

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE SWORD AND THE CUP

A SINGULAR OCCURRENCE interrupts the regular course of the sacred narrative of our Lord's passion, and serves as additional proof of how difficult it is for human thought to elevate itself to God's thoughts, especially as displayed in the work of redemption.

In the scene we are about to contemplate, a disciple smites with the sword, an action, which, however well meant, is, nevertheless, directed against the very ground and basis of the world's salvation. Let us rejoice that eternal love pursues its even path, and does not require our help in the accomplishment of its object.

After the mild but overwhelming words addressed to the traitor, our Lord voluntarily offers Himself to His enemies; How horrible to see the Lord of Glory fallen upon and surrounded like a robber and a murderer! The disciples witness it; but the sight renders them beside themselves. If, at the traitor's kiss, their blood congealed with horror, it now begins to boil in their veins. They cannot bear that it should come to such a pass.

"Lord," say they, as with one voice, **"shall we smite with the sword?"**

While speaking, they themselves give the answer; and before their Master has time to say a word, Peter's sword is unsheathed, and the first blow in defense is struck.

We understand what was passing in Simon's heart.

The words our Lord had uttered on the road to Gethsemane, respecting his denying his Master and his own reply, still fermented within him; and he was anxious to show that in accordance with his own assertion, he would rather die than forsake Him. Full of these ideas, and doubtless with a confused remembrance of what the Lord had said respecting the purchase of swords, he blindly attacks the troop with his blade of steel, and smites Malchus, one of the high priest's servants, on the right ear, so that it is severed.

It is undeniable that an ardent and sincere affection had its essential part in this act of Peter's; but certainly, it was not love alone which nerved his arm on this occasion; he was equally as anxious to save his own honor as the person of his Master.

Had Peter been in earnest with his question, “**Lord, shall we smite with the sword?**” the Lord would certainly have answered him by saying, “Simon wilt thou pollute the glory of My submission? Is it thy intention to expose us to the suspicion that we are only a company of political demagogues? Dost thou propose affording our opponents a ground of justification for coming against us armed? And wilt thou again offer the hand to Satan for the frustration of the entire work of redemption?”

In this, or a similar manner, would the Lord have spoken; for certainly, if Simon and the rest of the disciples, who were also ready for the combat, had succeeded in their attempt, the plan of the world’s salvation would have been obstructed, since the Lamb of God would then not have been led to the slaughter. The great truth that the salvation of sinners could only be accomplished by the offering up of the God-man was still a profound mystery to the disciples, and continued so until the day of Pentecost broke the seals and disclosed to them its sacred depths. And to this day it is the Spirit only that opens the understanding and solves the difficulty.

The confusion caused by Simon’s thoughtless assault is indescribable.

The whole scene suddenly changes. The troop, drawing their swords, now prepare also for the conflict, and the sacred soil of Gethsemane is on the point of being transformed into a battle-field. A shriller discord could not have interrupted the entire purpose of Jesus, than arose out of that inconsiderate attempt.

To all appearance, Peter had for the moment drawn his Master entirely out of His path; and in what danger had the thoughtless disciple, by his foolish act, involved the Eleven, who formed the tender germ of the Lord’s future Church! They would doubtless have been together overthrown and slain without mercy, had not the Lord again interfered at the right moment.

Scarcely had the blow been struck, when the Saviour stepped forward, and while turning to the armed band, rebuked the storm in some measure, by these words - “**Suffer ye thus far**” - that is, “Grant me a short time, until I have done what I intend.” It is a request for a truce, in order that the wounded man may be healed. Be astonished, here again, at the humility, calmness, and self-possession which the Lord exhibits even in the most complicated situations and confusing circumstances. Even in the reckless troops, He honors the magistracy they represent; and does not order and command, but only requests them for a moment to delay seizing His person.

By a significant silence, they gave their assent to His wish. But how they are astonished on seeing the Lord kindly inclining to Malchus, and touching his wounded ear with His healing hand, when the blood instantaneously ceases to flow, and the ear is restored uninjured to its place!

We are also astonished at this miracle - the last and not the smallest, by which the Saviour manifested Himself on earth, as the God-man. And we admire in it, not merely His power, which shines forth so gloriously, but likewise His love, which did not exclude even His enemies from its beneficial operation, as well as His care of His disciples, whom, by the healing of Malchus, He secured from the sanguinary revenge of the murderous troop.

Nor must we overlook the wise forethought with which the Lord, by this charitable act, defends His kingdom for the future from all misunderstanding as to its real nature. It is not a kingdom of this world, but one in which revenge is silent, meekness heaps coals of fire on the adversary's head, and where evil is recompensed with good.

While the Lord was stretching out His healing hand to the wounded man, He opens His mouth to Peter, and utters, for the instruction of every future age, the highly important words respecting the use of the sword, His voluntary abasement for sinners, and His unconditional submission to His Father's will.

He begins by saying, **“Put up thy sword again into its place, for all they that take the sword, shall perish with the sword.”**

According to the views of some parties in the Christian Church, this passage altogether prohibits the use of the sword. But Scripture must be compared with Scripture, and what is termed *“the analogy of faith,”* is the first principle of biblical exposition.

In the words above mentioned, our Lord gives us a hint that the sword has also **“its place,”** where it may justly leave the scabbard; and hence **“the powers that be”** are described in Romans 13:4, as **“not bearing the sword in vain,”** seeing that they are **“the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doth evil.”**

Now, if they commit the sword to any one - whether to the executioner, the soldier, or to a private individual for his own defense: it is then drawn in a proper manner; while in the two first-mentioned instances, the responsibility attaches solely to them; but the sword is unconditionally and in every case withdrawn from private revenge, which is essentially different from self-defense. Least of all is the sword in its place with reference to the interests of the kingdom of God.

There, on the contrary, the words are applicable, **“Not by might, nor by power; but by my Spirit, saith the Lord! The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty, through God, to the pulling down of strongholds.”**

There the victory is gained by the power of the testimony, by the blood of the Lamb, and by the patience of the saints. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. Her laurel wreath is the crown of thorns, and meekness is her weapon. If reviled, she blesses; if persecuted, she suffers it; if defamed, she entreats (I Corinthians 4:12, 13).

In this mode of passive overcoming, by which alone the world is conquered and brought into subjection to the Prince of Peace, the latter Himself is our Forerunner and Leader. Hear what He says, **“Put up again thy sword into his place; for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. The cup, which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it? Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?”** (Matthew 26:52-54).

O what a profound and comprehensive view is here afforded us into our Lord's sublime knowledge of His divine Sonship! How the veil of His abject form is here drawn aside, and how does the whole majesty of the only-begotten Son of the Father again display itself before us like a flash of lightning in the darkness of the night!

He continues the same in the obscurest depths of humiliation; and in the consciousness of His divine dignity, always rises superior to the opposite appearance in which He is enveloped. If He would, He had only to ask, and the Father would send twelve legions of angels for His protection (consequently a legion for each of the little company).

How must Peter, on hearing these words from his Master, have felt ashamed for imagining that, if he did not interfere, the latter would be left helpless and forsaken. For Simon knows that his Lord is not wont to use empty phrases, and that he must, therefore, take the words concerning the celestial powers that stood at His command in their literal sense; and yet the idea could occur to him that he must deliver such a Master from a few armed mortals, as though He were defenseless!

But was it really in the Lord's power to withdraw Himself from His sufferings by angelic aid?

Without the shadow of a doubt. Having voluntarily resolved upon the great undertaking, He could, at any moment, have freely and without obstruction, withdrawn from it. Every idea of compulsion from without must be banished far from the doing and suffering of our Redeemer. Hence, there is scarcely a moment in His whole life, in which His love for our fallen race is more gloriously manifested.

A heavenly host, powerful enough to stretch a world of adversaries in the dust, stands behind the screen of clouds, waiting at His beck, and burning with desire to be permitted to interfere for Him and triumphantly liberate Him from the hands of the wicked while He, though ill-treated and oppressed, refuses their aid, and again repeats, more emphatically by the action than by words, "**Father, thy will, and not mine, be done!**" "**Thus it must be,**" says He.

Carefully observe also this renewed testimony to the indispensable necessity of His passion. "**How, then, shall the Scriptures be fulfilled,**" he adds. The words of Moses and the prophets are "**a lamp unto his feet, and a light unto his path.**" His language still is, "**The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?**" Great and momentous words!

Let us spend a few moments in meditating on them. A cup is a vessel which has its appointed measure, and is limited by its rim. The Saviour several times refers to the cup that was appointed for Him.

In Matthew 20:22, He asks His disciples, "**Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of?**" By the cup, He understood the bitter draught of His passion which had been assigned Him. We heard Him ask in Gethsemane, at the commencement, if it were not possible that the cup might pass from Him; and here we find Him mentioning, with the most unmoved self-possession, "**the cup which his Father had given him.**"

We know what was in the cup. All its contents would have been otherwise measured out to us by divine justice on account of sin. In the cup was the entire curse of the inviolable law, all the horrors of conscious guilt, all the terrors of Satan's fiercest temptations, and all the sufferings which can befall both body and soul. It contained likewise the dreadful ingredients of abandonment by God, infernal agony, and a bloody death, to which the curse was attached - all to be endured while surrounded by the powers of darkness.

Here we learn to understand what is implied in the words:

- **"Who spared not his own Son, but freely gave him up for us all."**
- **"The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all."**
- **"I will smite the Shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered."**
- **"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us."**
- **"God made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin."**

All that mankind have heaped up to themselves against the day of God's holy and righteous wrath - their forgetfulness of God - their selfish conduct - their disobedience, pride, worldly-mindedness - their filthy lusts, hypocrisy, falsehood, hard-heartedness, and deceit - all are united and mingled in this cup, and ferment together into a horrible potion.

"Shall I not drink this cup?" asks the Saviour. "Yes," we reply, "empty it, beloved Immanuel! we will kiss Thy feet, and offer up ourselves to Thee upon Thy holy altar!" He has emptied it, and not a drop remains for His people. The satisfaction He rendered was complete, the reconciliation effected.

"There is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus."

The curse no longer falls upon them. **"The chastisement of our peace lay upon him; and by his stripes we are healed,"** and nothing now remains for us but to sing Hallelujah!

~ end of chapter 16 ~

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