

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“ECCE HOMO!”

WE STAND BEFORE GABBATHA. The judgment-seat is still empty. The scene, as we are aware, has been transferred for a time into the inner court-yard. We know the things which have occurred there. The evangelists describe them with a trembling hand. They mention the scourging only briefly. We think we see them covering their faces with their hands at this terrific scene; but they cannot conceal from us the tears which silently steal down their cheeks.

Impatience begins to seize upon the multitude outside; when suddenly, the gate of the praetorium again opens. Pilate approaches, visibly affected, followed by One who is surrounded by a troop of jeering barbarians. Oh, what an appearance does He present! - You shudder and cover your faces. Do so and permit me, meanwhile, to relate a brief narrative to you.

Heaven's pearly gates were once thrown open and a Holy One descended into the world - such a One as the sons of men had never seen since the fall. He was glorious beyond compare, and came to verify the dream of Jacob's ladder which connected earth with heaven. Love was His banner, compassion the beating of His heart. He sojourned three years among mortals, shedding light on those who were stumbling in darkness, filling the cottages of the wretched with temporal and spiritual blessings, inviting the weary and heavy laden to come to Him, in order to give them rest, and irradiating the darkness of the vale of death with promises upon promises, as with so many golden lights from heaven.

“I came not,” said He, **“to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give my life a ransom for many.”**

He testified that He came to redeem His people from their sins; that He would not leave them comfortless but would bring them to the Father, and elevate them to be fellow-heirs with Him in His glory. And how did He fulfill His promises, whenever any ventured to take heart and confide in Him!

O what blessings must such a Guest have brought with Him to a world lying under the curse! Even the angels around the throne might have envied the pilgrims in this vale of death by reason of this visit.

And as regards the children of men - "Doubtless," you say, "they received Him with exultation, melted into tears of rapture, conducted Him in triumph, and knew not what they should do to manifest their gratitude to their heavenly Friend and Deliverer."

Truly, one might have supposed that such would have been the case. "What, and was it not so?" My friends, lift up your eyes and look toward Gabbatha. You exclaim, "Who is yonder sufferer?" O, my friends, whom do you take Him to be? Look Him narrowly in the face, and say if wickedness could have vented itself worse than it has done on this Person? Alas! they have made of Him a carnival king; and as if He were unworthy of being dealt with seriously, they have impressed upon Him the stamp of derision. Look at the mock robe about His shoulders, the theatrical scepter in His hands, and on His head, which is covered with wounds and blood, the dreadful crown of thorns.

But who is this Man thus horribly disfigured? I think you will no longer seriously inquire. The lamb-like patience, and the superhuman resignation with which He stands before you, point Him out sufficiently clearly. No less does the majesty betray Him, which, in spite of all the abasement He experiences, still shows itself in His whole deportment, as well as the divinely forgiving love which even now beams from His eye. Who would be found acting thus in a similar situation?

Yes, it is the Holy One from on high who stands before you, the picture of agony. "**Behold the man!**" exclaims the heathen judge, deeply affected and faintly impressed with an idea of some superior Being. Ah, had Pilate clearly known what he only obscurely felt, he would at least have said, "You have here before you the moral pattern of our race, the flower of humanity, and holiness personified."

"**Behold the man!**" The hope is once more excited in the governor that he would still be able to accomplish the liberation of Jesus.

"Now," he thinks, "the blood-thirstiness of the raging multitude will certainly be satisfied. In the presence of One so full of dignity and meekness, the fury of the most cruel must subside and right feeling return, even to the most hardened."

Let us see what occurs. The people are about to reply to the governor's appeal - the people, that thousand-headed giant, of whom so much is said in commendation and whose appearance is so imposing; whose united voice is supposed to be always correct, and even proverbially esteemed equal to the voice of God. But what is the echo which resounds from the breast of the powerful monster in reply to the governor's exclamation, "**Behold the man!**" "**Crucify him! Crucify him!**" rends the air, as if proceeding from a single tongue.

"But are these impious men aware of what they are doing?"

Certainly not, in all its extent. In the person of Christ, they would gladly dash to pieces the mirror which mutely renders them conscious of their own deformity. In the Nazarene they would gladly extinguish the Light of the world, which they hate because they feel more at ease in the darkness of deception than in the broad daylight of unvarnished truth.

They neither desire an external conscience, nor the exhibition of a model of virtue, nor an awakener from their deadly sleep, nor, generally speaking, any moral authority Over them. On all these accounts, they are exasperated against the Holy One of Israel, and have nothing left for Him but the implacable cry of “**Crucify him! Crucify him!**”

Thus they are judged. In the manifestation of Him who was “**fairer than the children of men,**” our fallen nature has made it evident that its corruption is radical, its disease desperate, and its inmost tendency nothing else than enmity against the Most High God. Our race, in the murder of the Lord from heaven, has pronounced sentence upon itself, and filled up the measure of its guilt. The mute sufferer in the purple robe and crown of thorns sits in judgment upon it, and silently testifies that without mediation and an atonement, the seed of Adam in its whole extent, is exposed to the curse.

That which manifests itself at Gabbatha is only the mature fruit of a seed which grows openly or secretly in us all.

Do not call this assertion unjust. As long as we have not experienced the second birth by the Word and the Spirit, we do not act with regard to Jesus, in a manner essentially different from the wretched men at Gabbatha.

Like them, we are offended at the holiness of Jesus. Like them, we spit upon Him in spirit with our scorn, when He gives us to understand that we ought to bow the knee of homage to Him as our ruler.

Tell me, does not Christ still wear in a hundred different forms, the purple robe and crown of thorns in the world? Is He not exposed to public ridicule, and treated as a liar and an enthusiast, because He bears witness to His superhuman dignity? Is not His name, even to this day, proscribed by thousands like scarcely any other? Does not an ironical smile dart across the lips of many, when it is mentioned with reverence and fervor?

Truly, the sins which were committed on the bleeding form of Jesus are so little to be regarded as the sins and impious acts of a few, that the accumulated guilt of the whole human race is thereby made apparent. The cruel scene at Gabbatha is not yet at an end. It is daily renewed, although in a somewhat less striking manner. The words, “**Behold the Man!**” point not only to what is past, they have also a condemning reference to the present.

Alas, the world became a Gabbatha! The thorn-crowned martyred form exhibited there mutely condemns us all without distinction.

But the presence of the divine sufferer acts not merely judicially and condemnatory. It also exercises an influence commanding homage and reverence. However deeply abased the Saviour may appear, He is still a King. Even in His blood-stained attire, He accomplishes a truly regal work, and in so doing, ascends a throne on which no eye had previously seen Him.

It is not the throne of government over all created things; for to this the Father had long before elevated Him.

Do not mistake, while contemplating the man thus covered with disgrace. If He sways even the feeble reed in his hand, legions of angels would hasten down for His defense, and lay His foes beneath His feet. Just as little is the throne He here ascends that of an avenger and a judge. This also He had previously occupied. Let no one deceive himself; beneath His robe of mockery, He still conceals the thunder and the lightning; and consuming fire, if He permitted it, would issue from His thorny crown and devour His adversaries.

“But if He possessed the power to do this, why did He not make use of it?”

I answer, because beneath the robe of mockery He wears another and a different one, the purple of a compassionating love, which longs for the salvation of the lost. The new throne, which He ascends on Gabbatha, is that of a King of poor sinners and of a **“Prince of Peace.”** It is the throne of grace, from whence forgiveness flows down instead of retribution.

To this throne no other way is open to Him, but that on which we have seen Him walk. Before the curse could give way to blessing, the obligations of sinners must be fulfilled, their debts liquidated, and thus divine justice satisfied. This is the great work in which we see the Redeemer now engaged. Through suffering, He acquires fresh power; immersed in ignominy, He clothes Himself with new glory.

“Behold the man!” In the mock robe in which He stands before you, He gains victories and triumphs which He never could have won in the sumptuous robe of His divine majesty.

In it He overcomes eternal justice, while compelling it to change its sentence of death upon the sinner to a sentence of grace. In it, He overcomes the irrevocable law, by rendering it possible for it to withdraw the curse pronounced upon us without infringing its authority and dignity.

He overcomes sin, from which He rends its destructive power; Satan, whom He deprives of his last claim to us in the way of right; and death, from which He takes away the sting. To the Man, so disfigured as scarcely to be recognized, belongs henceforth the earth, as the price of payment for His blood. From its pillars He removes the insignia and armorial bearings of all usurping authority, and replaces them with the cross, the mark of His peaceful sway. And no one dares to interfere and say to Him, What dost thou? He is complete and unassailable in His own right. The world is His, that He may let His love rule over it, and not His wrath; and if He henceforth treats penitent sinners as if they were replete with holiness and virtue, who will be bold enough to contest His right to do so?

“Behold the man!” Yes, it is a strange ornament that decks His head; but know that in this wreath He possesses and uses a power of which he could not boast while only adorned with the crown of Deity, which He inherited from all eternity. In the latter, he could only say to the dying thief, **“Be thou accursed!”** In the former, He is able to say to him, **“This day shalt thou be with me in paradise!”** In the heavenly crown, he could say nothing else to a Magdalene, a publican, or a paralytic, than **“Depart from me!”** and give them over to perdition.

But in His crown of thorns, it is in His power to say to these guilty souls, “Go in peace, your sins are forgiven you!”

“Behold the man!” A feeble reed is His rod of office; but with the scepter of Omnipotence, which He wielded from the beginning, He did not perform the wonders which He works with this mark of abasement and weakness. The scepter of His majesty did not menace the kingdom of darkness in its claim on fallen man, since retributive justice, the basis of God’s throne, bounded His power with impassable limits. With the scepter of His lowliness, on the contrary, He overturns the seat of the prince of darkness, and hell itself dares not object to, nor can it in question.

It is not in the form of **“the Master in Israel,”** nor in that of the glorious Son of the Eternal Father, but in the form of the divine sufferer, that He inclines the hearts of those toward Him whom He has purchased with His blood.

No sooner does He display before them His suffering form, than they begin to be astonished, and feel attracted, as by a wondrous and magnetic power; and when they hear, as from His bleeding lips, that all He endured was for their sakes, it is His purple robe they first lay hold of, His crown of thorns to which they first pay homage, and His reed-scepter to which, in joyful obedience, they bow their necks, as to that of their rightful Lord.

Yes, the sight of the suffering Saviour is still the mighty power which silently changes lions into lambs, breaks and melts the stony heart, and prepares the way for His most glorious achievements.

“Behold the man!” Yes, keep your eyes fixed upon Him.

Even as he is the Judge and Conqueror, so He is also the Benefactor of the world. We know that He no longer stands on Gabbatha. He has long ago ascended the throne of glory, in a different robe and a different diadem to that in which we there beheld Him. But He left us His thorn-crowned image in the gospel; and oh, the wonders it has wrought in the world, and continues to perform, whenever the Holy Spirit illumines it!

He appears in this form to those who are grievously afflicted, and scarcely do they behold Him than they breathe more freely, and exultingly.

In this form He approaches His children when rejected and despised by the world, and when they see Him they feel already fresh courage.

In this form He restores those to His flock who had let themselves be seduced from Him by the allurements of the world.

A compassionate and warning look from His eye from under the crown of thorns causes them to melt in contrition at His feet.

In this form He appears to His children when the shades of death begin to fall around them, and their feet tread the dark valley; and when their half-closed eyes behold Him, they feel that heavenly peace flows down to them from His crown of thorns.

O may He thus appear to us, likewise, when our day declines, and the darkness of night surrounds us! May He then unveil His suffering form before us, when the gloomy path presents itself to our view, which we must tread alone!

When the consolation of human affection no longer reaches the heart, O may He then accompany us in our solitary path, in His purple robe and crown of thorns, and all that is dark around us will be changed into heavenly light and glory! For it is in this form above every other, that the great truth is expressed, that the sentence of death, and the curse are removed from our heads to His, in order that free access to the throne of grace may be granted us, when clothed in the robe of His righteousness.

Let, then, the sound of "*Ecce Homo!*" ever vibrate in our hearts, and nothing in the world ever cause His suffering form to fade from our mental view. The wisdom of the just consists, as Paul expresses it, in knowing nothing among men save Christ and Him crucified. Dying daily to ourselves and the world in fellowship with the dying Redeemer, in order daily to rise with Him to the new life in God, is our vocation. Let us be satisfied, remembering that "**we have here no abiding city.**"

How long may it be before we hear the sound of another "*Ecce Homo!*"

But if we then lift up our eyes, a different form will present itself to our view than that which we saw on Gabbatha. The King of Glory will then have exchanged the robe of mockery for the starry mantle of divine Majesty, the wreath of thorns for a crown of glory, and the reed for the scepter of universal dominion. He inclines the latter to us graciously as the symbol of His especial favor, saying, "**Come, and inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world!**"

And while from the interior of the heavenly city of God the never-ending hallelujahs of the blessed above greet our ears, our full hearts respond to the ecstatic acclamation, "**Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing!**"

~ end of chapter 36 ~

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