

THE GLORY OF THE CROSS

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CHAPTER FIVE

"THEY PARTED HIS GARMENTS AMONG THEM"

"They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture" (Psalm 22:18)

"And they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet robe. . . . And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots" (Matthew 27:28, 35)

"And when they had crucified him, they parted his garments, casting lots upon them, what every man should take" (Mark 15:24)

"Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots" (Luke 23:34)

"Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also his coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout . . . But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs" (John 19:23, 33).

"This which is here shown us is the essence of Eternal Wisdom, the Secret dwelling at the heart of life: this is that Word which is through all things everlastingly. Behind the vesture of nature and of art, behind religion, knowledge, beauty, love in its myriad forms -- we are in the last resort, to see this Creative Chivalry, enduring to the utmost: wrung with agony, reduced to weakness in our interest: sparing itself nothing, if thereby our errant souls may have more light. Unsearchable and Absolute Godhead within whose thought we dwell, stripped of His vestments and exhibited before the uncomprehending eyes of all His creatures, loving and loveless, evil and good alike." -- JOHN CORDELIER in *The Path of Eternal Wisdom*.

The stripping of CHRIST! This terrible experience of JESUS our Saviour is referred to by all the four evangelists.

By Mark, who himself fled naked from the mob in the garden,

and by Matthew, who observes that this incident was a direct fulfilment of the Messianic Psalm, **"They part my garments among them, and upon my vesture do they cast lots."**

John also refers to this Psalm which gives the most detailed and accurate description of the whole agony of crucifixion in all literature. **"For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet"** (Psalm 22:16-17).

This experience must have been one of the most harrowing to the feelings of CHRIST because of His purity and the dignity of His manhood. "They stripped him," says Matthew. Naked He came from His mother's womb and naked He hangs on the tree.

The first Adam experienced physical and moral nakedness in Paradise by his transgression. The second Adam took upon Him the likeness of sinful flesh and therefore the shame of our nakedness was His also.

The Word was made flesh and men beheld His glory -- and stared on His shame -- yet this, too, was His glory. The CHRIST of GOD was stripped. This was His utmost humiliation. Stripped that we might be clothed with white raiment, with His righteousness, and when unclothed by death not be found naked.

All Roman writers on the method of crucifixion agree that the victim nailed to the cross was stripped naked. The Jews, we are told, granted a loin cloth to their culprits, and conventional art has done the same in portraying the dreadful scene. Nevertheless, we must add to the piteous picture this last and most horrible of all humiliations. The stripping off of the veil of privacy and modesty which the very saints have feared in their martyrdoms and from which some shrank in agony -- this CHRIST endured for us. What Christian women suffered in the Armenian massacres included this bitterness also, more bitter than death. Godiva of Coventry "all clad in chastity" still felt each crevice in every wall gazing at her. So JESUS suffered. And we who have ourselves put these lurid tints in the painting must not pass it by with indifference.

"When JESUS came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When JESUS came to Birmingham they simply passed Him by,
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.

Still JESUS cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do,"
And still it rained the wintry rain that drenched Him through and through;
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And JESUS crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary."

There are two aspects to the horror of crucifixion, physical pain and mental suffering -- the agony of the body and the agony of the soul.

The merciless scourging,
the nailing of hands and feet,
the thirst of fever,
the throb of tortured muscles bearing the weight of a broken body and longing for release.

Rejected of His own,

reckoned with sinners,
stripped of His raiment,
cursed of men,
mocked by His companions in suffering,
a great supernatural darkness closing in on the scene.

His bitter cry proved to all, and for all time, that the sufferings of His soul were the soul of His sufferings.

"Ye that pass by, behold the Man!
The Man of Grief condemned for you,
The Lamb of GOD for sinners slain,
Weeping to Calvary pursue.

His sacred limbs they stretch, they tear
With nails they fasten to the wood;
His sacred limbs exposed and bare,
Or only covered with His blood."

Three thoughts challenge our attention as we meditate on this aspect of CHRIST's death. He was unveiled to the uttermost on the Cross; the world still strips JESUS CHRIST and then divides His garments, casting lots; the Christian too must be stripped on his cross as we once stripped Him. A penetrative thinker once said, "You cannot love JESUS with impunity; you cannot meet the Cross with impunity; whether you accept it or shirk it the encounter leaves a wound." Surely this is the result of meditating on this unveiling of JESUS.

The deepest meaning of the Incarnation is seen on Calvary.

To Paul this was the climax of CHRIST's humiliation. "**And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross**" (Phil.2:8). Here is one answer to the question of the righteous on the great Judgment Day, "**Lord, when saw we thee naked?**" (Matthew 25:44). He hides nothing. Job in his misery said, "**Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him**" (Job 13:15). But JESUS says, Though they crucify me, yet will I show them all -- my hands, my feet, my bleeding side. "**I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me.**"

The King is here not in His glory but in His nakedness. To all alike, the soldiers, the rabble, the priests, the beloved disciple, the women, and His mother -- GOD made manifest in the flesh, but not in ineffable glory and honour. Only one who witnessed it could have written the words in the Epistle to the Hebrews, "**they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame**" (Hebrews 6:6).

No wonder that the curtain fell in the midst of the tragedy.

"Well might the sun in darkness hide
And shut His glory in,
When GOD the mighty maker died

For man the creature's sin."

In His helplessness and agony, JESUS endured the Cross not only, but for the joy that was set before Him He despised the shame.

At this moment, according to Luke's Gospel, it was that JESUS said, "**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do**" (Luke 23:34).

Above His head Pilate's mocking superscription, KING OF THE JEWS. A King without the purple, His throne a Cross, and beneath it soldiers parting His garments and casting lots over His vesture.

How can any one after this be ashamed of JESUS, or crucify Him afresh and put Him to an open shame?

The scene was also prophetic. For over nineteen centuries CHRIST has been crucified afresh and put on an open shame:

"This thing; a multitude of worthy folk
Took recreation, watched a certain group
Of soldiery intent upon a game, --
How first they wrangled, but soon fell to play,
Threw dice -- the best diversion in the world.
A word in your ear -- they are not casting lots,
ay, with that gesture quaint and cry uncouth,
For the coat of One murdered an hour ago!"

What are the garments of JESUS? "**Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, thou art very great; thou art clothed with honour and majesty**" (Psalm 54:1). The visible universe is the robe of GOD's majesty. The heavens are the curtain that hides His glory. The clouds are His chariot. Because JESUS is very GOD of very GOD, John does not hesitate to say, "**All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made**" (John 1:3).

All the marvellous beauty of nature, therefore, in His creation -- His seamless robe of splendour and majesty. Science and art can only discover and contemplate or imitate the beauty and order which were in nature from the beginning because CHRIST put them there. Every red sunset is "the coat of One murdered an hour ago."

There is not a single fine art -- painting, sculpture, music, architecture -- that is not finer because of the influence of the life and death of JESUS. Yet how often the artist and the musician have stripped Him of His robes for their own inspiration and then left Him hanging naked and despised. Darwin's "Origin of Species" tries to explain man's origin and place in nature but ignores the Son of Man. How about the origin of JESUS? There is a world beyond the visible and tangible to which science has no key and no access. When we have stripped creation from the CREATOR by explaining all its laws without Him, are we the richer or the poorer? There goes the man, they may have said in Jerusalem, who wears the seamless robe of the Nazarene! But did he know the way to His heart?

Pure science has no place for moral values. "If we adopt sincerely and wholly the popular conceptions of science," says James T. Adams, "we really destroy all values in human life. The arts are already beginning to show this deteriorating influence. In fiction, for example, of what use to write of character if there is no such thing, if personality is a myth, if freedom of action is a dream, and if all we are is merely a succession of states of mind having as little significance as a glow of phosphorescence over decaying wood?"

And philosophy, too, has stripped JESUS. The philosophers, wisely or unwisely, discuss the very questions He came to answer and to which He is the answer, and then leave Him out of their discussions.

A recent text-book widely used in American colleges is entitled "Problems of Modern Philosophy," and the book in its 575 pages makes no reference whatever to JESUS CHRIST.

Yet He came to answer the fundamental questions of philosophy:

whence are we,
why are we here,
what is our true nature,
whither is our goal,
what is life,
what is death,
why the mystery of pain,
and what is the hope of humanity?

Spinoza, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kant, Huxley, Spencer, Bergson and the rest, are they not casting lots over His seamless robe?

Modern ethics strips JESUS of the Sermon on the Mount, but refuses to climb Calvary.

Those who have never entered Gethsemane and witnessed its agony speak glibly of an Elder Brother and a universal Fatherhood. They know not its cost.

The new Theology, Modern Hinduism, the new Islam and Modern Judaism all eagerly covet and claim the ethics of JESUS but they deny His Deity. All that is beautiful and true and noble found in these new religions and philosophies are after all the borrowed garments. "**Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part**" (John 19:23).

Sociologists preach a social gospel and forget that the social Gospel was born at Bethlehem and the rights of humanity were sealed with blood on Golgotha.

The Cross, once a symbol of shame and guilt, has become through Him who hung on it the symbol of compassion and peace and love, of courage and devotion and martyrdom.

How can we speak of social service and leave out CHRIST?

When one visits Red Cross hospitals, asylums, homes for the friendless or welfare centres, where the Christian spirit is manifest but the CHRIST and His message are not in evidence, the soul cries out with Mary, "**they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him**" (John 20:13). The symbol is there but He is left outside. There is no room for Him. We send out our Christmas greetings in ever more lavish forms but one misses a distinctively Advent message on the cards that tell of His birth. The garments are there but not the CHRIST. Men cast lots for His vesture while He hangs alone, naked and forsaken. "**And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him**" (Matthew 27.31).

No wonder that the Fathers of the Greek Church in their liturgy of the Passion, after they have recounted all the particular pains of our Saviour and by every one of them called for mercy, close with this petition: By Thine unknown sorrows and sufferings felt by Thee on the Cross but not distinctly known by us, have mercy on us and save us."

We need that prayer. The Christian, too, is stripped on his cross, as He was on His. The disciple is not above his MASTER. Men always see us as we are when we mount our cross. Tribulation worketh experience. Over that awful bridge of death nothing but the naked personality can pass. Carlyle portrays mankind all one, and startlingly alike, when stripped of clothing and ornament -- the tags of honour and office and the pride of place that make our distinctions. Now there is nothing that reveals inner character more than suffering. Fire separates. Crucifixion reveals. There they hang; JESUS, Gestas and Desmas, each on his own cross and side by side. One dead in sin, one dead to sin, the third the death of sin. A blasphemer, a believer, a Saviour. One died, and lost his life, one found his life, One gave His life. On the Cross GOD and men see us as we are. Death strips us of everything but our inner soul. All self-hiding drapery is gone. When we stand before the judgment seat we stand naked. "**Naked came I out of my mothers womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD**" (Job 1:21). "**Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do**" (Hebrews 4:13), when we pass over the bridge of death.

Therefore gazing at the Saviour on the Cross we long to be "**clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked**" (II Corinthians 5:2-3). "**Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame**" (Revelation 16. 15). This is the most neglected of the seven beatitudes in the Book of the Revelation.

"There is no place for the verb 'to have' in Heaven; it is annihilated by the verb 'to be'."

We shall no longer possess but be an everlasting possession.

Who are these in white robes? They are clad in righteousness not their own, and at the centre of the great white multitude stands One who was stripped on the Cross, but is now "**clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle**" (Revelation 1:13).

The painter, G.T. Watts, asked Frederick Shields to tell him the correct colours for the draperies

of Faith. He replied: "She is the assurance of heavenly things to mortals shut in by sensuous things, therefore the sky's hue is hers -- her mantle and her wings -- but her robe is white, unspotted. And this because they who seek righteousness by works fail of that which only Faith gives." Robed in the King's white we shall understand at last the spiritual and prophetic meaning of the words, "**They parted His garments among them.**"

~ end of chapter 5 ~
