

# THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### THE CLOSE OF THE PROCEEDINGS

THE JUDICIAL PROCEDURE against the Lord of Glory hastens to its close. Events crowd upon and even overthrow each other. The great and decisive moment is at hand and the occurrences which take place claim our sympathy in an increasing degree.

“**Crucify him!**” was the people’s answer to the pathetic appeal of the more than half-vanquished governor that the life of the Lord Jesus might be spared. This response completely dispossessed Pilate of his last and imaginary safe position. Behold him, now a mere object of compassion and pity, helpless, and wholly at a loss, inwardly torn and tortured by the scourge of his better-self.

He again affirms the innocence of the accused, but instead of terminating the proceedings by the liberation of Jesus, as he ought to have done, he demeans himself so far as to give the cowardly advice to the Jews to take Him and crucify Him without his authority. Our compassion for the weak-minded and unprincipled man begins greatly to diminish, and we are tempted to soften our reprobation of the people thus misled and strengthened in their delusion by Pilate’s weakness, and to transfer it entirely to him. Can we feel surprised that the people become more bold, the more they see the judge vacillate and give way?

“**We have a law,**” they cry out very determinedly, “**and by our law He ought to die, because He made himself the Son of God.**”

The new accusation here brought by the Jews against Jesus, that He made Himself the Son of God, is very deserving of notice.

By this they in fact assert that Jesus, in the proceedings against Him, had assumed this high and honorable title. They therefore consider Him guilty of a capital crime. It was quite clear to them that by the title of Son of God, Jesus intended to place Himself high above every creature, and even on an equality with the all-sufficient God Himself.

And if our Lord had intended less than this, it was His sacred duty, on this occasion, to reject the assertion of His accusers as false, or to rectify it as a great mistake. However, He neither does the one nor the other, but observes silence, and by it, openly confirms the accusation brought against Him as well-founded.

**“We have a law, and by our law He ought to die because He made Himself the Son of God.”**

Very true, presupposing that He had spoken falsely in the great things He asserted of Himself. The charge of a treasonable blasphemy would then have lain upon Him. Such, however, was not the case, for He was really what He gave himself out to be. But let us remember that He was now appearing in our stead; and in this position the people’s sentence proves correct.

He died, the just for the unjust, and thus He became the end of the law to all them that believe. We died with Him, without personally feeling the suffering of death. In Him we emptied the bitter cup which was destined for us on account of our sins. Henceforward the law no longer stands in our way but only ministers to us in offices of love. Henceforth it may say to us, “Behold the righteousness reflected in my demands, and know that it is now yours in Christ Jesus. As personally holy as I require men to be, you shall eventually be presented before God.”

The law is also appointed to us, who delight in the law of God after the inward man, to live so as entirely to please Him who hath bought us with his blood; to unfold to us, in every case, what is pleasing to the Lord, and wherewith we may infallibly serve Him. It is to such performances that the law is now enjoined. It is our friend, though occasionally disguised under a gloomy mask, and makes again the sound of its lifted rod to be heard by us. This it does, only to drive us back to the wounds of Jesus, or still deeper into them.

But having again reached this city of refuge, it greets us in its true and wholly reconciled form. It has forever forsaken its hostile and menacing position with regard to us. **“Christ is the end of the law;”** and whoever is conscious of being a sinner in the sight of God, let him read these words to his complete satisfaction. In them lies the spring of my peace, as well as the dying song with which I hope, at length, gently and blissfully to fall asleep.

**“He made Himself the Son of God,”** cried the assembled crowd.

**“When Pilate heard that saying,”** we are informed, **“he was the more afraid.”**

We will understand the reason. The words were in unison with his deepest presentiment. Jesus had therefore declared Himself to be the Son of God. This seemed to the governor to be something highly remarkable and significant. All that he had seen of the Man with his own eyes seemed only to confirm this assertion respecting Him.

**“The Son of God!”** Pilate, had he been willing to have given vent to the feeling which in single moments overpowered him, would have almost called Him so; and what was there in the wondrous Man to render it incredible that He should be of other descent and superior in nature to other men?

Pilate is deeply affected. His mind feels a degree of mysterious apprehension of which it had never before been the subject. He is anxious to inquire more particularly who the Nazarene is, and for this purpose retires with Him again into the interior of the palace.

Here a memorable conversation takes place between them.

Pilate begins it with an inquiry which includes within it nothing less than the vital question of the whole of the Christian religion.

“**Whence art thou?**” says he. You perceive that we have rightly judged of what had occurred within him. His inquiry does not refer to the city or town, but rather to the world from whence Jesus proceeded. He wishes to know whether He is a son of earth, or has come from some other sphere of the universe. This of itself has become a problem to Pilate. How clearly, therefore, must the stamp of eternity have shone upon our Lord’s forehead, even in His menial form!

“**Whence art thou?**” We perceive from the emphasis laid upon this question that if the Lord had replied, “I am from heaven,” the governor would not have started back amazed, but would only have said, “Then my presentiment has not deceived me, for it has already seemed to me as if Thou wert only a stranger and a pilgrim upon earth.” But the Lord gives him no such answer, and even thinks fit to leave him without any information.

We must not regard this as strange; for what benefit would Pilate have derived, if the great mystery had then been revealed to him, that “**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh**”?

The heart of the heathen governor was not prepared for it, and his inquiry concerning the descent of Jesus, strictly regarded, must have proceeded more from vain curiosity than from desire for salvation and a need of help. Besides this, such a disclosure respecting Christ’s true person and nature could only have increased Pilate’s responsibility and have aggravated his condemnation at the last day, and hence it proceeded both from compassion and sparing mercy, that Jesus maintained a profound silence at his question.

How little Pilate would have felt inclined to bow to the scepter of the Son of God had he recognized Him as such, is sufficiently evidenced from the conduct which he observed immediately after the question. For on Jesus not at once replying to him, he feels offended, and addresses the Lord in a tone of extreme excitement with the arrogant and haughty words,

“**Speakest thou not unto me? Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?**” Hear him! How evident he makes it appear what spirit he is of! Ah, the finest feelings and presentiments of the natural man are only like a rapid vernal vegetation upon a moral morass, which just as rapidly decays. The man must be born again, or else he continues sold under sin as from the first; and his life, however moral and pious it may appear, will only be an uninterrupted chain of relapses.

“**Speakest thou not unto me?**”

Does not the man act as if the Lord committed high treason by not immediately giving him the desired information? What presumption! what pride! “**Knowest thou not,**” continues he, “**that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?**”

Oh, what delusion, what ridiculous and beggarly pride in one who had just before in the presence of his subjects manifested a weakness which should not have allowed him to use any longer the word “**power**” without blushing, especially with reference to crucifying and releasing!

But let us listen to what the Lord says. With the majestic composure of His regal self-consciousness, he replies to the judge who so boldly boasted of his authority. “**Thou couldst have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above; therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin.**”

Admirable words, perfectly worthy of the Lord from heaven and the Son of God! According to them, Pilate appears, although acting in his own estimation as self-existent and independent, as an unconscious instrument in the hands of the living God for a sublime purpose, only moving within limits appointed and marked out by an invisible hand. He is unable to do anything but that which God enables him to do. Notwithstanding his cowardice and want of principle, he would not have delivered Jesus over to his murderers if it had not been pre-determined in heaven. He walks, indeed, in his own way but in leading-strings of which he is unconscious. He bears, indeed, his guilt; but, while acting thus culpably, he promotes a great and sacred object, of which he is ignorant.

The Lord immediately follows up what He has said, to humble and put the governor to shame, with something different and more consolatory. “**Therefore,**” says he, “**he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin.**” He means, “Because thou art ignorant of Me, and knowest not why I am come into the world, thy guilt is less than that of him who delivered Me into thy hands.” The latter was primarily the high priest Caiaphas, this son of Abraham, this master in Israel, who had grown up in the light of Moses and the prophets, and, therefore, knew what the title “**Son of God**” signified, and was in a position to recognize this Son of God in Christ. He, nevertheless, pronounced the sentence of death upon our Lord as a blasphemer.

This sin was the greater because committed in the daylight of scriptural illumination and against superior light and knowledge. It was not committed from weakness, but purposely; not from being taken by surprise, but considerately; not from cowardice, but from wickedness.

Observe how the Lord here again appears great. How He shows Himself afresh as the King over all, yea, as the Judge of the world. With the certainty of an infallible searcher of hearts He weighs sin and guilt in the balances of the sanctuary, appoints the measure of future punishment, opens, at the same time, to the unhappy governor a prospect of mercy and possible forgiveness, and manifests the compassion of His heart, which thirsted for the salvation of sinners.

The Lord’s words have not entirely failed of their effect on the mind of the governor. He clearly feels in them the sublime as well as the benevolent and charitable motive which dictated them; and hence he is induced to return to the open court, and with fresh zeal to repeat the attempt to liberate Jesus. But he then hears from the crowd below the words which break the mast and rudder of the bark of his good-will, even on venturing out of the harbor.

“**If thou let this man go, thou art not Cesar’s friend; for whosoever maketh himself a king (like him for whom thou art pleading) speaketh against Caesar.**”

This outcry hit the governor's weakest and most vulnerable side. He knew his master the Emperor Tiberius too well not to foresee that an accusation like that which had just been raised against him, would find only too strong a response in his suspicious mind and would cost him, the governor, his office and who knows what beside. He therefore felt assured that the emperor would pronounce the severest sentence upon him so soon as he should be informed that his viceroy had set a man at liberty who had attempted to claim the title of king over Israel. The emperor's favor was everything to Pilate, for with it stood or fell his official dignity. Nay, the emperor's anger would have endangered his liberty and life, and it was a grave question with Pilate whether he ought to sacrifice these blessings to justice and peace of conscience.

No sooner does Pilate hear the unfortunate words, "**Thou art not Caesar's friend,**" than his little remaining ability to resist gives way. He does not indeed entirely give up his efforts to set Jesus at liberty; but what he undertakes for that purpose is with the despairing consciousness that a successful result is no longer to be expected. He steps forward from the praetorium once more, again brings the accused with him upon the stage, ascends the judgment-seat, and then again begins to harangue the people. But all he now says seems only to be calculated fully to frustrate his purpose.

"**Behold your king**" cries he, pointing to the suffering Saviour, torn with stripes and covered with ignominy. Who does not feel from this exclamation that it was prompted by a mixture of compassion for the Man of Sorrows, and of bitter scorn toward the hated Jews? He wishes at one and the same time to gain them over to favor Jesus and to give them a very painful blow. The people naturally felt only the poisoned sting of his speech and not its moving power, and that which Pilate might have foreseen occurs. The insulted multitude rise up, like an irritated viper, and cry out more resolutely, angrily, and furiously than before, "**Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!**"

Pilate now loses all self-possession. His passion even removes the object of his efforts from his view; like a madman destroying his furniture, so Pilate destroys the last hope of Jesus' rescue, while pouring oil into the flame of the people's rage already brightly burning. He calls out maliciously and with bitter sarcasm to the raging crowd, "**Shall I crucify your king?**" He no longer knows what he is saying. Inward discomfiture and despair, accompanied by a powerless thirst for revenge render him beside himself.

The chief priests, on the contrary, know better how to preserve their coolness. To the ironical question, "**Shall I crucify your king?**" they have immediately an answer at hand, which, though it casts an evil light upon themselves, could not have been more ably chosen to give the governor a moral death-blow. With pretended loyalty and devotedness toward the Roman sovereignty, they cried briefly and forcibly, "**We have no king but Caesar,**" and thus give themselves, as regards Pilate, the menacing aspect as if it were they and not he who defended the endangered authority and sovereignty of the emperor.

The supposition that the matter might be regarded in the same manner by Tiberius, quite overpowered the governor. He now gives Jesus up to the people to do with him as they list. They have gained a complete victory; but woe, woe to the poor unhappy beings!

While vociferating, “**We have no king but Caesar!**” in which they rejected the true Messiah, as well as their hopes in Him, they verified Jotham’s parable of the trees, who chose for their king a fiery bramble-bush, and unconsciously pronounced sentence and predicted a curse upon themselves for thousands of years. To this hour the Jews have no king but live without a home as tolerated aliens under foreign dominion.

We take our leave of Pilate and bid him farewell, not without sorrow. He was fitted for something better than that which we saw him display. But he wished to serve two masters - God, who spoke in his bosom, and the world at the same time; and hence his fall and his ruin. He was desirous of doing what was right, but not wholly. The seed of all the sanctifying impressions he received fell under the thorns of his unbroken pride and worldly-mindedness, and these sprang up and overpowered and choked it. Pilate fell a sacrifice to his want of decision and weakness of character, even as numberless others, though often the subject of fine feelings and resolutions incessantly become a prey to the power of Satan.

We have very scanty intelligence respecting the governor’s subsequent fate. We merely know that his inward state became gradually more gloomy and his severity increased; from whence we infer that his peace was at an end, because his conscience condemned him on account of the crying injustice committed upon the Holy One of Israel. In consequence of heavily oppressing the people he was removed by the Syrian Proconsul in the last year of the reign of Tiberius and banished to France.

It is a question whether, in his exile, he came to himself and learned to know the King of the Jews in the glory of His mediatorship. The curse which hovered over Pilate’s head was written clearly enough to induce us to hope that its contents would bring him to reflection, and kindle in him a desire for mercy and forgiveness. The primitive fathers speak of documents which Pilate sent to Tiberius respecting his judicial proceedings against Jesus and his death, by which the latter was induced to cause Christ to be received among the gods. We have no reason to doubt the truth of this ancient tradition; and for the sake of those who cannot believe in the superhuman majesty of Christ, sincerely regret that these documents are lost.

But to me, the whole conduct which Pilate, though a heathen, observed toward Jesus seems sufficiently glorifying to Him. Pilate occupies his place in the Word as a witness for the holiness and superhuman dignity of the Lord from heaven, as well as that Christ was delivered up and crucified, not merely according to human will and design, but in accordance with the divine plan of redemption and mercy.

~ end of chapter 37 ~

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