

# THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

### “ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI!”

ONCE A VOICE SPOKE from heaven to the people who were assembled around Jesus and the evangelist relates, some “**said that it thundered: others said, An angel spake to him.**” No one exactly knew what to make of the wondrous sound, although all were affected, amazed, and thrilled by a secret awe.

Such are our feelings on the present occasion, on hearing the echo of the cry, which sounds down from the cross; and I confess that my soul trembles at the idea of approaching the unfathomable depth of suffering, from whence the cry of “**Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani**” proceeded. How much rather would I lie prostrate on my face in silence before this awful incident, than write or speak upon it!

You know what happened to Luther, when he plunged himself in profound meditation on this most enigmatical and affecting part of the whole of our Saviour’s sufferings.

He continued for a long time without food, and sat wide awake but as motionless as a corpse, in the same position, on his chair. And when at length he rose up from the depth of his cogitation, as from the shaft of a mysterious mine, he broke into a cry of amazement, and exclaimed, “God forsaken of God! Who can understand it?” Yes, who is there that is able?

We find ourselves surrounded by an impenetrable darkness. But if the understanding has here reached the boundary of all human comprehension, yet faith finds a path amid these mysterious shades. A holy light precedes it, and that light is derived from the Saviour’s Mediatorship.

Enlightened by it, let us now contemplate, more closely, the awful cry of the dying Redeemer.

It is about twelve o’clock at noon that we again meet on Mount Calvary. The Saviour has hung bleeding on the tree for nearly three hours.

No change has meanwhile taken place in His vicinity, except that, in the little faithful group, we miss the disciple John and the mother of Jesus, the cause of which we know. A momentary silence has ensued in the crowd surrounding the place of execution.

We may suppose that even on them the sublime behavior of the divine Sufferer under His torture has not failed in producing feelings of emotion and shame.

They look up to the cross with silent seriousness. The moaning of the two malefactors in their agony strikes their ears, and the trickling of the blood of the dying men is heard as it falls to the ground. From time to time, also, the grief and half-stifled sobs of the little faithful group is heard, whom we now, in spirit, join, asking with anxious hearts if the Father will continue forever silent concerning His Son, and not at length make it known by some sign, which shall be obvious to all the world, that He, who was apparently rejected both by earth and heaven, was no transgressor, but in reality the Holy One of Israel, and His, the Father's elect and well-beloved Son. Lo, a sign appears! But what kind of one? Who could have anticipated anything of the sort? Our surprise increases to horror, our amazement to dismay.

The sun, just arrived at the meridian, withdraws its beams, as if the earth were no longer worthy of its light, and begins visibly, in a clear sky, to grow dark. First twilight commences, as at the decline of day; and this is followed by the obscurity of evening. Gloomy night at length spreads itself like a funeral pall, not only over the land of Judea, but over the whole of the enlightened part of the earth.

The animal creation are terrified. The herds of the field crowd bellowing together. The birds of the air flutter, alarmed, to their retreats, and the masses of the people who surround the place of execution hurry back with loud outcries to Jerusalem, wringing their hands and beating their breasts. Trembling and lamentation extend into palaces and cottages, as if the world were menaced with destruction.

The primitive fathers, as for instance Origen and Eusebius, were acquainted with heathen records, some of which were from distant countries, such as that of Phlegon a freedman of the Emperor Adrian, which mentions an eclipse of the sun at the same time with the crucifixion of Christ, and that one so entire, terrific, and wonderful had never before been seen in the world.

An ancient tradition also states that Diogenes witnessed, in Egypt, the solar darkness which preceded the death of Jesus, and exclaimed, "Either the Deity Himself suffers at this moment, or sympathizes with one that does."

We also stand amazed at this terrific phenomenon, in which even the blindest cannot mistake the finger of the Almighty. But what does this gigantic hieroglyphic on the pillars of the world denote? Some have supposed it to convey a symbolical manifestation of the wrath of God against the murderers of Jesus.

But such an interpretation is not in accordance with the event that is taking place on Calvary, and in which God, by the giving up of His only-begotten Son, evinces not merely His judicial severity and avenging justice, but especially His compassion for the murderers.

The inference has also been drawn from the darkness that nature must have suffered in the death of Christ. But there seems little ground even for this explanation, since Christ, by His vicarious death, became, in an especial manner, the Renovator of nature.

It has also been supposed that the nocturnal darkness typified the fact that with Christ, the Light of the world was extinguished. But it was just in Christ's vicarious death that the Light of consolation and of real life rose upon the world. A sympathy also of the irrational creation with the pangs of its Lord and Master has been spoken of; but there is no room here for such poetic speculations. The sun did not obscure itself, but it was the Almighty who clothed it in that mourning-dress.

The import of the sudden darkness lies incomparably deeper than the attempts at explaining it.

Even the mournful cry of the Sufferer does not leave us for a moment to doubt that the darkness stood in immediate relation to His sacred Person, and the situation in which He was at the time. It is true, indeed, that the miraculous event, according to the purpose of God, was intended to intimate to the world the wondrous nature of the fact about to be chronicled in its history, that the eternal Son, the source of all life, became Himself a prey to death.

But the chief object of the appalling phenomenon was to shadow forth by a stupendous figure, the mysterious position and inward state at the time, of Him who bled on the cross. The Lord withdrew Himself from the eyes of men behind the black curtain of appalling night, as behind the thick veil of the temple. He hung there full three hours on the cross, His thorn crowned head drooping on His breast, involved in that darkness. He is in the Most Holy Place. He stands at the altar of the Lord. He performs His sacrificial functions. He is the true Aaron, and at the same time the Lamb.

That which, during this time, passed between Him and His Father, lies for the present sealed as with seven seals, hidden in the depths of eternity. We only know that behind that veil, He was engaged in the most ardent conflict, gained the most brilliant victory, and adorned His representative obedience with its final crown.

We know that the grave of our sins was then dug; the handwriting that was against us taken out of the way; the curse which impended over us blotted out; and the wall which separated us from our God removed.

Call the sight of the Redeemer weltering in His blood, and in total darkness, heart-rending if you will; we know not a more delightful scene in heaven or on earth. The Man on the cross is to us the fairest star in the horizon of the world. We behold it, and feel delivered from every evil.

When Moses came forth from the darkness in which God dwelt, his face shone in such a manner that the astonished Israelites could not bear the sight. The radiance which we wear upon our brow from the darkness of Calvary, as far as we enter believingly into it, is milder and more pleasant; for it is the radiance of a peace of which the world is ignorant, and the reflection of an inward and triumphant joy of which even the angels might envy us.

But I hear you say, "Explain to us the meaning of the awful darkness; decipher the terrific and ambiguous hieroglyphic, and unfold to us the state it indicates."

Listen, then.

The phenomenon Signifies the withdrawing of another Sun than the earthly one - the obscuring of an inward world. It shadows the going down of a day of comfort and joy. It points to a night of the soul, in which the last bright star is about to disappear.

Imagine to yourselves, if possible, a Man free from sin, holy, nay, of divine nature, who calls the Almighty His light, God's nearness His paradise, and God's love His bliss. Imagine Him deprived of all this, no longer refreshed with any experience of the gracious presence of His heavenly Father, and although exclaiming, "**Whom have I in heaven but thee?**" banished into dreadful and horrifying visions of hell, and surrounded by nothing but images of sin and death.

Imagine such a One, and then say if His state is not strikingly depicted by the midnight darkness which overspreads the earth.

The third hour of this appalling and universal gloom is drawing to a close. The sun again begins to cast off his obscuring veil. The Sufferer then breaks His long and anxious silence, and, like some cry of distress from the shaft of a mine, but at the same time, like a trumpet-sound of victory, the incomprehensible and heart-affecting exclamation breaks forth, "**Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!**"

Under the influence of reverential awe, the evangelists give us this cry in the same language in which it was uttered by the divine Sufferer. It is as if they were apprehensive lest a rendering of it into Greek might detract somewhat from its import.

Like us, all believers for eighteen hundred years have stood amazed and astonished before these words, and have sought in vain to fathom their depth. You are aware that the words, "**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!**" form the commencement of the twenty-second Psalm, in which David, impelled and guided by the Holy Spirit, describes, while connecting with it his own sufferings, the lot of a righteous One sojourning in a sinful world.

His description, however, expands in the sequel so much, that the Psalmist's personal state and circumstances lose themselves in it; and a child must perceive that more stupendous and important events than those in the life of David mingle in the expressions made use of by him.

The portrait of a guiltless Sufferer gradually increases to a sublimity which has found its perfect antitype in the life of the holy Jesus. In the picture features appear of which we meet with only slight traces in David's history, and which, therefore, call upon us to seek the literal fulfillment elsewhere. For the Sufferer in the Psalms is not only represented as the offscouring of the whole world, not only do those who see Him say to Him, "**He trusted in the Lord that he would deliver him; let him deliver him, seeing that he delighted in him**" - not only must He agonizingly exclaim, "**I am poured out like water; all my bones are out of joint; my tongue cleaveth to my jaws, and thou hast brought me into the dust of death**" - but He must also see what David never experienced, that His hands and feet were pierced, and that His enemies parted His garments among them, and casts lots upon His vesture.

Besides this, His passion ends in such a manner as no other man's sufferings; for a glorious crown of victory at length adorns the head of this tried and faithful One, yea, He receives the testimony that His sufferings shall result in nothing short of the salvation of the world, and the restoration, enlightenment and blessing of the Gentiles.

Who is so blind as not to perceive that this just Man, who is so sorely tried, and who comes forth so triumphantly from the conflict, as depicted by the Spirit in this twenty-second Psalm, is no other than the promised Messiah in the person of Jesus of Nazareth? This is beyond a doubt, even if the New Testament had not expressly given that Psalm such an application. Even one of the champions of modern infidelity, prophesying like Balaam, has called the twenty-second Psalm "*the program of the crucifixion of Christ*;" and another, against his will, is carried away to use these words, "One might almost think a Christian had written this Psalm."

We will not entirely reject the idea that our Lord, in His distress of soul, bore this Psalm in mind. But if He uttered His exclamation with a conscious reference to it, He certainly did not do so simply in order that the words might be fulfilled; but only because that prophetic Psalm was now being fulfilled in Him. That mournful cry, as it proceeded from His lips, was the genuine expression of the most perfect personal reality and truth.

"But was Christ really forsaken of God while on the cross?"

How could He be forsaken of God, who was essentially one with Him, and when just at the moment of His unconditional obedient self-sacrifice on the cross, He was the object of His supreme and paternal good pleasure? But in the depths of suffering into which He had then sunk, and through which His cry of "**Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!**" darts like a flash of lightning-such distress overpowered Him, such horrible and death-like terror appalled Him, and such infernal temptations roared around Him, that a feeling came over Him, as if He were exiled from the fellowship of God, and entirely given up to the infernal powers. Not only did all the horrors which were produced in the world from the dreadful womb of sin expand themselves before Him, but He also entered, with His holy soul, in a manner incomprehensible to us, into the fellowship of our consciousness of guilt, and emptied the whole of the horrible cup of the wages of sin - that is, of the death involved in the curse, which was threatened in paradise.

And no one stood by Him. No greeting of affection descended toward Him from heaven. No vision of angels refreshed Him in His great agony. The Father had really withdrawn Himself from His inward consciousness. If the trials in Gethsemane brought the Lord Jesus to the extreme boundary of obedience - those of the cross brought Him to the utmost extent of faith. Not a step, no, nor a line more was between Him and despair. According to Psalm 69:15, the idea entered His soul as with a vulture's claw, that these floods of suffering might swallow Him up, and the pit shut her mouth upon Him. It was then that the cry of "**Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!**" was wrung from His agitated breast.

But be very careful, in explaining this expression, that you make no mistake.

It is not a charging God with having forsaken Him, but rather a powerful defense against infernal incitement to such an accusation.

By the repetition of the words, "**My God,**" He makes it evident that solely by means of His naked faith He had struggled through all opposing feelings; and that God was still His God. Does He not, in these words, still cling with filial fondness to His heavenly Father, and say - although the words, "**My God,**" instead of "My Father," leave us to infer a superiority of inward reverence in the presence of the Eternal Majesty - "Between Thee and Me there can never be any separation!"

Perhaps someone may say, "But we hear Him inquire why God had forsaken Him."

That is true; but consider that the words do not, in the first place, ask the reason of His passion in general. Of this He was clearly conscious every moment on the cross. The question rather refers exclusively to the personal bearing of His heavenly Father toward Him, especially during the three hours of darkness; and the inquiry is a filial one, synonymous with "**Why art thou so far from Me, and hidest Thy face from Me?**"

But at the very moment in which He is threatened with the horrible idea that the hell which blazed around Him might close over Him, and when the nameless misery of being eternally rejected entered, as far as it was possible, into His consciousness, He fled from this horrible mental phantom, and from the fiery darts of the wicked one, holding the shield of faith against them, into the arms of God; and hence the following results as the real meaning of His mournful cry, "My God, why dost thou forsake Me, and withdraw Thine aid from Me? Have I acted contrary to Thy commands? Am I not still Thy child, Thy only-begotten Son, in whom is all thy delight? And Thou art still My God; for how shouldst Thou be able to forsake Me? Thou canst not; Thou wilt help me out of this distress. Thou wilt cause Thy face again to shine."

Thus, complaint - not accusation - a cry for help, and a victorious child-like confidence are the three elements which mingle in the exclamation, "**Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!**"

But let this suffice respecting a subject which, inaccessible to human comprehension, discloses, even to believing presentiment, only a small part of its sublime signification. But so much must be clear to everyone, that without the doctrine of mediation, Christ's mournful cry - and the cross would be altogether inexplicable. But, viewed in connection with it, the words become the solemn announcement of our eternal redemption. May God in mercy grant that as such they may find a mighty and increasing echo within us!

Thus, as far as it was possible - and with reference to the mysterious connection into which Christ as the second Adam, entered with our race, we must not imagine the limits of this possibility too narrow - the Lord tasted the bitterest drop in the accursed cup - the being forsaken of God.

The words, "**My God, why hast thou forsaken me?**" were certainly the Warrior's cry, with which He overpowered and victoriously overcame the inward feeling of abandonment. But nevertheless, it was a manifest proof that Christ had really to endure an arduous struggle with this feeling.

If we now inquire what fruits have resulted to us from this conflict.

The fact itself is encouraging and consolatory for us, that in our Lord's inquiry why He was forsaken, the consciousness of His perfect righteousness before God is so clearly manifested. For in default of it, how could He have ventured the bold question to the thrice holy God, why He had forsaken Him? But the most essential benefit which we derive from His conflict is a very different one.

It was not of Himself that He thought, but of the sinners whom He was representing, when He exclaimed, "**Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!**" For if God forsook Him, He had also forsaken them whom He represented. If God rejected the Surety's work as insufficient, the redemption of the whole world was frustrated. It was chiefly this consideration which forced from our Lord the cry of "**My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?**" and hence His question contains this meaning in it also - "No, Thou dost not forsake Me, thou acceptest My work, and I, therefore, cleave firmly to Thee as My God, and consequently, also, as the God of those whose cause I have undertaken."

But His heavenly Father did not suffer the cry of His Son to remain without His "Amen."

He uttered it symbolically, by immediately dispelling the darkness, and restoring to the sun its full mid-day splendor. The being thus forsaken essentially belonged to the cup which our great High Priest was obliged to empty for us. Hence there can be no idea that those who are united to Christ by the bonds of a living faith can be really forsaken of God. Even as for us no somber cloud any longer darkens heaven, and as we at all times behold the face of God unveiled, and every moment may enjoy free access to His throne of grace, so God will never more depart from us, whatever else may forsake us.

Though we may be abandoned by the world's favor, the friendship of men, earthly prosperity, and the bodily strength, though we may even be bereft of the feeling of God's nearness and the freshness of the inward life of faith; yet God Himself always continues near and favorably inclined to us in Christ.

However strangely He may sometimes act toward us, into whatever furnace of affliction He may plunge us, however completely He may withdraw Himself from our consciousness, yet in every situation the blissful privilege belongs to us, not only courageously to approach Him, and say, "Why dost thou forsake me, Thy child, for whom Thy Son has atoned?" but also to say to Him with still bolder confidence, "Thou wilt not, canst not, and darest not forsake me, because the merits of Thy only begotten Son forever bind Thee to me."

~ end of chapter 47 ~

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