

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of CHRIST

By

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM”

OUR VISIT TO THE DARKNESS which reigns on Calvary has this time reference only to the ray of compassion which flashes through it, than which none more beatifying ever shone upon the sinful earth. This ray displays its effulgence in the intercession of Him who hangs bleeding on the cross. In it, the divine Sufferer throws down from His cross the first-fruit of His passion into the lap of the human race, whom He came to redeem.

Horrible is the tumult on Calvary. A choir from the pit of hell precedes the chorus of angels. The powers of darkness exhaust themselves in vomiting forth rage and blasphemy; and alas! the very men whose vocation it is to be keepers of the sanctuary, yield themselves up to be the most zealous instruments of hell.

Without being aware of it, these men of Belial entirely fail of their object. Their intention is to degrade the Man on the cross, and yet they are obliged to glorify Him. They are anxious to tear from His head the last remnant of His crown; but they only lift the veil from off His majesty. Listen to the taunts which they pour forth upon the Holy One; but remark at the same time how these outbreaks, viewed in the light, contain only the most honorable confessions respecting Him. **“He saved others,”** say they, **“himself he can not save.”** Truly, this plain confession on the part of His adversaries is of high importance, since it confirms anew the historical account of the saving acts of JESUS recorded in the Gospels.

“He trusted in God,” they continue. Infer from hence how evidently His heavenly and devotional frame must have impressed itself on His entire outward deportment, so that it did not remain concealed even from such worthless characters as these.

“Let him deliver him now, if he will have him!” Can it be otherwise than extremely welcome to us, to hear it confirmed, even by His most furious opponents, that the Lord had declared Himself to be the Son of GOD, and had therefore made no secret of His heavenly descent?

“Thou that destroyest the temple,” they exclaim further, **“and buildest it in three days, save thyself!”**

Observe how they confirm what He had so decidedly announced concerning His resurrection from the dead. In the same manner, by their taunting words, “**Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross,**” they establish the fact that the Saviour had repeatedly applied this significant title to Himself.

The Saviour hears the envenomed taunts of the crowd below. He knows from whence they proceed, and whom the blasphemers serve as instruments, without being aware of it. In their infuriated language, He hears only a ruder echo of those temptations with which the prince of darkness once assailed Him in the wilderness. But now, as then, He is conscious of being on the path pointed out to Him by His heavenly Father; and this serves Him as an impenetrable shield, with which He quenches all the fiery darts of the adversary.

O that we could now cast a look into the Redeemer’s soul! But profound silence conceals it from us, like the veil in the temple.

But, see, His lips are moving. He is about to speak. What shall we now hear? Look, He opens His mouth. But - can we believe our ears?

“**Father,**” says He, “**forgive them!**”

Surely not the servants of Satan who have nailed Him to the cross - the heartless brutes, who are even still rending Him with their poisoned fangs? Yes, it is even they to whom His intercession refers. It is for them He requests mercy and forgiveness. We bow our heads and adore. What language, “**Father, forgive them!**” and, in the words, what an act, greater than the most splendid miracles with which He marked His radiant path through the world. CHRIST was admirable in His transfiguration on Mount Tabor; but here He shines in superior light.

“**Forgive them!**” Is it possible!

With these words, as sincerely as they sound, He covers the guilty heads of His murderers with the shield of His love, in order to secure them from the storm of the well-deserved wrath of Almighty GOD.

With these words, which must have produced adoring astonishment even in the angels themselves, He takes these miscreants in the arms of His compassion, and bears them up the steps of His Father’s throne, in order to commend them to His mercy.

For the words, “**Forgive them,**” mean, in JESUS’ mouth not merely, “Do not impute to them the murderous crime they have committed upon Me.” No, when He utters “**Forgive,**” it comprehends something much more, and embraces the whole register of sins. In His mouth it means, “Plunge their whole sinful life into the depths of the sea, and remember no more their transgressions, but consider these sinners henceforth as dear in Thy sight, and act toward them as such.”

There are individuals upon earth for whom no one feels inclined to pray, because they are too depraved.

There are those who even dare not pray for themselves, because their consciences testify that such worthless creatures as they are cannot reckon upon being heard. What a prospect is here opened to people of this description!

Ah, if no heart beats for them on earth, the heart of the King of kings may still feel for them. If among their friends, not one is to be found to intercede for them, yet possibly the Lord of Glory is not ashamed of bearing their names before His Father's throne.

O what hope beams on Calvary for a sinful world! And if the great Intercessor appears there for a transgressor, how does His intercession succeed! Though a whole world should protest against it, His prayer saves whom He will. His voice penetrates the heart of the eternal Father with irresistible power. Mountains of sin vanish before His intercession. How highly characteristic and deeply significant is the fact that the Lord with this prayer commences the seven expressions He uttered on the cross.

The words, "**Forgive them!**" show us not merely the heaven of loving-kindness which He carries in His bosom, but it also dart-like a flash of lightning through the gloom of the entire night of suffering, and deciphers the mysterious position which the Holy One of Israel here occupies as Mediator and High Priest.

"As High Priest?" you exclaim. Certainly, you must feel that He could only venture to offer up such a prayer in that capacity. Apart from this His peculiar divine office, such a petition would have been an attempt to overturn the foundations of GOD's throne, which are justice and judgment. How can the holy GOD deal with sinners? Can He say anything else than, "Depart from me, ye polluted beings?" How can the GOD of justice act toward transgressors? Must He not, if He will not act contrary to His nature, reward every one according to his works? Can He, who is the true GOD, make laws and denounce threatenings against transgressors, and yet pardon those who have actually trodden His law underfoot, without breaking His word, and withdrawing His threatenings?

Yet the prayer for forgiveness raises its wings from the mount of suffering and passes apparently through all those eternal statutes and limitations. It puts aside even Mount Sinai and Ebal. It soars with seemingly unheard-of boldness above the brazen walls of the manifold menaces of the divine maledictions which inexorably close against sinners the entrance to the mansions above, and requests forgiveness and even admittance into the habitations of the blessed children of GOD for rebels, blasphemers, and murderers.

"Does the Saviour's prayer do so much, and yet continue legitimate?" Yes, it is legitimate, well-founded and entitled to be heard. The mercy of interceding love on the cross is a law which is, at the same time, subject to all the ordinances of GOD. Its seeming boldness is only in appearance. It knows what it does, while crying for forgiveness to Him with whom is no variability nor shadow of turning. It is well aware of the properties of the house of GOD, while desiring blessing and liberation for those whom the law condemns and sentences to the prisons of darkness. It does not direct its petition to an arbitrariness in GOD, which does not exist, but appeals to both the divine justice and mercy.

Its prayer sets aside no divine ordinance, but leaves them all unfringed upon. It is so far from desiring that the Almighty should deny Himself or His Word, that it has, on the contrary, the glory of GOD as its supreme and final aim.

“But can GOD continue in the exercise of all His perfections, if He rewards murderers with His favor?”

Yes, He can; and it is just this which is the greatest mystery of godliness, of which the Gospel opens the seals, but which is accessible only to faith. JESUS, who here prays for His murderers stands in the very place of those men as their representative.

- If they have broken the law, He, the Surety, has fulfilled it in their stead.
- Are they worthy of death? He is the Lamb who lets Himself be made sin for them, that sin might be no longer imputed to them.
- If they drew down upon them the curse of the law, He is the Mediator of whom it is written, **“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.”**
- If, according to the judgment of GOD, they are consigned to the powers of darkness, He gives Himself up as a voluntary sacrifice to their fiery darts.

Therefore, satisfaction, atonement, and mediation are the momentous words which express the ground of justification for the intercession of JESUS.

The whole world must now be mute and hell likewise, when GOD Himself receives into His favor blasphemers and murderers, for whom JESUS appeared in the breach. For complete satisfaction is rendered to all the statutes of the eternal sanctuary, and divine justice can no longer object when eternal love presses sinners with blessing to its breast.

We now fully comprehend the tone and perfect certainty, firmness, and confidence with which the words, **“Father, forgive them!”** are uttered.

The High Priest pronounces them from the most holy place, and that too at the very moment when He is paying the debt of the guilty. That He really does this, and that the true meaning of His sufferings is to be sought in this, He once for all evinces to a sinful world from His elevation on the cross; and hence, while bleeding on their behalf, He sends up to heaven this unconditional petition for mercy in favor of the vilest sinners, His murderers.

“But how could the Lord commend these hardened rebels to divine mercy?”

Observe that those whom He had in view were by no means hardened. For such as have committed the **“sin unto death”** there is certainly no longer any deliverance or salvation, and according to the apostle’s directions, we ought not to pray for such. But the Lord well knows what He is doing. Although He says at first, **“Forgive them,”** which is certainly very general, yet he immediately limits His words so that Judas, for instance, and doubtless many of the heads of the people, are excluded from the influence of His intercession.

The addition of the words, "**They know not what they do,**" defines its bounds. By this clause the Lord selects from the multitude which surrounds Him those to whom the majority of them that crucified Him probably belonged.

Now observe first, the sublime self-possession which the Lord here again manifests in the words, "**They know not what they do.**"

For what other meaning lies concealed beneath them than this, that if they had known it was the Lord of Glory, or even some innocent and just person, they would not have done it? For in the words, "**They know not what they do,**" the idea is included that while offering up the Lord JESUS, they unconsciously pay the ransom for themselves, and thereby render it possible for GOD to have mercy upon them, without detracting from His justice.

Finally, the words, "**They know not what they do,**" contain a veiled prediction of the future repentance and conversion of those for whom CHRIST prays.

For even by this petition a powerful impulse to repentance is given them, and a direction to a change of mind. Only look forward a little, and you will already see, first in the Roman centurion under the cross and his shield-bearer, the commencement of the fulfillment of that prediction.

Mark then the crowds who, returning from Calvary to Jerusalem, smote upon their breasts, and at least in part gave evidence of sincere repentance. Assuredly among them were some to whom the petition, "**Father, forgive them,**" applied.

But if they were not among these, they were decidedly among the three thousand who were pierced to the heart by the apostles' words on the day of Pentecost.

For listen to the address of Peter:

"**This Jesus,**" says he, "**whom ye have crucified, hath God made both Lord and Christ. Now, when they heard this,**" the narrative states, "**they were pricked in their hearts, and said, Men and brethren, what shall we do?**"

Yes, it was these who knew not what they did, but now it became evident to them.

O how did the remembrance of the words, "**Father, forgive them,**" smite humbly and overwhelmingly upon their hearts! How did the love which was manifested in those words melt their souls! Alas! alas! they had nailed to the cross their only Deliverer and Saviour! Thus did the petition, "**Father, forgive them, they know not what they do,**" neither overthrow the statutes of divine justice, nor the method of grace, once for all established by the Lord. Justice retained its splendor by virtue of the satisfaction of the only-begotten Son, and the plan of salvation was preserved entire in the repentance and conversion of them to whom the petition applied.

Let us then rejoice that the most desirable and indispensable of all blessings, the forgiveness of sins, is acquired so fully and legally for us.

What do all the treasures in the world avail, if we do not know that Our names are written in heaven, and that we have an inheritance there? But reflect that the forgiveness acquired on the cross, although always an entirely free gift of grace, is forever withheld from those who know what they do, while refusing to give their hearts to CHRIST. Awake therefore, from your deadly sleep of security; bid farewell to pharisaic deception, condemn the sin that besets you, and then hasten penitently and believingly to the cross of CHRIST, and devote yourselves, body, soul, and spirit, unto Him who loved you, and gave Himself for you; for this is the road that leadeth unto life.

~ end of chapter 44 ~

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