

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of CHRIST

By

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CHRIST BEFORE PILATE

THE DAY HAS JUST DAWNED - the most momentous, decisive, and eventful in the world. It greets our Lord with dreadful insignia. It approaches in a blood-stained robe, a crown of thorns to encircle His brow, in the one hand, and in the other, the scourge, the fatal cup, and the accursed tree; while it rises upon us with the olive-branch of peace, the divine acquittal, and the crown of life. O sacred Friday, day of divine compassion, birthday of our eternal redemption, we bless thee, we greet thee on our knees!

We find the holy city in unwonted commotion. Masses of men move along the streets. A spectacle like that which now presents itself, had never before been witnessed. The whole Sanhedrin has risen up to conduct a delinquent whom they have condemned to death, in solemn procession to the Roman authorities, in order to wrest from the latter the confirmation of their sentence. And who is it they are dragging thither?

The very man who was recently received, in the same city, by the same crowd of people, with loud hosannas, and was exalted and celebrated as no one had been before. It is JESUS of Nazareth, respecting whom they cried exultingly, "**Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!**" and of whom, even His enemies could not refrain from testifying that a great prophet had arisen among men. He now meets us as the offscouring and refuse of the same people, who shortly before strewed palms and wreathed chaplets for Him!

Were we able to look into the hearts of the Jews, and especially into those of their chief priests and rulers during their procession to the Roman praetorium, we should see in them a glowing furnace of rage and vexation. It was dreadful to them to see themselves compelled to this open exhibition of their subjugation to a foreign yoke. But the bloodthirstiness under which they languished for the extirpation of the hated Nazarene outweighed their boundless ambition and national pride.

Foaming with indignation they proceed forward with their victim, and are compelled, by this procession, to testify against their will, that the scepter has departed from Judah, and that the time so definitely pointed out by the dying Jacob for the appearance of the Shiloh, to whom the gathering of the people should be, had now arrived.

It will doubtless be, in some measure, the conviction of every one that GOD must necessarily have pronounced an eternal curse on such ruthless reprobates as the characters just described, if no mediating Surety interposed to take their curse upon Himself, and render satisfaction to divine justice in their stead.

To suppose that the Most High could pardon such sons of Belial, without anything further, would be to demand the overthrow of the whole moral government of the world, and to require nothing less than that GOD should act in opposition to Himself and cease to be GOD.

Reason cannot believe in the possibility of salvation for a race like that of Adam irrespective of an atonement; and scarcely anything in the world appears more rational than the scriptural doctrine of the redemption of sinners by the mediating intervention of the Son of GOD.

I confess that all that is within me would rise up in the greatest excitement and astonishment, were I to behold the thrice holy GOD embracing without such an intervention, the worthless assemblage at Jerusalem in the arms of His love. But when I see in the midst of those transgressors the Lamb which taketh away the sin of the world, I then see that GOD could open the gates of paradise even to the most degraded of that generation of vipers.

Behold the adorable Prince of Peace bound like a criminal, and covered with ignominy!

Since we are aware of His Suretyship, although we may feel deeply affected at His infinite humiliation, we are not struck and astonished. We can even bear to be told that the visible sufferings He endured were only the faint reflection of the incomparably more horrible torments which He secretly suffered; and that the host which surrounds Him with swords and spears forms only a part of the escort which accompanies Him, since another part, which is invisible and behind the curtain, is commanded by Satan himself.

For when CHRIST experienced what was due to us, we know that it included all these horrors. Nothing more nor less befell Him than what was destined to be endured by us on account of our sins. What an unspeakable gift do we therefore possess in the bleeding Lamb! Would too much honor be done Him if our whole lives were one continued adoration of His Name?

They bring the Lord JESUS to Pilate, the Roman governor.

The Almighty permits circumstances so to connect themselves together that the whole world, in its representatives, must participate in the condemnation of the Just One.

Hence His death becomes the common crime of our race, and every mouth is stopped before the judgment seat of GOD. They conduct the Lord to Pilate; and thus what the Saviour had before so distinctly predicted when announcing His passion, was literally fulfilled:

"Behold," said He, "we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, and deliver him up to the Gentiles."

We now see the accomplishment of this prediction. By so doing Israel filled up the measure of its guilt. For the second time they hand over their brother Joseph to the uncircumcised and to strangers. By this transfer they typified, at the same time, their own fate. The world's salvation, intended for them in the first instance, was by them most ungratefully given up to the Gentiles; while they themselves were thenceforward left to languish in darkness and the shadow of death.

The procession arrives at the governor's palace. They lay hold of their prisoner, and rudely push Him into the open portal of the house. Why do they act thus? The narrative informs us, that **"they themselves went not into the judgment hall lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the passover."**

Their idea was not in accordance with a right understanding of the divine law; but they obeyed the arbitrarily invented ordinance of their rabbis, which stated that they exposed themselves to defilement by entering a house, and especially a Gentile one in which leaven might be found. But they had no objection that their captive should be thus defiled. They even purposely push Him into the house they deemed unclean, and thus tangibly and symbolically expel Him, as a publican and a sinner from the commonwealth of Israel.

But all this was to happen thus, in order that CHRIST's character as the sinner's Surety might become increasingly apparent, and everyone perceive in Him the Man who, by virtue of a mysterious transfer, had taken upon Himself everything that was condemnatory in us.

There is no feature in the history of the passion which is devoid of significance.

Throughout there is a manifestation of superior arrangement and divine depth of purpose. This forcible urging of the Holy One of Israel into the house of a heathen is typical. We could weep to see Him who was love itself pushed forward by the rude hands of the brutish multitude. But we will not weep over Him, but over ourselves and our race, which is capable of such depravity and devilishness.

Let us not overlook, however, the evangelical emblem that meets our view even in this detail of the narrative. CHRIST entered for us alone where real and serious danger menaced us, even into the horrible abyss of the curse of the law, the prison of death, and the regions of darkness, in order to exhaust upon His own sacred person the force of the terrors which were prepared for us, and leave us nothing but peace, salvation, freedom, and blessing.

But what shall we say to the conduct of the Jews who, full of the leaven of all ungodliness, while making no conscience of laying their murderous hands on the Holy One of GOD, act as if they were too conscientious to enter the house of an impure heathen, lest they should come in contact with the leaven which could not defile them?

What a striking example do these "**whited sepulchers**" prove of the truth of our Lord's words in Matthew 23:27, and what a complete commentary do they yield us on the words that follow:

"Ye blind guides which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel!"

Would to GOD these wretched people were the only ones of their kind! But they meet us in every form and color, even among those who call themselves Christians. Who is not acquainted with individuals who scrupulously abstain from worldly amusements, and carefully avoid coming into social contact with the worldly-minded, and yet vie with the world in all the arts of dissimulation, uncharitable judgment of others, and hateful scandal and even go beyond it?

Who does not know those who believe that they would be committing a great crime if they performed the slightest labor on Sunday, or if they were not the first at every performance of divine service; while it never occurs to them to regard as sin the secret service of mammon to which they are devoted - who on no account would suffer themselves to be seen at a theater or a ball - in which they do well - but forgive themselves without hesitation, for compensating themselves for that privation by taking part in imagination in all the enjoyment and pleasures of the world, not less than the most frivolous characters of the age - who never fail to appear at the institution of beneficent establishments and associations, and head the list of the contributors while they make no scruple of secretly practicing deceit and imposition in their trade and business, or of acting unjustly or severely toward those who are under them, or of their avarice and greediness for transitory honor?

One of the crafty devices by which men pass by the moral claims which GOD makes on our conduct is that instead of bowing to the divine yoke, they form and impose another more pleasing to the flesh; thus trying to make it appear as if they performed more than GOD's commands enjoined upon them.

But he is mistaken who supposes that by such counterfeit holiness he shall be able to settle accounts with the Most High; and he dishonors and insults Him who hopes to bribe Him with "**cups and platters**," outwardly clean, but inwardly full of "**ravening wickedness**."

"**The eyes of the Lord**," said the prophet Hanani to Asa the king, "**run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him**."

He desires the whole man and not mere fractional parts.

He that cannot resolve to devote himself to His service without reserve loses nothing by withdrawing himself entirely, and placing himself at the disposal of the world and his own lusts. There is no medium betwixt belief and unbelief. True conversion is a new birth, and not a patching up of the old garment. The life of godliness is a harmonious organization, and not a sticking together of single acts of piety.

Pilate soon begins to suspect why the Jews pushed their culprit toward him through the gate, but feels so little offended at this that he pretends ignorance, and magnanimously steps out to them to ascertain the object of their coming. He considers that he has only to do with contracted and narrow-minded Jews, and deems that it comports both with his refinement and his dignity to tolerate their prejudices.

"Pilate then went out unto the people, and said, What accusation bring ye against this man?"

He assumes the appearance of unbelief and indifference, but he was able to take a more unprejudiced view of the matter than the Jews, and cannot think, after all he has hitherto heard of the Nazarene, that they would be able to bring any serious charge against Him.

To the governor's question of what JESUS is accused, the haughty and insane reply is returned by His accusers, **"If he were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered him up unto thee."**

In this impudent speech, their entire refractoriness toward the hated Romans is made apparent. It is the rebelliousness of fettered slaves, the fury of caged wolves. Here again we perceive also the furious Pharisaism of the priests and the people; for though they are endeavoring to murder innocence and do the devil's work, yet because they do it, it must be right and blameless. Can pride go beyond this?

Do not let us overlook the circumstance, however, that by their arrogant language they hope to disguise the embarrassment in which, in spite of all appearance to the contrary, they have involved themselves. They know of nothing from which they can form a well-guarded charge against their delinquent, and think that the bold front they put on the affair will compensate for what is deficient in proof and testimony against JESUS.

Alas! they do not entirely fail in their object. Pilate suffers himself to be overawed by their determined appearance, and places the first foot on that slippery path on which we shall afterward see him carried forward, from one crime to another, against his will, and finally ending in the abyss of perdition.

"Then said Pilate unto them, Take ye him, and judge him according to your law."

What worthless behavior in a judge who ought to administer law and justice in the land! We already see how little he cares whether JESUS lives or dies, only he would not willingly have the blood of a Man upon his soul whom his conscience absolves as innocent.

"Take ye him, and judge him according to your law."

The heathen governor would gladly have escaped from sharing the guilt of murdering the Righteous One whom the Jews had delivered up to him. But he will not succeed in his object on the path he is now pursuing. He must either decide for or against JESUS. He is compelled either to take the part of the Holy One, to the setting aside of all private considerations, or to afford his sanction to the most cruel and bloody deed the world ever witnessed.

But the case is similar with us. There is just as little room left us for a neutral position as was left him.

The Holy One of Israel comes into too close a contact with us to be quietly passed by. If we refuse to do Him homage, we are compelled to aid in crucifying Him. We cannot escape the alternative of rejecting Him, if we will not decidedly devote ourselves to Him. He testifies too loudly to our consciences that He is the Lord, to suffer us quietly to part with Him with a mere passing compliment.

If we wish to separate ourselves from Him, nothing is left for us but to say, in positive opposition, "**We will not have this man to reign over us!**" GOD grant that this may not be the case with any of us, but may He enable us to exclaim with the apostle Thomas, "**My Lord and my God!**"

The Jews close the outlet before Pilate's face by which he hoped to escape from any participation in the dreadful crime of the murder of JESUS, by giving him a reply which ought to have made him feel deeply ashamed, "**It is not lawful for us,**" say they, "**to put any man to death.**"

Pilate knew this, and what confusion of ideas and increasing perplexity does the man betray, who, though he was the supreme judge, could recommend to the Jews themselves the execution of an act of justice to which they had no right according to the existing laws.

Or was Pilate induced to express himself thus foolishly from having no idea that the accusers of JESUS were bent upon His death?

This is also conceivable. But his miserable attempt at an escape is wholly frustrated, as it deserved. There is something really tragic in the fact that circumstances should so concur and be interwoven with each other that it would seem as if Pilate was to be drawn into the blood guiltiness of the Jews. And this will assuredly be the case if he cannot resolve to give his heart and pay homage to JESUS, even as everyone who obstinately resists the call to conversion must increasingly fill up the measure of his sins and accelerate his ripeness for destruction.

"It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death."

They were not permitted to do so. When on one occasion they tumultuously stoned a supposed heretic to death, the Roman authorities probably leniently overlooked it. But in order to a formal accusation, and death by crucifixion in particular, they could not act without superior consent. Hence they openly, though with stifled rage, confess their dependence on the Roman tribunal.

Their thirst for revenge upon the Nazarene, however, this time outweighs their national pride.

The Man they hate is doomed to be crucified and to perish ignominiously. Such are their thoughts. But the Lord in heaven also exercises an influence in the affair.

The Evangelist remarks, "**That the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which he spake, signifying what death he should die.**"

John has reference here to the words recorded in chapter 12:32, of his Gospel, "**And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me,**" adding the explanatory remark, "**This he said, signifying what death he should die.**"

In the tumultuous assemblage before the governor's palace at Jerusalem we are therefore unexpectedly aware of a divine intimation respecting the Saviour.

The counsel of the Eternal Father displays itself, and in its depths a cross is described for His only-begotten Son. For the sake of the symbolical meaning included in it, the accursed tree was selected in the counsels of eternity as the instrument of the Saviour's death.

The brazen serpent in the wilderness, as well as the wave-offering of the Tabernacle, early shadowed it forth to the people of GOD. It now stands erected in history, in the ministry of the gospel, and in the minds of men, and manifests its wonder-working and attractive influence.

We conclude our meditation strengthened afresh, as I hope, in the twofold conviction that our forgiveness unconditionally demanded a vicarious sacrifice, and that the whole of our Lord's passion can only be properly understood when regarded from such a point of view.

We are astonished at the wisdom of the Almighty who has so wonderfully solved the greatest of all problems - that of the restoration of a race which had fallen under the curse to the divine right of sonship without thereby denying His holiness.

This solution is found in the Saviour's obedience and death.

Let us adoringly bow the knee to Him, and join with thankful hearts in the song of the Church triumphant, "**Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by his blood, out of every kindred and tongue, and people, and nation!**"

~ end of chapter 26 ~

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