

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

F. W. Krummacher

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CHAPTER FOUR

CHRIST WASHING HIS DISCIPLES' FEET

WE ARE APPROACHING, in our meditations, a very solemn section of our Lord's history.

Jesus has completed His sojourn on earth, and the eve of the great and awful day of atonement has arrived. He assembles His followers around Him once more, in the social chamber of a friend's house in Jerusalem.

Once more they are permitted to look into their Master's faithful heart, and to feel how much God has given them in Him. Never was the recollection of the affecting circumstances which took place that evening erased from their memory.

- The tranquil majesty displayed by their Lord and Master
- The astonishing degree of ardent affection which manifested itself in every look, and every word
- The heavenly peace which shone forth in His whole deportment
- His cheerful and filial resignation to the will and counsel of God.

And with all His dignity, such amiable condescension, while in every expression of His lips, and in all His actions and conduct, there was something divinely profound, consoling, and mysterious.

The whole scene was overpowering and heart-cheering in a manner they had never before experienced. They felt themselves translated, as it were, into an outer court of heaven, and would have felt infinitely greater blessedness than even in the glory of Mount Tabor, had it not been for the anticipation of their Master's approaching departure, which threw a melancholy gloom over their joy.

The evangelist John informs us that **“before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them to the end.”**

What a wonderful style of writing is this! Does it not seem as if the Evangelist's heart beat audibly through the whole passage?

But that which so powerfully affects his heart above everything else, is the fact that the Lord Jesus, although He was then clearly conscious that His hour of return to the bosom of the Father was near at hand, and although He had already lived more above than on the earth, and heard from a distance the hymns of praise, amid whose echoes He was soon to re-ascend the throne of divine Majesty - yet He did not forget His followers, but still retained so much room for these pilgrims in this vale of death, in His affectionate solicitude and recollection.

And yet how much sorrow of heart had these very disciples occasioned Him only a short time before, by their lamentable strife for precedence, and especially by their conduct, when Mary poured the costly ointment upon Him.

You remember the mild and gentle reply which our Lord then gave them; but so far was it from humbling them, and causing them to acknowledge their fault, that it created discordant feelings within them and even closed and estranged their hearts from Him for a season. And yet - O comprehend this depth of fidelity and compassion! and yet - the Evangelist writes as if the tears were bursting from his eyes - and yet **“having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them to the end.”**

For it was to this end - is the Apostle's meaning - that He associated with sinners, that He might bear them eternally on His heart.

Those whom His Father had given Him were more the objects of His affection than the holy angels around the throne of God, and His love to them increased as the end drew near.

O how He loved them, when He took their sins with Him into judgment, and cast Himself into the fire which their transgressions had kindled!

How He loved them, when His own blood did not seem to Him too dear a price to be paid for them, although it was they who were the transgressors; He loved them to the end; and to this day He loves them that are His in a similar manner.

If a feeling of heavenly rapture thrilled through the apostle John at such a thought; let our hearts vibrate in like manner! Whatever may befall us, His love continues the same; **“For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord, that hath mercy on thee”** (Isaiah 54:10).

We return to the chamber at Jerusalem, and find the company already reclining around the paschal meal.

It would seem that at the commencement, little was spoken. But when the Lord is silent, His disciple speaks. Unveiling the heart of the incomparable.

Redeemer, like a sanctuary, he says, **“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God.”**

What a knowledge is this!

Had such an idea sprung up in the heart of anyone who was a mere man, though he were the most excellent of his kind, he must either have been an idiot, or the worst of blasphemers that ever called down the curse of the Almighty upon his guilty head. We see the Lord Jesus, sitting at table, in the consciousness of His eternal majesty and Godhead, of His being the King of kings and the Lord of lords, as well as the Mediator, to whose hands, for His work's sake, the Father has committed all things, including the divine authority to forgive sins; and, regarding the shedding of His blood as having already taken place, to whom nothing more stands in the way of His acting as the high priest and intercessor of His people, at the bar of the Thrice Holy in the heavens.

In this sublime and twofold consciousness, we see Him unexpectedly rising up from supper; and for what purpose? To appear in His dignity? To display the splendor of His divine glory? To constrain His disciples to bow the knee in the dust before Him? One might imagine so; but no, He has something very different in view.

Look, what means that?

He lays aside His outer garments, takes a towel and girds Himself with it; pours water into a basin, bends down to the feet of the disciples, and begins to wash them in their turn, and then to wipe them with the towel.

What a spectacle!

It is enough to make one start, and to hold one's breath with astonishment! Are we not ready to exclaim aloud, "Lord, Lord, what art thou doing?"

Think of the Holy One, who came down from heaven, thus engaged with sinners; the majestic Being, whom angels adore, abasing Himself to the occupation of a menial servant! No, we should never be able to make such an action agree with His high dignity, were we not acquainted with His wonderful and peculiar sentiment. He no longer knows His followers "**after the flesh**"; He sees in them those whom His Father has given Him - those whom God so loved, that He gave His only-begotten Son for them - the objects of an eternal and paternal counsel of mercy - beings, who, notwithstanding the sin which still cleaves to them, carry in their bosoms the work of the Holy Spirit, and in it the seed of God; and still more than all this does He behold in them. They are to Him the spiritual bride, clothed with the sun; for they stand before Him arrayed in the royal robe of His righteousness.

- O great and significant symbol!
- O powerful exposition of the words - "**I came not to be ministered unto, but to minister!**"
- O important testimony to that which is of value in His kingdom, and to that which is not!
- O impressive condemnation of all selfishness and self-exaltation in the children of men!
- O deeply affecting commendation of humility and self-denial, as the characteristics of His children, and amiable and ennobling instance of that love, which ought to animate us!

And how much more than all this is there not comprised in this act of our Lord's? It testifies of the sweetest, most glorious, and most exalted things in store for us, as will now be exposed to our View.

The disciples continue motionless and lost in mute astonishment. And how are they now ashamed of ever having striven among themselves as to who should be the greatest! They could almost bury themselves in the earth for confusion and regret. How humbled do they feel, and what tenderness and love pervade their hearts! With feelings of blissful astonishment, they suffer their Lord to act as He pleases with them.

The work of unheard-of condescension proceeds in silence, until the turn comes to Simon Peter.

Here, as might be expected, resistance is offered and a stand is made. When the Master approaches him, his face flushes with a fiery excitement. He hastily draws back his feet, and, as on a former occasion, he exclaimed, "**Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!**" so now he cries in the violence of his feelings, "**Lord, dost thou wash my feet?**"

He cannot comprehend how anything so unseemly should take place. The glory of the Lord and the worthlessness of the creature contrast too strongly. How deeply does Peter abase himself in this expression of his feelings, and how highly does he elevate his Lord and Master! "Thou, the Holy One," is the language of his heart - "I, a worm of the dust! It cannot be."

But however commendable may have been such a feeling in Simon's soul, it was nevertheless, in other respects, culpable and improper.

He ought to have remembered his Master's own words: "**(I) came not to be ministered unto, but to minister.**"

It is His peculiar office to cleanse the polluted and to purify the unclean. What would have become of us had He not condescended to the depth of that depravity in which He found us?

Simon thought it would be more befitting for him to wash his Master's feet. Yes, do not cease to wash them with penitential tears; but in other respects let Him wash and cleanse thee, otherwise how wilt thou escape eternal perdition? But Simon does not understand his Lord, and has no idea of his error. Jesus, therefore, replies to him in the well-known words, "**What I do, thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter.**"

But will not this remark of our Lord's induce Simon to resign himself wholly to Him?

On the contrary, Simon thinks he ought to preserve his Master's dignity, and therefore exclaims, in a very decided tone, "**Thou shalt never wash my feet!**"

Simon, however, forgot that obedience is better than sacrifice.

O, my friends, if you wish to honor Jesus, do so by submitting to His Word! He says, “**I am come to seek and to save that which is lost.**”

“No,” you reply, “I cannot imagine that His divine Majesty will trouble Himself about the prayers of such a worm as I!”

O unreasonable zeal for the divine dignity! It is the will of God that we should glorify Him in this very particular, that we believe Him to be the hearer of prayer.

“**Thou shalt never wash my feet!**” said the mistaken disciple.

But listen to the Saviour’s reply, “**If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.**”

What an important declaration is this! You perceive how the more profound and mystic meaning of our Lord’s act shines forth in these words - namely, as having reference to the blood of atonement, to forgiveness, justification, and purification from sin.

You know how much lies concealed in this passage, and how every syllable has its profound signification. “**If I wash thee not.**”

Yes, Thou, Lord Jesus, must do it; for whoever purified himself from sin?

- “**If I wash thee not.**” Yes, Thou must wash us; for teaching, instructing, and setting us an example, is not sufficient.

- “**If I wash thee not.**” Certainly, what does it avail me, if Peter or Paul is cleansed, and I remain defiled?

I must be forgiven, and it remains eternally true, that he who is not washed in the blood of Christ has no part with Him, nor the blessings of His kingdom.

It may easily be supposed that our Lord’s words excited in Simon a degree of astonishment he had never before experienced; and the idea of having no part with Jesus humbles him unspeakably. Resigning himself therefore, without reserve, he says, “**Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head**” - that is, the whole man.

When Jesus makes it appear that He is about to depart from us, it then becomes evident how closely and deeply we are connected with Him, though for a time He may have been forgotten by us in the bustle of daily life. When it would seem that He is willing to leave us to walk again in our own ways, it becomes manifest how valueless is all beside compared with Him.

The anxious doubt, whether we have any feeling for Him, disappears, and the “**bond of perfectness,**” which inseparably binds us to Him in our inmost being, is again brought to light, and we feel, with renewed vitality and force, how suddenly the curse, death, hell, and Satan, would again break in upon us, were we no longer permitted to trust and hope in Him.

Experience of this kind gives “**songs in the night,**” and encourages us in a time of darkness, even as King David was cheered by the remembrance of his former hymns of praise.

“Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.”

Excellent, but again not altogether correct. Simon now oversteps the line to the right, as he had before transgressed to the left.

He had previously rejected that which was indispensable; he now requires what is superfluous.

He does not yet comprehend the whole of the matter clearly; and probably the full meaning of Christ’s reply became evident to him only in the sequel; “**He that is washed need not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all.**”

It is clear that the last words have reference to the traitor. But what is the meaning of this mysterious speech?

I believe it to be as follows: he is washed, who, as a poor sinner, enters by faith into fellowship with Jesus. Such a one is then purified from sin, in consequence of being justified by grace. The blood of the Lamb was shed for him. The payment of all his debts was made. He is clean in the sight of God, for the merits of the Surety are imputed to him, and he continues to be thus regarded; for “**the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.**” He ought daily and hourly to rejoice in this his purified state.

Peter, in his second epistle, admonishes us not to forget that we are “**cleansed from our old sins.**”

But the individual is also pure as regards his sanctification; since, in consequence of being born again of water and the Spirit, he has forever renounced all that is sinful, and by reason of his new nature, though still assaulted and tempted in various ways by the flesh, he desires that the will of God may be accomplished in him, and that whatsoever he does may be well-pleasing in His sight.

But what is wont to happen in the progress of the life of faith? Unguarded moments occur, in which the man again sins in one way or other. He incautiously thinks, speaks, or does that which is improper, and is again guilty of unfaithfulness, although against his will; for only the devil and his seed sin willfully; while he that is born of God, saith the apostle, cannot practise sin. The man’s walk is polluted; his feet, with which he comes in contact with the earth, are defiled.

What is now to be done?

Two by-paths present themselves, and not infrequently one of them is taken. The individual either gives himself up to an excessive feeling of his guilt; openly cries out, “**Unclean, unclean!**” like one who is excluded from the fellowship of the pure; regards himself as fallen from grace; considers the bond of union with the Lord as rent asunder, and cries out with Peter, “**Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!**”

Or else the man takes his transgressions too easily; persuades himself that the faults he has committed are of no importance; soothes his conscience with the rash and vain idea that the iniquity belongs to the multitude of sins which have been atoned for and annihilated by the blood of Christ, and thus unconcernedly proceeds on his way.

In each of these cases there is a deviation, the one to the right, and the other to the left of the line of truth.

In the former, the man gives way unnecessarily to an excessive idea of the fault he has committed, and ascribes to it an influence over his entire state of grace, which according to the Word of God it does not exercise. The individual transgressions which a Christian may be induced to commit are by no means to be compared to an apostasy from Christ. In the single advantages which the flesh gains over the spirit, the regeneration which has been experienced is no more lost than divine grace is withdrawn.

In the other case, the sin committed is too lightly esteemed; and by an arbitrary act of the understanding, the man forgives himself, instead of letting himself be forgiven. But the little faults, as they are termed, are not thereby rendered less; and so far from being erased from the conscience, in consequence of our persuading ourselves that they belong to the multitude of those for which the atoning blood was shed, they remain in it, on the contrary, as a secret evil which gnaws the peace of our hearts like a cancer, and gradually robs us of filial boldness in our approaches to the throne of grace.

What, then, ought to be our conduct, according to the Scriptures, in situations like the foregoing?

First, beware of despondency, by which we only prepare a feast for Satan.

Next, withdraw not from the presence of the Lord, as if His heart were closed against us.

Thirdly, think not that it is necessary to make a fresh beginning of a religious life.

The seed of the new birth remains within us; and the child of the family of God is not suddenly turned out of doors, like a servant or a stranger. **“He that is washed,”** says our Lord, **“is clean every whit; and ye are clean, but not all.”**

Who does not now understand this speech?

Its meaning is, he that is become a partaker of the blood of sprinkling and of the baptism of the Spirit - that is, of the twofold grace of absolution from the guilt of sin, and of regeneration to newness of life, is, as regards the inmost germ of his being, a thoroughly new man, who has eternally renounced sin, and whose inmost love, desire, and intention is directed to God and things divine. When such a one, from weakness, is overtaken by a fault, he has no need of an entirely new transformation, but only of a cleansing. He must let his feet be washed. Let this be duly considered by those who are in a state of grace, and let them resist the infernal accuser, lest he gain an advantage over them by his boundless accusations.

Hold up the blood of the Lamb as a shield against him, and do not suffer your courage and confidence to be shaken.

The other danger which menaces us here, must be equally cautiously avoided; and we must beware of cloaking or underestimating any act of unfaithfulness we may have committed.

No fault is too trifling or inconsiderable. We must suffer the judge in our breasts to perform his office without hindrance and not refuse to listen to his convictions. We must draw near to God and sincerely confess our faults.

Let our language be, "O Lord, my God, I have sinned against Thee afresh, and am grieved at it. I judge and condemn myself; but Thy mercy is great, and therein do I trust. Sprinkle my conscience with the blood of atonement, and enable me, by faith, to appropriate for this my fault, the suffering Thou hast endured for me!"

Let the humbled and contrite heart pray thus, and the Lord will graciously incline to it, and impart forgiveness to the soul by His Holy Spirit, and the peace of the heart with the consciousness of adoption will then remain undisturbed in the blood of the Lamb.

And O, how do we feel ourselves again united to the Lord, and strengthened anew to fight against Satan, the world, and our own flesh; and how does the joyful confidence bloom afresh in our minds, that we really possess a Saviour, after such a renewed experience of His faithfulness! Then we arrive again at Peniel, and exultingly say with Jacob, "**I have seen the Lord face to face, and my life is preserved;**" and join, with deep emotion, in the words of David, "**Return unto thy rest, O my soul! for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee!**"

This is letting our feet be washed, in the sense intended by our Lord; and you will observe how blissful, refreshing, and reviving is the act.

And in the eyes of him who is possessed of true simplicity, this daily renewed repentance, and the fresh experience of salvation which attends it, is nothing legal, but the real gospel, and an exercise which is unspeakably sweet. The inward man is thus renewed day by day, and experiences a continued restoration. The flowers of joy and devotedness to God incessantly spring up in the heart, and it is always spring time within.

There are many Christians who know of no other nourishment for their inward life than the moldy bread of long past experience. But no true peace results from this.

Inward religion does not consist in a life of morbid security, arising from the recollection of having once received the forgiveness of sins. Where a real spiritual life exists, there is also constant activity, unceasing striving against sin, repeated humiliation before God, and renewed experience of His favor. Were it otherwise, why should the Lord put into His children's lips the daily petition, "**Forgive us our trespasses!**"

He that is washed need not be again entirely washed, but only his feet, and that continually.

The inmost meaning of the scene under consideration has thus been unfolded before us. It belongs to the method of salvation, and as regards its whole extent, was certainly apprehended only in the sequel by the understandings of the disciples. That which they doubtless understood better, at the moment, was the exterior act, and the example it afforded. To this our Lord's closing explanation is limited, to which we have now in conclusion, to direct our attention.

After the Lord resumes His outer garments, and reseats Himself at the table with His disciples, He again opens His gracious mouth and says to them, "**Know ye what I have done to you?**"

By this question He refers once more to the profounder meaning of His action, which He had brought sufficiently near to the comprehension of His disciples by the remark, "**now are ye clean, but not all.**" At these words every doubt must have vanished as to the spiritual cleansing here alluded to.

"**Ye call me Master and Lord,**" He continues, and adds, in majestic self-consciousness, "**Ye say well, for so I am.**" He then says further, "**If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the servant is not greater than his Lord, neither he that is sent, greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.**"

In these words, that part of Christ's act which is intended as an example is set before us. The word, translated in our version "**example,**" includes in it the twofold idea of symbol as well as example, and therefore points out to us a deeper meaning than appears on the surface.

It will be known to you that many have supposed our Lord here intended to institute an outward ordinance for His Church. *But there is not the slightest foundation for such an idea;* nor is the Lord to blame that the washing enjoined by Him has in some places degenerated into the mere formality of an outward, empty ceremonial.

The Lord, by this act, commended to His disciples that brotherly love which flows from His own heart into ours, manifests itself in real self-denial, and willingly condescends to the most menial offices.

We ought also to wash one another's feet, even in a literal sense, when necessity and circumstances require it.

We ought not to imagine ourselves too high and lofty for any kind of assistance, however apparently degrading, since Christ has left us such a brilliant example in this respect.

Acts of love never degrade, however menial they may be. They did not degrade the Lord of Glory; how, then, should they degrade us His unworthy servants?

But it is chiefly in a spiritual sense that we ought to follow the example of our Lord.

We are naturally much inclined to accuse each other of faults, and we judge and grieve each other by our severity. But the Lord recommends a washing of the feet, which arises from the charitable intention of cleansing and divesting our brother of some besetting sin. This cannot indeed be done without mentioning the particular offense; but there is a great difference between humility, which never judges others without first judging itself, and self-righteous faultfinding, which holds up to the poor sinner the catalogue of his transgressions.

He who washes a brother's feet in the sense intended by our Lord, places himself on the same footing with him as a sinner; enters compassionately into his fault; reveals it to him with forbearance and undissembled frankness; melts his heart by gently reminding him of the riches of divine goodness, which he has repaid with ingratitude; and after having thus washed his feet, while inciting him to repentance, he does not forget to wipe them also, by unveiling the throne of grace, depicting to his view the cross of Calvary, announcing to him the mercy of Him who has received gifts, even for the rebellious, and by dropping into his wounds the balm of the gospel.

Certainly we never wash each other's feet in this manner until we know what the Lord has done for us in particular.

The mystery of His cross must first have been revealed to us in the light of the Holy Spirit ere we are able thus to wash one another's feet. We must first have experienced that in the substantial anti-type, which Simon Peter experienced in the type. Christ Himself must first wash us before we can wash the feet of any in the manner intended by Him. Let the words, then, ever sound in our ears: **"If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me."**

May they expel all false security from our souls; give us no rest day or night until they cast us down at His footstool, and if He has not yet cleansed us, call forth from our bosoms the words of Peter:

"Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!"

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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