

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

MATTHEW 26:31-56

WITH reverent reticence we have now to follow the King through Gethsemane. We cannot attempt to interpret the sorrows of Christ as they are suggested to us by this narrative; from beginning to end of the meditation we shall but walk around the margin, stand on the outside of the darkness, and come to know in a very faint and far-off way all that is revealed in this story of Agony.

Let us notice, however, that in this passage there are again three subdivisions, and let us make Christ the center of all our meditation. The disciples are here; we shall see them incidentally; we are bound to do that; but let us fix our reverent thought upon the Lord Himself as He is seen in this matchless picture.

First we stand in the vestibule of that inner shrine and sanctuary of sorrow to which the Lord came under the shade of the Olive trees in Gethsemane. Standing there, we see Christ preparing His disciples for what was then immediately to follow.

Then, in the central section of the passage, we pass to the inner sanctuary of sorrow, and there Christ is seen alone. The disciples are there also, but their presence but emphasizes the fact of His absolute and desolate loneliness.

Then finally, we have a picture of Christ triumphant.

We come first to the vestibule of the sanctuary. It was night. The moon was at the full, as we know by the feast that was being observed. There had been that strange and wonderful gathering in the upper room, the passing of the old feast and the institution of the new. They had sung a hymn, the Hallel Psalms, and the song was in their minds as they had gone forth from the upper room, along the streets and out by the road, until they came to the slopes of Olivet and found their way into the enclosed place. Such is the meaning of the word Gethsemane. How strangely they had been perturbed, and perplexed, and puzzled by the things He had said.

They had asked Him, "**Whither goest Thou?**" and He had answered them in what seemed to be emphatic terms, of going to the Father, but He had failed to give them any geographical description of His goings.

Now He was going and they were accompanying Him.

Suddenly the silence of that walk toward Gethsemane was broken by Christ Himself. Turning to this group of men He said, **“All ye shall be offended because of Me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad.”**

His first words told them of the darkness which was just ahead. Maybe they were hoping that He had done with the strange and troublous things since Judas had left the company. But now He looked at the eleven that remained, and said, You will all be scandalized in me this night, made to stumble in Me; I shall be the object over which you will fall; you will all be offended in Me, for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad. He knew the darkness far better than they, and He told them of the worst thing that was coming to them, that the whole of them would be offended.

Yet it was not the voice of a fatalist, but of One Who told them whither they were inevitably moving, of One conscious of a pre-arranged program.

These men were familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures; they knew full well the great prophecy of Zechariah from which the quotation was made. And He said, This is the night of that smiting and scattering. No accident is happening to-night; this is part of a divine plan and movement.

How constantly He said, **“It is written,”** or, the Scriptures have foretold. And so, while the shadows were deepening about them, He told them of the deeper darkness, and of the fact that they were going into a darkness so profound as to scandalize, and drive them away.

But that was not all. He was preparing them by giving them to know before they should be offended, that He knew they would be offended. Christ was always making it easy for these men to get back presently; and when He told them the worst that was in them, and they did not believe Him; though they all personally declared they would not be offended, He did not argue; but He left something in the heart, and mind, and memory, which returning presently, would make it easier for them.

It is a great thing to be able to say within one's own soul, Well, my friend knew and warned me, I will go back to Him. Christ was telling them the worst. But not only the worst. Mark the next words well, words flashing with light, **“But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee.”**

Christ was on the way to Gethsemane with this little group of men, frightened souls, not knowing what was going to happen next, wondering what He meant, sadly disappointed He had not forced things to an issue and set up a Kingdom; brokenhearted because they thought He was going to be murdered; and He said, **“All ye shall be offended because of me this night . . . But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee.”**

Your scattering is not the last thing, there will be a gathering; My defeat is not the end, there will be a raising up; this darkness is not finality, there is light beyond it.

Peter's answer was the protestation of love and of ignorance:

“Thou all men shall be offended because of Thee, yet will I never be offended. Jesus said unto him, **‘Verily I say unto thee, that this night,’** “ and then to emphasize the immediateness of it **“before the cock crow, thou shalt deny Me thrice.”**

And Peter replied, **“Though I should die with Thee, yet will I not deny Thee.”**

The King Himself was quiet and calm, full of tenderness for these frail men. He had no rebuke for them, but a solemn warning of what was coming, so definite and positive, that there could be no mistake. The one thing He was impressing upon them was His knowledge.

Peter said in effect; If I do not know myself, who does know me? The one thing a man does not know is himself, and that is what we find out when we see Christ with His disciples. Peter meant it, **“yet will I never be offended;”** he was absolutely sincere; but he did not know himself, he did not know his weakness or his power, he did not know the forces coming against him, he did not know how dark the darkness could be, or how terrible the temptation might become. He was perfectly honest.

But Christ knew him, Christ knew that beneath all that wonderful devotion which was so precious to His heart, in the very strength of his nature lay his weakness, the passionate man, impulsive, fiery, like a thunderstorm; He knew under stress of great temptation that he could and would deny. The King was calm and tender toward His disciples. They, while loving Him, were nevertheless perplexed and blundering.

Then we pass into Gethsemane.

The presence of the disciples throughout this section but serves to intensify the realization of His loneliness. Notice how He passed to loneliness with them. He took eleven of them from the upper room, and having come to the garden, eight of them were left either outside its gate or perhaps just inside.

Three of them were taken yet a little further with Him;

- They were the boanergic men, Peter, James, and John.
- They were the men who had been with Him on the Mount of Transfiguration.
- They were the men who had been with Him in the house of Jairus when He raised the maiden.
- They were the men who for some reason or other He perpetually took a little nearer to Him than the rest.

It is almost uniformly held that they were an elect inner circle, and that He trusted them more, and could say more to them. One cannot be at all convinced of that.

- Perchance they were the weakest three of the twelve, and therefore it was necessary for Him to keep them near to Himself.
- Perhaps the man who never has a vision is stronger than the man who gets his vision.

Presently, in the light of our Lord's revelation of Himself in the Father's home, we may find that the people who always seemed to be left at the gate and never had a naming vision, and no high ecstatic experience, but who have quietly pursued the line of commonplace devotion, are stronger than the others.

It is recorded that a long time ago a sister was dreaming that she saw three other sisters at prayer, and she imagined that as they were at prayer she saw the Master Himself coming, passing by them. The first of them He brushed by almost rudely without a glance or touch. To the second He spoke some brief word as He passed, but with the third He lingered, and laid a caressing hand upon her head, and with His face all wreathed in smiles, whispered some word of infinite love in her ear. And in her dream the sister thought to herself, How the Master loves that last woman; the second must have grieved Him somehow; and with the first He must be very angry. Then in her dream she thought the Master turned to her and said, O woman of the world, how wrongly hast thou judged. The faith and trust and obedience of this first woman is so perfect that I can train her for higher service than the others can ever attain. The last one needs all my attention or she would never follow at all. Perhaps Peter, James, and John were of that sort. He took these three men, yet they were unable to go with Him all the way. He asked them to watch, and then going still a little further He prayed.

Next let us notice the terms that are used here about our Lord.

He **“began to be sorrowful and very heavy.”**

We have seen that word **“began”** twice before in this book of Matthew about Jesus.

- In chapter four, He began to preach.
- In chapter sixteen, He began to tell His disciples that He must suffer.
- Now He began to be sorrowful and sore troubled.

This word, **“very heavy,”** is a strange word.

Nothing can be definitely said as to its derivation. It may have come from two words. Most probably it has come from one that means *“away from home,”* He began to be sorrowful and away from home. It means more than that, of course; but that is the root idea, that of desolating loneliness.

He began to enter into that consciousness of His absolute isolation. When He began His ministry the crowds were with Him. They had left Him long ago. When He began His ministry the rulers were interested, they now were plotting for His death, and He knew it.

He had gathered about Him a band of disciples, a large company, more than twelve; but there came a day when He tried to teach them spiritual things concerning bread that comes out of heaven, and from that time many of His disciples went back and walked no more with Him. But at least there are twelve.

No, one of them is now out somewhere, bringing the mob.

But at least there are eleven? No, eight of them were left at the gate.

But at least there are three? No, they will all be asleep in half an hour.

He began to be sorrowful and away from home. And then He spoke of it. How seldom He spoke of His sorrow! But He said to these men, “**My soul is exceeding sorrowful.**” And here we have another word that arrests the attention. He “**began to be sorrowful**” is one word. Then “**He said My soul is exceeding sorrowful.**” That is the same word with a prefix which gives emphasis to it. It means, *My soul is the center of surging sorrows*, and He said to them, “**Tarry ye here, and watch with Me.**”

It was His last appeal to humanity, His last appeal to His disciples.

Then we go a step further with Him. We can do nothing more with this threefold prayer than notice three of the simplest things about it.

Three times He prayed.

First, He said, “**O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt.**”

The second time He did not ask that if it be possible the cup should pass, but He consented to the impossibility, “**O My Father, if this may not pass away from me, except I drink it, Thy will be done.**”

The third time He said the same thing.

Mark the first prayer most carefully.

In the presence of it, one is inclined to think that there was a shrinking there had never been before, yet it is not a prayer that the cup may pass, it is a prayer that God’s will may be done.

Notice first of all, His recognition of His abiding relation to God, “**O My Father.**” We hardly dare venture to try and illustrate from our own experience because there is a gulf between His sorrow and ours that never can be bridged. And yet, seeing it is the Man Christ we are looking at, may we not venture to say, It is in the moment of overwhelming agony that the soul is tempted to doubt God’s love and goodness. But with all the surging sea of sorrow surrounding Him, and His intense loneliness filling His heart, His sense of relation was unbroken; as yet there was no obscuring of the face of God.

And then the request.

First the condition, “**If it be possible let this cup pass from me.**” And the final prayer, “**Nevertheless, not as I will but as Thou wilt.**”

Again He speaks. The relation is unchanged, “**O My Father**” and there is a recognition of the impossibility of the passing of the cup “**if this may not pass away from me,**” and the same great prayer ascends, “**Thy will be done.**”

The final attitude was that of the repetition and ratification of abandonment to the will of God.

What did Christ pray for in the garden? That God’s will might be done. What is the meaning of this shrinking? The last shadow of temptation. To go back in the story of His ministry to the things we have already seen; long ago in the wilderness, the enemy, in open guise, unveiled before the eyes of the Christ, the kingdoms of the world and said, If Thou givest me one moment’s homage I will make them over to Thee. This was a suggestion that He might gain the kingdoms without the passion. That was the first temptation. It was in open guise in the wilderness, and with quiet, calm dignity and absence of perturbation, the answer was, “**Thou shalt worship the Lord Thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.**” That was at the beginning of public ministry.

Then at Caesarea Philippi the same temptation, no longer voiced by the enemy in open guise, but voiced by the devil disguised in an apostle, “**From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.**” And the apostle said, Not that. Lord, “**Be it far from Thee.**”

And eight days after, or thereabouts, with the glory of the mount flashing upon Jesus, the same apostle had made as great a blunder when he said, “**It is good for us to be here,**” which meant, Not the Cross, but the mountain of glory, Lord. Get the Kingdom, but miss the Cross. He refused the temptation with greater severity in the case of the apostle when the devil was in disguise, than in the case of the devil when he was in open vision. “**Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.**”

Now in Gethsemane the devil is not there in open guise; the apostle is asleep; but the shadow of it all is upon the soul of Christ, “**If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me.**”

To go back outside the garden for a moment. He had said to these men, You will all be offended in Me this night; but after I am raised up I will go before you into Galilee. That is to say, I am going through the passion, but I am coming to the Kingdom. I must set up this Kingdom. The will of God must be done. I must leave you, but you who will be scattered will also be gathered. Now, alone, the last disciple away, He looked again toward the light beyond. The darkness was around Him, and the cup, this mystery of a sorrow that we cannot understand, this cup, this sacrament of infinite, sorrow, was presented to Him.

The shadow of the passion was upon Him, and with it came the shadow of a great temptation; “**If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me.**” If that had been all; if He had halted! But He did not halt! Quick, sharp, immediate, resolute, followed the words; “**Nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt.**”

In that moment He took the cup, took it finally, took it alone, took it as He had taken it against the devil's temptation, and the apostle's suggestion, took it in the desolating loneliness, because it was the will of His Father. All this is but an unveiling, that we may see something that is too great for human explanation. It is the unveiling of the passion and agony of God Himself in the presence of human sorrow. We cannot read this story without feeling somehow or other that it is too difficult to see. It does seem as though at least there was a breach, a difference, between this Man and God. Yet there never was a difference, never a shadow of a difference. Jesus was never more God Incarnate than when He was in Gethsemane; and at the back of all we see that which we can never fathom God's heart broken in the presence of human sin.

At last He came to His disciples and He said, "**Sleep on now, and take your rest; behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.**" "**Rise, let us be going.**"

These two verses have caused some difficulty. A great many of the old expositors declare that when He spoke to them of taking their rest He spoke satirically. That is impossible. Satire had its place in His method, it had often played like summer lightning, clearing the atmosphere. But this was no satire. Then what did He mean?

We must put a break between verses forty-five and forty-six. He came back to them, His own triumph won, and they were still drowsy, and opened their eyes as He came perchance, and He quietly said to them, There is a little time left, sleep on now. And they went back to sleep and He watched over them. He kept the lone vigil over those sleeping men until presently He saw the flash of the torches, for Judas was coming, and then He put His hand upon them and said, "**Rise, let us be going.**" What passed through His soul in those hours we do not know. Nothing but love for those men, those drowsy men whom He had to rebuke was in His heart. He knew that presently out of the darkness He would win the inspiration that should make them selfless in their toil for Him, flames of fire carrying on His victory. O that vigil and that awaking!

Lastly observe the Master's victory. He said to Judas, What you do, do quickly; to Peter, Put thy sword up; I have no need of it. Twelve legions of angels I could have, but I will not. Why not? For very love of humanity. So we see Him coming out of the garden and men attempting to hold Him. Hold Him fast said Judas, as if the puny hands of soldiers could have held Him. But He was held fast. What held Him? "**He loved me, and gave Himself for me.**" That is the whole story. May God help us to say it each for ourselves.

~ end of chapter 68 ~

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