

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“WHAT IS TRUTH?”

“**HE THAT IS OF THE TRUTH,**” said our Lord, “**heareth my voice.**”

Pilate then said unto Him, “**What is truth?**”

Some have found in these words a gentle sneer; others the expression of a complete indifference to religion. But neither of these explanations fully accords with the man’s character. The words are more profound and important. They shed light upon an entire age, and upon the inmost state of mind of thousands of its children.

Pilate lived in days which might be designated as those of the mature education of mankind, so far as we understand by that expression, intellectual and moral culture, to which the children of Adam, left to themselves, and by the exercise of their own natural powers and abilities, are able to attain.

Not only had art reached its highest perfection, but philosophy was also at the summit of its boldest investigations; and even to the present day we admire the systems which, by the effort of highly gifted reasoning powers, they called into existence. But still there was no satisfactory basis for them to rest upon. Although the human mind had brought to light much that was probable, yet anything certain and infallible was sought for in vain.

Even the greatest of all the sages of antiquity confessed that only if a God were to descend from heaven would it be possible for men to attain to that which was sure. Nay, the saying became common-place, that only one thing was certain, which was that we could know nothing of things above the reach of the senses, and even this was not entirely certain.

Pilate stands before us as the true representative of the social culture of his age.

Though we must not take it for granted that he ever deeply studied the various systems of philosophy, yet, like others of his own rank, he was doubtless acquainted with the essential results of philosophical investigation, while to the literature of his age he was doubtless no stranger.

This man's path through life brought him into contact with the Lord from heaven, and thus placed him in a spiritual atmosphere, in which feelings and presentiments again awoke in him which seemed to have been long stifled by the breath of the frivolous culture of the age which he had imbibed.

Christ, whose very appearance produced a strange effect upon this heathen, speaks to him of another world, of a heavenly kingdom, and finally of a truth which had appeared, and which, therefore, might be really found and known. Pilate then breaks out into the remarkable words, "**What is truth?**"

The polished heathen of that age, and one of the better of them, displays to us by the question his inward state. "**What is truth?**" was at that time the language of thousands: "That which we see with our eyes, and feel with our hands, is the only thing that is certain under heaven. No mortal eye sees beyond the limits of the region of the senses; and though the plea of a poetic imagination may be able to satisfy those upon one stage of life and culture, it cannot satisfy all."

In Pilate's question, we may further perceive the skeptical philosopher of rank, who is not only aware that the researches of human thought lead to the most diversified and opposite results; but who also cherishes the idea that he has himself reflected and ruminated upon the labors of the wise of this world, and that by his own reasoning upon them, he has arrived at the conviction that nothing can be known or ascertained of things which lie beyond the bounds of visibility.

"**What is truth?**" he exclaims - "One man calls this truth, another that, which is perhaps even something quite the opposite. Systems rise and fall. The man who seeks for truth sails upon a sea without a haven or a landing-place."

In Pilate's question is also apparent the boundless pride of the Roman citizen, who as respects enlightenment and culture, thinks himself far above all the other nations of the earth, and the Jews in particular.

Pilate utters his inquiry with a degree of inward, though transient excitement, as if he would say, "Thou, a Hebrew rabbi, wilt surely not think that I, a Roman patrician, am going to seek instruction from thee?"

The pervading tone of Pilate's question is, however, of a better kind, and is only slightly tinged with the discords hitherto mentioned. It breathes of melancholy, dejection, and even the silent despair of a heart which, with the belief in the existence of a world above the stars, cannot throw away the wish and the feeling of necessity for such a world.

The soul of Pilate finds itself unhappy and desolate in the dreary waste of absolute unbelief into which it is banished.

Were we to elucidate the governor's question, and explain it as proceeding from the inmost recesses of his soul, it would probably imply what follows:

“Thou speakest of truth, alas! Truth was never given to a poor mortal to be the companion of his steps. We inquire after it, but echo, as if in ridicule of our anxious desire, only returns our question back to us. Not a single truth has rewarded the many thousand years’ research of philosophic thought, and yet thou, Man of Nazareth, speakest of truth as of a resident on the gloomy earth! Death has been silent from the first; the grave below is silent, as well as the stars above; and dost thou wish to be regarded as having loosed their tongues and unsealed their mysteries?”

In Pilate there was doubtless something of the proud philosopher, something of worn-out indifference, something of the professed skeptic, something of the frivolous free-thinker and scoffer, and something of the hasty, jealous, and haughty blusterer, who, with his inquiry, “**What is truth?**” also meant to say, “How could you venture to trouble me with your Jewish matters of faith, who have things of greater importance to think of. But still there is something beside this - something better and nobler - an unperverted inquiring mind - a longing for deliverance, but bound down, alas! by the impure and gloomy elements, which enthrall him so that he cannot act at liberty.

As often as this question of Pilate’s occurs to me, it appears to me as if it had not been asked eighteen centuries ago, but as if uttered in the present day - nay, it even seems to sound in my ears as proceeding from my immediate vicinity. It strikingly indicates many philosophers of our own times, and the so-called “height” which modern intellectual refinement has reached; only that the question, in the mouths of our contemporaries, sounds infinitely more culpable than from the lips of the Roman, whose eyes had not seen what we have; for at that time Jesus was not glorified, nor His Spirit poured out from on high, nor the wondrous edifice of the Church of Christ established.

But after all this has taken place, for a man to step back again to the position of Pilate, a mere heathen, is something no longer human but devilish. An infernal spark now burns in skepticism; and the dubiousness of the Roman, compared with the unbelief of our baptized heathen, is almost like an innocent lamb contrasted with a wily serpent. Unbelief is now the light-shunning offspring of a wicked and rebellious will. We feel a degree of pity and compassion for Pilate, but for infidels of the present day, nothing is left them but “**the blackness of darkness forever.**”

“**What is truth?**” - It is soon found, when earnestly sought.

There are many, who inquire respecting certain truths, but studiously turn their backs upon the truth of the gospel, wherever it meets them. They would be glad to see solved a number of problems in nature and in human life; but all their research is a mere effort of the imagination, and the interest they take in it only vain curiosity. They take part in discussions respecting the creation of the world, existence after death, and the kind of life beyond the grave. But they shun the truth as it is in Jesus, and seek in a variety of ways to avoid and evade it.

Eighteen hundred years ago, a Man appeared upon earth, whom no one could convict of any other crime than that of calling Himself “**the Truth,**” and of having announced Himself as the Messiah, who should eventually subdue the whole world to His spiritual scepter.

Truth likewise appeared in the nomadic tents of the patriarchs of Israel, as well as in the encampments of the people of God, when wandering in the wilderness. It speaks to men in a voice of thunder from Mount Sinai, and in gentler tones from the hills and valleys of Canaan. We hear her voice on Bethlehem's plains, in the harmonious psalms of the "sweet singer of Israel;" and it greets us in the halls of the Temple, in significant types and mysterious hieroglyphics.

We approach The Lord's seers, and our astonished eye looks up to a brilliant starry firmament. They are thoughts of truth, which shine with such supernatural radiance. Led by the hand of these holy seers, we go forward, and are greeted at length by the Truth in person. "**I am the Truth,**" says One, everything about whom points Him out as more than human; and all who long for the light, are heard exclaiming, "**Thou art He!**"

Then let the question of Pilate, "**What is truth?**" no longer be heard upon earth.

It can now only be asked by imbecility or obstinate self-deception and diabolical hatred of the light. Truth has made its entry into the world, and dwells confidently among us, accessible to all who sincerely seek it. A philosophy that acts as if it must first bring up truth from the deep, or fetch it down from heaven, will be punished for its base ingratitude toward the God of grace by being left to grope eternally in the dark and never to reach the end of its fruitless investigations.

The true object of philosophy now would be to fathom and exhaust the inmost consciousness of the human spirit, and free from prejudice, to try the effect upon its indelible necessities of the truth which has appeared in Christ. If this were done, it would soon moor its bark, after its long aberrations, on the shores of Mount Zion, and joyfully exclaim, "I have found what I sought, I have reached my goal." All who seriously and sincerely inquire for truth will inevitably land at last in the haven of the gospel. Hence the Saviour was able, with the greatest confidence to say, "**He that is of the truth heareth my voice.**"

Let us thank and praise the all-sufficient God for the unspeakable gift He has bestowed upon us. "**Behold, the night is far spent, and the day is at hand.**" The prophetic call to "**Arise and shine for thy light is come,**" has long been fulfilled. May the admonition which that call includes be responded to by us, and its promise be experienced! Let us cheerfully make room in our hearts and minds for the Truth which stands at our door, and let us walk as children of the light. He is the Truth, who is at the same time the Way and the Life. Let us cast the viperous brood of doubts beneath His feet, that He may trample upon them, and make Him our all in all, for life, death, and eternity.

~ end of chapter 29 ~

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