

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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PART TWO

THE HOLY PLACE

CHAPTER TWELVE

GETHSEMANE - CONFLICT AND VICTORY

IT IS NIGHT. The Lord has left Jerusalem with His eleven confidential followers, fully aware of what awaits Him. In deeply affecting converse He descends with them into the dark vale of cypresses, where once, during the reign of the kings, the fire blazed, in which the abominations of idolatry were consumed to the honor of The Lord. Here He crosses the brook Kedron, over which His royal ancestor, King David, when fleeing from his son Absalom, passed barefoot and in sackcloth, deeply bowed down by his own guilt and that of his people.

Affected by momentous recollections, and sunk in the contemplation of expressive types and shadows, the Saviour arrives at the entrance of the garden of Gethsemane (the oil-press) at the foot of the Mount of Olives, where ancient gigantic olive trees, to this day, point out to the pious pilgrim the very spot where the Lord of Glory wept over the misery of the human race, and prayed and agonized for their redemption.

We know that the Lord frequently retired to the solitude of that peaceful enclosure, after the heat and burden of the day, in order, by sacred converse with His heavenly Father, to strengthen Himself anew for His great work. Luke expressly remarks that He went “**as he was wont,**” to the Mount of Olives, but with feelings such as He had never before known upon entering that silent retreat.

The song of praise, with which He had left the friendly chamber at Jerusalem with His disciples, had long been ended.

The Lord’s solemnity increased, and it was evident that His soul became increasingly oppressed.

Everyone perceived the alteration in the Master’s feelings; and, therefore, it did not seem strange to the disciples that, on arriving at the garden gate, He should say to them, with deep emotion, “**Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder.**”

The disciples, obedient to their Master's dictate, seat themselves at the entrance of the enclosure, while He Himself, after beckoning to Peter, John, and James, His most confidential friends, to follow Him, goes before them deeper into the interior of the garden. It is of importance to Him, for the sake of His future Church, to have eye-witnesses of that solemn scene. He is also incited to take the three disciples with Him, by the purely human feeling of the need of affectionate and comforting fellowship in His approaching conflict. How beneficial it is, in seasons of trial, to be surrounded by friends who watch and pray with us! Christ was not a stranger to any purely human feeling of necessity. He was made in all things like unto us, but without sin.

The voice which resounded through the garden of Eden cried, "**Adam, where art thou?**" but Adam hid himself trembling, behind the trees of the garden. The same voice, and with a similar intention, is heard in the garden of Gethsemane. The second Adam, however, does not withdraw from it but proceeds to meet the High and Lofty One, who summons Him before Him, resolutely exclaiming, "**Here am I!**"

Let us follow Him into the nocturnal gloom. But what awe seizes upon us! The beings we there meet are well known to us; but how is their appearance changed! All is enveloped in mysterious obscurity, and the distress of our hearts increases every moment at the sight.

It is the eternal Father Himself who here presides; but what is left for us, in His presence, except to exclaim with Job, "**Behold, God is great, and we know him not, and darkness is under his feet!**"

His only and supremely beloved Son appears before Him in a position which might melt the flinty rock to pity; but compassion seems a stranger with Him, who yet said to Zion, "**Though a woman may forget her sucking child, yet will I not forget thee!**" We are tempted to break out with David into the piteous cry, "**Hath God forgotten to be gracious, and is his mercy clean gone forever?**"

For look, what a scene! Again and again does the Son cast Himself on His Father's bosom, with ardent supplication; but His ear listens in vain for a favorable Amen! from on high. There is neither voice, nor response, nor attention, as if the Eternal had in wrath retracted His words, "**Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, thou shalt glorify me!**" and had no longer a heart for Him, who lay in His bosom before the foundation of the world.

The cup of horror does not pass from the trembling sufferer; on the contrary, its contents become every moment more bitter. Louder sound the cries of the agonizing Saviour; more urgent becomes His prayer; but the Lofty One is silent, and heaven seems barred as with a thousand bolts.

A holy angel, indeed, at length approaches; but why an angel only, instead of the immediate and consoling vision of the Father? Does it not almost seem like irony that a creature should be sent to strengthen the Creator? And what kind of invigoration was that which was only attended with an increase of suffering? For we read, "**And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling to the ground.**"

But now let us fix our eyes upon the suffering Saviour.

Scarcely do we know Him again, so enveloped is He in an impenetrable covering of agonizing mystery and contradiction.

- He is the Man beheld in spirit by Jeremiah, and described in the words, “**His heart is turned within him, and all his members quake.**”

- He is the desolate individual, who testifies of Himself in the Psalms, “**I am a worm, and no man.**”

- He announced Himself as the Redeemer of the world, and yet, who seems to require deliverance more than He?

- He bears the sublime title of “**Prince of Peace**”; yet where ever was there one more destitute of peace than He?

See how He applies at one time to His Father, and at another to mere human beings for comfort to His desponding soul, and does not find what He seeks, but is compelled to return disappointed. His eye is filled with tears, His lips with cries, while His heart is crushed as in a wine-press, which forces a bloody sweat from all His veins.

Is this the One who was once the strength of the weak, the comfort of the sorrowful, the support of the feeble, and the shield of the combatant? Is this the Holy One of Israel, who formerly was prepared for everything, and joyfully exclaimed, “**lo, I come to do thy will, O my God! yea, thy law is within my heart**”?

And now look also at His disciples, who fill up the measure of these incomprehensible things; while their Master is struggling with death in indescribable agony, we see even the most select of the little troop lying on the ground, overpowered with sleep. He rouses them, and almost supplicates them to watch with Him only a little while; but they slumber again, as if unconcerned about Him, and leave their Master to His sufferings.

One of their number is he who said, “**Though all should be offended with thee, yet will not I, though I should die with thee!**” Another is the beloved disciple, who once lay on Jesus’ breast, and the third is he who formerly answered so resolutely in the affirmative to the question, “**Can ye drink of the cup of which I shall drink, and be baptized with the baptism wherewith I am baptized?**”

Behold here the little dependence to be placed on human fidelity!

But let us contemplate this mysterious conflict in Gethsemane a little more closely.

Scarcely had Jesus, with His three disciples, penetrated a few paces into the garden, when “**he began**” - therefore before their eyes, “**to be very sorrowful and very heavy.**”

In these words, the history gives us a hint that something unheard of before, now came over Him. At the same time, it intimates that the distress which seized Him was voluntarily endured by Him, after due preparation.

Mark, according to his peculiar manner of depicting the awful scene more in detail, gives us a clearer idea of the Saviour's distress, by saying, "**He began to be sore amazed.**" He makes use of a word which implies a sudden and horrifying alarm at a terrible object. The Evangelist evidently intends to intimate thereby that the cause of Jesus' trembling must be sought, not in what might be passing in His soul, but in appearances from without which forced themselves upon Him; something approached Him which threatened to rend His nerves, and the sight of it to freeze the blood in His veins.

Immediately after the first attack, Jesus returns to His three disciples, with words which cast a strong light upon His inmost state of mind. He says, "**My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.**" This does not indicate merely the measure, but also the nature and kind of suffering.

We read in the sequel, that "**he was in an agony,**" that is, "he wrestled with death." It was in the horrors of this state that our Surety felt Himself placed - not merely in the way of beholding them, but also in that of a mysterious entering into them.

Whatever men may say, without holding firmly by the idea of a Mediator, the horrors of Gethsemane can never be satisfactorily explained. A mere representation of the death of the sinner, from which Christ came to redeem mankind, could not have laid hold of the Holy One of Israel so overpoweringly. He entered into much closer contact with "**the last enemy.**" He emptied the cup of its terrors.

Observe now to what a height His distress increases. With the candid confession, "**My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death,**" He hastens back to His three friends, like one who, in his feebleness, welcomes even the slightest support and consolation, and speaks to them no longer like a master to his servants, but like one who is oppressed and in need of comfort, to His brethren who may possibly be able to afford Him help. "**Tarry ye here,**" He says, "**watch with me.**" He means, "Do not leave me; your presence is a comfort." It is not they, but He, who is to be pitied.

"**Tarry ye here.**" In what terrific vicinity must He have found Himself, that even the sight of these poor, frail disciples, seemed so desirable and beneficial to Him. "**Watch with me.**" This expression points out still more minutely the distress of His soul; for, though intended to serve as a warning to His disciples to be upon their guard in this hour of temptation, yet He claims, at the same time, their sympathy for Himself, and requests their compassion, possibly even their intercession.

Scarcely had He uttered these words to His disciples, when He tore Himself from them, and proceeded about a stone's throw into the recesses of the garden. Here we see Him sinking on the ground, first upon His knees, and then on His face, and the supplicating cry now forces itself, for the first time, from His deeply agitated soul, "**Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what thou wilt.**"

Yes, He would gladly have been spared the cup which was given Him to drink, the contents of which were so horrible; for it is a real Man, susceptible of every painful feeling, that suffers within Him. He wishes its removal, however, simply on the condition which is invariable with Him, that it should be in accordance with His Father's counsel and will. He says, "**If it be possible;**" He does not, however, mean this in the general sense, for He had already said, "**All things are possible unto thee;**" but He thinks only of a conditional possibility, within the limits of the object for which He had appeared in the world.

But it may be asked, "How can Christ still inquire whether the redemption of mankind can be accomplished without the cross and the shedding of His blood?"

This, however, is not His object. The Lord's question confines itself to the present horrors - the cup of Gethsemane. Let this circumstance, therefore, again remind us that the self-renunciation of the Son of God essentially consisted in His divesting Himself, to a certain point, of the use of His divine perfections generally, and of His unlimited omniscience in particular; in consequence of which He was in a position to walk in the same path of faith with us, and, according to the expression of the apostle, to "**Learn obedience by the things which he suffered.**"

The prayer of the divine Sufferer knocked at the door of the divine audience-chamber with all the force of holy fervor and filial resignation, but no echo greeted His ear. Heaven maintained a profound silence. The Suppliant, then rising up with increased anguish from the ground, hastens again to His disciples, but finds them - how inconceivable! - sunk in deep sleep.

He awakens them, and says to Peter, first of all - "**Simon, sleepest thou? Couldst thou not watch one hour?**"

An overwhelming question for the presumptuous disciple, whose mouth had just before been so full of assertions of fidelity even unto death! He then addresses this solemn warning to the whole three - "**Watch ye, and pray, lest ye enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak.**"

That which led Him back to the disciples this time, beside the need He felt of consolation for His agitated soul, was His ardent affection for them, who, like Himself, were surrounded by dangerous and infernal powers.

"**The hour of darkness,**" to which He had referred in a warning manner on a previous occasion, had arrived. The prince of this world had appeared on the stage in complete armor. The mysterious stupefaction and inability of the disciples manifests the baneful influence of the atmosphere they breathe.

It was, therefore, necessary that they should summon up all the powers of their mind and spirit in order not to succumb to the temptation to offense, unbelief, and apostasy. The words, "**The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak,**" must not be explained as an excuse for the slumberers, but be regarded as an additional reason for the warning He addresses to them.

The Lord again returns to the deeper shade of the garden, and prays a second time in a somewhat altered form - **“O my Father, if this cup may not pass from me, except I drink it, thy will be done!”**

One of the Evangelists mentions that He prayed **“more earnestly this second time.”** He does not mean that He urged His suit to be spared more importunately than before; but that, on the contrary, as soon as He perceived from the silence of His heavenly Father that His petition was refused, He strove, with an increased expenditure of strength, to enter still more deeply into the obedience of faith.

Meanwhile His inward horror continued to increase.

After rising up from prayer, He again sought His disciples, but found them still sleeping - **“Sleeping for sorrow,”** as the narrative informs us; **“for their eyes were heavy.”** And on being awakened, **“they wist not,”** in their stupor, **“what to answer him.”**

The Lord withdrew a third time into solitude, and prayed the same words.

An angel now descends to the suppliant Saviour, and approaches Him in order to **“strengthen him.”** This sudden appearance of a heavenly being must, in itself, have afforded the Lord no small comfort, after His mental imprisonment in the sphere of sinful men and lost spirits. Probably the mission of the angel was to strengthen His exhausted frame, and revive His fainting spirit, in order that in the last and most painful part of the conflict, the body, at least, might not succumb. For immediately after the return of the angel, **“Being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was, as it were, great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”** What a spectacle! Does it not afford a dawning apprehension of the nature and importance of Immanuel’s sufferings, and shed a degree of light upon the darkest and most terrific moment of the conflict in Gethsemane?

Let us refer, once more, to that mysterious prayer at which the world is so often inclined to stumble. It has been found difficult to make it agree with the Lord’s love to mankind, with His submission to His Father’s will, with His omniscience, and with His previous composure and resolution in announcing the sufferings that awaited Him, that He could suddenly desire to be freed from these sufferings.

First, as regards the objection derived from our Lord’s omniscience, we repeat what we have formerly stated. The self-renunciation of the Eternal Son consisted essentially in this, that during His sojourn on earth, He divested Himself of the unlimited use of all His divine attributes, and leaving that eternity, which is above time and space, He entered upon an existence circumscribed by time and space, in order that He might tread the path of the obedience of faith, like ourselves, and perfect Himself in it as our Head, High Priest, and Mediator.

As **“the Servant of The Lord,”** which title is applied to Him in the Old Testament, it was His part to serve, not to command; to learn subjection, not to rule; to struggle and strive, but not to reign in proud repose above the reach of conflict.

How could this have been possible for one who was God's equal, without this limitation of Himself? All His conflicts and trials would then have been only imaginary and not real. He did not for a moment cease to be really God, and in the full possession of every divine perfection: but He abstained from the exercise of them, so far as it was not permitted by His heavenly Father.

Observe, secondly, that the Lord in Gethsemane does not pray to be delivered from His impending sufferings generally but only for the removal of the horrors He was then enduring. How could He desire anything contrary to the counsel of God, who, when His disciples had exhorted Him against thus giving Himself up to suffering, rebuked them so severely? He only asks, if it be possible for the cup to pass from Him; and means that cup alone, whose bitterness and horrors He was then tasting.

Finally, the doubt whether the urgency of Christ's prayer stands in accordance with His love to sinners, as well as with His submission to His Father's counsel, is completely destitute of foundation.

He only asks His Father whether, without infringing upon the work of redemption, this cup might pass from Him. That He has only this conditional possibility in view, and does not claim the divine omnipotence in general for His rescue, He clearly shows by that which precedes His question. "**Father,**" says He, "**to thee all things are possible;**" by which He intends to say, "I well know that My conflict shall end at Thy pleasure; but wilt Thou be able to will its termination without thereby frustrating the redemption of sinners? If not, then refuse My request; I will then drink the cup to the dregs."

His obedience to His Father resembles His love to Him.

The invariable language of His heart was, "**Not as I will, but as thou wilt.**"

As soon as He became assured, by the continued silence of His heavenly Father, that the world could not be otherwise redeemed than by His completely emptying this cup:

He did not permit the wish to avoid the suffering to be heard again; but with the words, "**My Father, if this cup may not pass from me except I drink it, thy will be done!**" He accomplished the great sacrifice of the willing resignation of His whole self to His heavenly Father.

The cup of horror has been emptied to the very dregs. Our Lord raises Himself up from the dust, and hastens back to His disciples. The whole manner of His behavior, tone, and deportment is now essentially changed, and indicates encouragement and consciousness of victory.

We behold Him coming forth triumphantly from the conflict, and armed and prepared for all that is to follow.

“Sleep on, now, and take your rest,” He begins to say with reproof seriousness, **“It is enough.”** “For my sake” - is His meaning - “you need no longer watch; I require your assistance no more. My conflict is ended.”

But what means the addition, **“It is enough?”** What else than “Your slumbers will now cease of themselves?”

The words that immediately follow require this explanation. **“The hour is come; behold the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.”** He intends by these words to say, “The body is now concerned, and your liberty is at stake; who will think any longer of sleeping under such circumstances?” He knows what hour has struck. Not without a degree of apprehension, but still perfect master of His feelings, He courageously prepares for being delivered into the hands of sinners, with whom, by this expression, He evidently contrasts Himself as the Holy One.

“Rise up!” says He at the close, expressive of the valorous resolution which His language breathed. **“Let us go;”** continues He, **“lo, he that betrayeth me is at hand!”**

What a momentous appeal is this! The Champion of Israel goes forth to attack and overcome, in our stead, death, hell, and the devil, in their strongest holds. Let us adoringly bow the knee to Him and accompany Him with hallelujahs.

Thus has the most mysterious scene the world ever witnessed passed before us in all its affecting circumstances. In no earthly martyrdom is there anything which remotely corresponds with the conflict of Gethsemane. It is obvious, on the contrary, that in treating of it, we have to do with sufferings which are unique in their kind. Let us ascribe thanksgiving, and blessing, and praise unto Him who endured such great things for us.

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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