation. He descends the gradations of such feelings into the distress of the damned, and into those infernal horrors where the prophetic lamentations in Psalm 22 find their fulfillment: **“Be not far from me, for trouble is near, for there is none to help. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, my tongue cleaveth to my jaws, and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.”**

His soul is unconscious of God’s gracious presence, and tastes only the pain and distress of abandonment. Instead of intimate nearness, He experiences only a feeling of distance on the part of God. But He was not to be spared these bitterest drops in our **“cup of trembling,”** in order that the words of prophecy might be fulfilled in Him:

“He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:4).

Even the heavenly peace of His heart belonged to the things which it was necessary for Him to sacrifice as the ransom for our souls. Can we, therefore, feel surprised that when His sufferings rose to this state of inward abandonment, the inquiry as to the possibility of the removal of the cup should, with still stronger effort, be wrung from His soul?

The third cause of our Lord’s bitter distress in Gethsemane is to be sought in the world of fallen spirits. It is beyond a doubt that Satan essentially contributed to the horrors of that scene.

The Lord Himself intimates as much in the words, **“The prince of this world cometh,”** and **“This is your hour and the power of darkness.”**

And His repeated call to His disciples, when overcome by gloomy slumber, to watch and pray, lest they should enter into temptation, places it beyond question in what kind of atmosphere they were at that moment. The infernal powers have been let loose upon the Divine Redeemer. They are permitted to array against Him all their cunning, might, and malice.

If they are able to drive the soul of the Holy One of Israel to despair, they are at liberty to do so.

It is certain that they assailed Him in the most fearful manner, and strove to induce Him to suspect the conduct of His Father toward Him, and tortured Him with insidious dissuasions from the work of human redemption. Suffice it to say that our Lord's faith, as well as His patience, fidelity, and perseverance in the work He had undertaken, were never put to a fiercer ordeal than under the fiery darts of the wicked one which He endured in Gethsemane. Here the complaints of Psalm 18 were realized: **"The sorrows of death compassed me, and the floods of ungodly men made me afraid. The sorrows of hell compassed me about, the snares of death prevented me."**

Thus has the night of Gethsemane become light to us, although that light be glimmering. The connection between that scene of horrors and the garden of Eden, of which it is the awful anti-type, is unmistakable.

While in paradise the first Adam reposed in the lap of divine love, and, like a child at home, held peaceful converse with The Lord and His holy angels, we see, in the garden of Gethsemane, the second Adam sinking in agony to the ground, under the oppressive burden of guilt, languishing, forsaken, and horrified in the company of dark and infernal spirits.

How evident it is, from this contrast, that what was transgressed and violated in the former, was suffered and compensated for in the latter; and how loudly does the narrative itself testify to the truth, that Christ suffered in the character of a satisfying Surety, and an atoning Representative!

After having thus developed the mystery both of the causes and nature of Christ's suffering in Gethsemane, so far as we have been enabled so to do, let us now inquire into the blessed result which has accrued to us from them.

For this purpose it is necessary that we should apprehend the conflict in Gethsemane, not in the abstract, but in its inseparable connection with the whole of Christ's mediatorial sufferings. We see in every single stage of our Saviour's passion, some particular part of the salvation He accomplished brought before us in a clear and obvious light.

Let us hasten to Gethsemane, therefore, when we feel oppressed in a world where selfishness reigns paramount, and what still remains of the charity of the Gospel threatens to expire in self-seeking and self-love. The loving Saviour, whom we behold struggling for us in Gethsemane, continues ours; and how faithfully, ardently, and disinterestedly is He attached to us! What a price did it cost Him to elevate such unworthy creatures as we are from our misery, and to procure eternal salvation for us!

Resort to Gethsemane when you stand uncertain which way to choose - whether to give yourselves to God or to the service of the world. Gethsemane will make it evident to you what sin is. Look at Jesus. He did no sin, but only took upon Him that of others. How did it fare with Him?

"Now is your hour and the power of darkness," said He. He was given up to the assaults of the infernal hosts. How they fell upon Him! How they tormented His holy soul! What horrible company! what nameless terrors!

But know that what tortured Him for a time, menaces you forever! Think of being eternally doomed to endure the society and the scourges of the infernal powers! Is it possible to conceive of anything more terrible? Remember the rich man in the Gospel, who vainly besought a drop of water to cool his parched tongue. Who among you can bear to dwell with devouring fire, or abide with everlasting burnings? Be irresolute no longer. On the left yawns the pit, on the right shines the crown! Sin begets death, but the fruit of righteousness is life and peace.

Let us repair to Gethsemane, lastly, when the storms of temptation roar around us, and Satan goes about seeking whom he may devour.

The days in which our lot has fallen are dangerous, and few there are who are not carried away with the stream of impiety. Even in the circle of the believing and the pious, how much weakness of faith, decrepitude of spirit, want of peace, and discouragement do we perceive! He, therefore, who wishes to be secure, must resort to Gethsemane. There we shall not only find a Confederate in the conflict, who will point the way to victory - there we shall not only be aroused with the alarming cry, "**Watch and pray lest ye fall into temptation;**" but there the conviction is renewed within us, that the prince of this world is already judged - that every rightful claim of the adversary upon us is extinguished, and that what the evil one suggests to us of an abominable nature against our wills, falls upon his Own head, and not upon ours, since it has been long ago atoned for by the bloody sweat of Immanuel, in the case of penitent sinners, and can only have a purifying effect upon us according to the will of God. This faith is the victory, which has already overcome the prince of darkness.

Looking thus at Gethsemane, in its proper light, it becomes to us an "Eden," and is transformed, with its horrors, into a peaceful retreat. Within its circuit we are safe from the judicial inquiry, "**Adam, where art thou?**" In this garden flows the never-failing river of God, which waters the new paradise. How many thousand anxious souls have gone forth out of it, from the conflicting bustle of the world, into divine Sabbatic repose! Its holy gates are open to us.

Come, therefore, let us reverentially enter, and inhale its peaceful atmosphere!

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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