

# THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### JESUS OR BARABBAS

WE RESUME OUR PLACE amid the wild and tumultuous assemblage before Gabbatha, the open court, where justice was wont to be administered. Pilate, who, the more he has to do with the dignified Man of Nazareth, is the more convinced of His perfect innocence continues his attempts to give the affair a favorable turn, both for the accused and himself. His very soul revolts at the idea of such a person dying the death of a criminal.

Not a few of our contemporaries resemble him in this respect.

They are those who, like Pilate, speak of the moral glory of Christ with a degree of enthusiasm, but the more they regard Him from this point of view, the more they are offended at His cross. They feel a repugnance to the doctrine of the atonement made by Him for our sins, simply because they wish sin to be regarded as an inconsiderable and trifling object, which they would be constrained to view as something important and horrible if they were compelled to believe that it could only be forgiven through the condemnation of the Son of God and atoned for by His blood. Those who are unable to absolve themselves as entirely free from sin, would then be forced either to take refuge with us in the wounds of Jesus and to sue for pardon with the vilest malefactors, or carry about with them a smitten and uneasy conscience. Hence it is altogether their interest to oppose the doctrine that the sufferings and death of Christ must be apprehended as vicarious.

Nay, I do not hesitate to affirm that all the doctrinal systems which seek to neutralize or evade the view of Christ's sufferings as an atonement proceed from a conscious or unconscious effort to weaken and lessen the enormity of sin. Those who are still satisfied with such systems are not aware of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. But those who have become acquainted with its abominable nature in the sight of God, see the necessity of Christ's sufferings and being justified by faith, have peace with God through the atonement made for us by His Son.

The governor is lost in thought; his forehead burns; his mind is distressed. What would he not give for wise counsel in this painful emergency? All at once the horizon of his soul clears up. He has hit upon a happy expedient, the idea of which did not occur to him without superior intervention.

Pilate calls to mind a custom which, though it was not founded on any divine ordinance, the Lord indulgently overlooked and bore with, from being willing to make use of it as the symbol of something of a superior nature.

According to this custom it was permitted the people - as a figurative realization of the deliverance of their forefathers out of Egypt, and to increase the general joy at the festival - to ask for the liberation of some grievous offender from prison.

Pilate grasps at this custom like a shipwrecked mariner the floating plank, as the only means of deliverance which is left him. He hastily passes through his mind the various receptacles of crime, in order to discover in them some malefactor whom he may confidently hope the people will never prefer to the Nazarene.

He soon thinks he has found such a one, or rather God found him for him; for this was the very sinner whom the Lord deemed fit for the spectacle which was then to be presented to the world. The man thus selected is Barabbas, a vile miscreant, a rebel and a murderer. Who, thinks the governor, would grant life and liberty to such an outcast of mankind, in preference to the just Man of Nazareth?

Already secretly triumphing in the expected success of his plan, Pilate proceeds to the Proscenium and in a tone of the fullest assurance of success, calls out to the crowd, "**Whom will ye that I release unto you? Jesus Barabbas** (for such was the man's whole name, according to an ancient tradition) **or Jesus the King of the Jews which is called Christ? For,**" adds the gospel narrative, "he **knew that the chief priests had delivered him from envy.**"

And such was actually the case; for that which vexed them the most was that the people followed Him.

But how foolishly did the governor act, though otherwise so prudent, in reminding the proud men by calling Him "**The King of the Jews,**" how His way had but recently been strewn with palm-branches and garments, amid the hosannas of the people; and how did he thus ruin Him without intending it! But his speculation would have been a failure without that; for "**God taketh the wise in their own craftiness**" who, disdainful of the restraint of His Word and will, seek success by their own inventions.

The Saviour's fate is now no longer in Pilate's hands. The majority of the multitude decides, and he is obliged to abide by its decision. Had he been bold enough to follow the dictate of his own conscience and to have said with calm discrimination, "Justice shall be done, even though the world should perish; the guiltless Nazarene is free, and those cohorts here will know how to give effect to my decision;" his opponents inwardly rebuked, would doubtless have shrunk back thunderstruck, and the people, roused from their delusion, would have loudly applauded the energetic judge. But Pilate now stands forever as a warning example of the consequence of endeavoring to satisfy both God, who speaks within us, and the world.

"**Whom will ye that I release unto you?**" exclaims Pilate, seating himself on the marble judgment-seat to await the decision of the people.

The latter waver and hesitate, which is no sooner perceived by the priests and elders than they rush into the crowd and exert all their eloquence to stifle the germ of right feeling which begins to awake in their minds, and to blow into a flame the dying spark of animosity to Jesus.

Meanwhile, a remarkable episode takes place. A messenger, out of breath, appears before the governor, sent by his wife, who is commissioned to say to him, **“Have thou nothing to do with that just man, for I have suffered many things this night in a dream because of him.”**

What a remarkable circumstance! The brightness of the purity and glory of the fairest of the children of men was such as to penetrate into the heathen woman’s world of dreams. We thus see how the life and actions of Jesus must have affected the hearts of those who were indifferent and even opposed to Him, and compelled them to respect Him.

Yes, by night, when the bustle of the day is silent and deep sleep falls upon men, the Spirit of Truth visits their tabernacles and approaches the couches even of those who, careless about higher objects, revel in the intoxication of worldly delusions. With the arrows of His judicial decision, He pierces by night into chambers where all that has reference to things of a higher nature otherwise finds no response. By night, ill-treated conscience assumes its right and makes itself again heard, even in the breasts of the most ungodly; and many are obliged to confess with the Psalmist, **“Thou searchest my heart, and visitest me in the night season.”**

God had also evidently His hand in the distressing night-vision of Pilate’s consort, and often exercises control over the world of dreams, and when He pleases makes the imagination of the unfettered spirit subservient to His purpose.

But though Pilate received a fresh divine warning by the message from his wife, yet the man had already laid down his arms and was no longer his own master. His wife’s communication affected him deeply. His excited conscience whispered to him, “Pilate, listen to the voice from another world, which warns thee against the crime of a legal murder.” He hears it, indeed, and is dreadfully disturbed, but hopes the people will act justly. The people? Poor man! Is this thy last despicable hope?

Pilate impatiently rises from his seat, and again calls out to the crowd with the mien of a suppliant, **“Which of the twain will ye that I release unto you?”**

We may easily infer that he added in his own mind, “You will surely decide for Jesus.” But it is in vain to come with requests where we have not the courage in God’s name to order and command. The priests and elders have succeeded in instigating the people to side with them, and the unfortunate governor hears a thousand voices unanimously and daringly reply, “Not this man, but Barabbas.”

Such are the two individuals presented to the people to choose from at their Easter festival. The man in chains and the Prince of Life; the former a vile wretch, who in a sanguinary revolt had been seized in the act of committing murder.

But Barabbas does not stand before us merely as an individual. He represents, at the same time the human race in its present condition - as fallen from God - in a state of rebellion against the divine Majesty - bound in the fetters of the curse of the law till the day of judgment; but nevertheless dignifying itself with pompous titles, without any real nobility of soul, and boasting of honorable distinctions without internal worth.

Before Barabbas was presented with Jesus to the people's choice, every prospect of his escape from the fate that awaited him had been cut off: and such is also our case.

There was no idea of a ransom, nor of any liberation from the well-guarded dungeon, much less of a merciful sentence, which everyone else might have anticipated sooner than this murderer. And believe me, that our case was not less critical than his. For what had we to give to redeem our souls? how escape the vigilance of those eyes which "**run to and fro through all the earth?**" and how could a Judge acquit us unconditionally, of whom it is said, "**Justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne?**" Barabbas' situation was desperate, and ours no less. But what occurs?

Without his own co-operation, and against all his calculation, a dawn of escape suddenly flashes through his prison. From Gabbatha resounds the governor's question to the people, "**Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus, which is called Christ.**"

How important the moment! How mysterious the change in the state of things!

Barabbas thought that he should certainly be put to death. It is now Barabbas or Jesus. The deliverance of the former has at least become possible; and by what means? Solely because the rebel and the murderer is offered to the choice of the people equally with Jesus, the Lord from heaven. The lot must fall on one or the other. One will be released; the other sent to the place of execution. There is nothing to justify a demand for the liberation of both.

Which of the two will be chosen - which rejected? If Jesus of Nazareth is set at liberty, Barabbas is inevitably lost. If the former is rejected, then hail to thee, Barabbas, thou art saved! His ruin is thy redemption; from His death springs thy life.

What say you to this state of things? Viewed solely in a historical light, it is certainly of minor importance, except that it serves as a renewed proof that the Son of God was spared no disgrace nor humiliation - not even that of being placed on the same footing with a murderer like Barabbas.

But regarded in a superior light, that historical fact becomes of great importance.

In the position in which Barabbas stood to Jesus, we all of us stood to Him. With respect to us, it might also have been said "Who shall die - the transgressor or the Just One?" It was impossible that both should be spared. The sword of divine justice must strike either to the right or the left. The curse which we had incurred must be inflicted. The sentence of condemnation pronounced upon us impatiently waited its execution, that God might continue holy, just, and true.

Here was the great alternative: these guilty creatures, or the Son of God in their stead, for He alone was able to atone for our sins. Thus we were quite in Barabbas' position. If Jesus was sent to execution, the hour of our redemption had arrived; but if He was spared we were irrevocably lost.

You already know the result.

The affair takes the most favorable turn for Barabbas, and in him for us. To Pilate's utter amazement, the voice of the multitude decides in favor of the rebel. "**Release Barabbas!**" cried the uproarious crowd, "**and crucify Jesus.**"

However wicked this decision may appear, compared with that of Pilate, who was anxious that Jesus should live, and not be put to death; still it was more in accordance with God's plan and the method of salvation that it should be so. For if the people had effectually demanded Jesus to be liberated, and Barabbas to be executed as Pilate wished, that demand would have been the funeral-knell of the human race, and the signal for our eternal perdition. But God so ordered it that the affair took a different turn; for the outcry of the people to crucify Jesus was the trumpet-sound announcing the day of our redemption.

Observe now the result of the decision. Barabbas and Jesus change places.

The murderer's bonds, curse, disgrace, and mortal agony are transferred to the righteous Jesus; while the liberty, innocence, safety, and well-being of the immaculate Nazarene become the lot of the murderer. Jesus Barabbas is installed in all the rights and privileges of Jesus Christ; while the latter enters upon all the infamy and horror of the rebel's position. Both mutually inherit each other's situation and what they possess: the delinquent's guilt and cross become the lot of the Just One, and all the civil rights and immunities of the latter are the property of the delinquent.

You now understand the amazing scene we have been contemplating.

We find the key to it in the words, "**God made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.**"

It places before us in a strong light, the mystery of our justification before God, through the mediation of Christ. In Barabbas' deliverance, we see our own. Left to ourselves, we should have been eternally lost. When Christ exchanged positions with us, our redemption was decided.

Truly he must be blind who does not perceive that in this Barabbas scene a light was divinely enkindled which should illumine the whole of the passion of God's only-begotten Son. This light would alone suffice to dispel every objection to the scriptural nature of our view of the doctrine of the atonement, if this were not also done by a whole series of striking passages from the apostolic writings.

Let us then rejoice that such is the case, and indelibly impress upon our memories the striking features of the scene we have been contemplating.

Let those who are humbled under a sense of their sin and guilt behold their image in Barabbas; and one consolatory idea after another will occur to you from the sight.

How comfortable the reflection that the man is wholly freed at the expense of Jesus; that however heinous his crimes, not one of them attaches to him any longer; that henceforward, no judicial procedure can be instituted against him for what he has done; and that nothing now prevents him from boldly appearing in the presence of his judge.

You also possess all these privileges in Christ, only in a more glorious form and a more abundant fullness.

- Since He became the criminal in your stead, you are accounted as righteous for His sake;
- Since He was rejected in your stead, you are admitted into favor with God;
- Since He bore your curse, you are the heirs of His blessing;
- Since He suffered your punishment, you are destined to share His happiness.

Such being the case, how ought you by faith, to rise into the blissful position assigned you and to learn in the school of the Holy Spirit boldly to say with the apostle, **“Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect, seeing that it is God that justifieth? Who is he that condemneth, since Christ hath died, yea rather is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us?”**

~ end of chapter 33 ~

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