

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

MATTHEW 26:57-75

THE supreme impression made upon our minds by our last study was that of the triumph of the King, as we saw Him emerging from the garden, Master of all the forces that had gathered about Him in the lone hour of the night.

Now we are to see the King passing through the hands of men, while still in the hands of God.

- First His judges; and one is almost inclined to say, God forgive us for calling them judges; those men who sought His death by the violation of justice.
- Then Peter, His own, a representative man here as everywhere.
- Then the traitor Judas.
- Finally Pilate the vacillating, time-serving slave of expedience.

Our contemplation of the King flings all these men up into clear relief, and we see them for what they really are. Then, presently, He passed again into that unutterable loneliness on the margin of which we may be able to stand, and listen to the sighing wind, and the beating surf, but we shall never be able to fathom it, or understand it perfectly.

Throughout the whole movement we shall see the same attitude of authority and dignity. He was never beaten, never defeated.

In the passage before us there are two things which arrest our attention.

The first is to be found in verses fifty-seven to sixty-eight, omitting verse fifty-eight because it has to do with Peter. The second section we find in verse fifty-eight, and verses sixty-nine to seventy-five.

- In the first, we have brought before us the vision of the King rejected of men, but chosen of God.
- In the second, we see the King denied by His own, but saving them.

In the first section let us fix our attention first upon the King Himself.

Very little is said about Him. It is announced that they had taken Him, led Him away to the house of Caiaphas, where the scribes and elders were gathered together.

The next thing that we read about Him immediately is that He “**held His peace.**” The final thing is that in answer to the priest’s administering to Him a judicial oath, He made a double claim for Himself, first, that He was the Messiah, the Son of God; and, secondly, that He would ascend to the place of power, and finally come again and manifest Himself. So that two things impress us as we look at the King, first His silence; and, secondly, His speech on oath.

First His silence.

Notice it carefully; He was silent when the witnesses, quite correctly called false witnesses by Matthew, bore testimony against Him. He was silent because He knew full well the purpose of the lie, and that correction was useless. They were men with the one set purpose of putting Him to death. When a court proceeds upon such lines as that, there is no hope.

How many witnesses they brought we do not know, quite a number evidently, and the stories they told were so flimsy, and foolish, and futile, that even the high priest made no use of them; until at last two were found who could represent something that He was reported to have said, upon which the high priest thought he could fasten. Even they lied ignorantly or willfully. They declared that He had said, I will destroy this temple and build it again in three days.

No such word had ever passed His lips.

He had said, “**Destroy this temple,**” not “I will destroy.” He had never affirmed His ability to destroy. He is not the Destroyer. His words had been a supposition of their power to destroy. They were men blinded by their rationalism, having no vision beyond the immediate, no conception beyond that which was absolutely and wholly material; and they had twisted His supposition into an affirmation.

We next observe His silence in the presence of the priest. When the priest asked Him purely in his personal capacity, “**Answerest Thou nothing?**” and as attempting to enforce Him to incriminate Himself, He was silent, no word passed His lips.

But that which is the most surprising and arresting in this scene, is Christ’s claim on oath. Notice very carefully how the high priest spoke to Him; “**I adjure thee by the living God.**”

That was the legal form of administering the oath. That which follows is not part of the legal form, but declares what would be the issue of His answer on oath. He did not say, I adjure Thee in order that Thou tell us; but I place Thee on oath in order that we may hear from Thee on oath, whether or not Thou art the Son of God, the Christ. It is the exact phrasing with which the Hebrew was familiar at the time. It was a careful question, and it was a question revealing the true attitude of the priest toward Jesus.

- It was a question revealing first of all the high priest’s conception of the Messianic hope and office as it existed among his people.
- It was a question revealing the high priest’s familiarity with the ancient Scriptures, and his perfect understanding of that Messianic hope which burned at the center of the national life.

The hope of the people concerning the Messiah was that He should be the Son of God, and the anointed One for the accomplishment of a Divine purpose.

But the high priest's question revealed more.

It revealed quite clearly the fact that he understood that Jesus had been making this very claim. He gathered up into his question the result made upon the mind of the high priest and all the rulers, of the teaching and preaching of Jesus. The question would only be asked of a Man Who made claims which amounted to this. And without staying to go back over the whole of our Gospel, or even to gather incidents, if we think what Christ had been doing we shall recognize that it did amount to this. He had claimed over and over again, Messianic power and office; He had claimed to be the Son of God; and therefore the high priest in effect said to Him, The hope of the Hebrew people is Messiah; Messiah is to be the Son of God; Thou hast been so speaking and teaching as to lead men to think that Thou art the Messiah, the Son of God. Let us have no more uncertainty, I place Thee, on oath; tell us plainly is this Thy claim?

He did not believe Jesus, and he did not believe that He was trifling. He felt it was necessary to put Him on oath, in order that He might be compelled thus definitely to make His claim.

It is necessary to emphasize this because that emphasis lends tremendous force to Christ's answer.

If we once clearly see that the high priest was definitely leading Him to open confession, then immediately we see the meaning of His answer.

It was a double answer.

- He first immediately answered the high priest's question,
- Then He added to it something other, more startling than the suggestion the high priest had made.

With regard to the question, Jesus said, **"Thou hast said."** This was an affirmation as direct, simple, and profound, as the question of the high priest.

Thus we see the King, hemmed in by His foes, standing at the illegal tribunal, silent while witnesses lie, silent while the priest asked Him why He did not answer; but when challenged on oath answering immediately, affirming that He was exactly what the high priest suggested, the Christ, the Son of God.

And now, with this in mind let us carefully observe the next word which has caused some difficulty in the minds of expositors.

"Nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven."

Efforts have been made to change the word “**nevertheless**,” and to say it must be translated in some other way.

Let us look at this simply but carefully.

“**Thou hast said.**” That was His answering affirmation on oath. One suggests we must change the next word “**nevertheless** “ and read instead “Moreover.” Another suggests that we substitute the word “But” None of these changes is necessary unless we lose our sense of the scene. But there is no real escape from it, the word means “**Nevertheless**,” and we have no business to change it.

Watch the scene for a moment. Look carefully into the face of the high priest and elders about Him. Endeavoring to entrap Him, the high priest had put Him upon oath. Christ absolutely, definitely, clearly, positively, without ambiguity or circumvention, on oath affirmed His Messiahship. In a moment we see upon the face of the high priest the infinite scorn and incredulity with which he heard the answer. If we see that, we shall understand the “**Nevertheless**.”

Nevertheless, that is, in spite of thine unbelief, thou shalt see!

So that here Christ, in answer to the high priest’s charge, declared on oath that He was the Christ, the Son of God; and secondly in answer to his scorn and incredulity He laid claim to triumph even in the hour of defeat. This was His last magnificent claim to the high priest of the Hebrew nation.

In the second Psalm we find the Hebrew conception of Messianic hope crystallized.

There is no doubt whatever that the Hebrew expositors, and teachers, treated that psalm as Messianic; it is the Psalm that tells that the Son is anointed, and set upon the throne of power, that He shall ask for the heathen, and possess them, and for the uttermost part of the earth, and they shall be granted to Him.

The high priest had used the thought crystallized in that Psalm, and had said, “Are you that Person, You, Galilean peasant, Nazarene? Do you claim to be the Person described in our ancient Scripture, the Son Who is anointed to such a place of power, the very Son of God ruling?”

And Christ said, “Yes!” The high priest was astonished, incredulous.

And then Christ said, “**Nevertheless**,” and immediately quoted from the book of Daniel, which was as surely Messianic to Hebrew thinking as was the great Psalm. In the book of Daniel the place of vision is heaven. The coming in the clouds there, is a coming from earth to heaven.

When Daniel wrote, “**I beheld till thrones were cast down**,” it was the uppermost spaces into which he was looking, the infinite, and the spiritual. Then followed Daniel’s vision of the Ancient of Days; “**I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven.**”

He came from the earth, to the Ancient of Days; and the One Who came was **“Like the Son of man. And came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. And there was given Him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him.”**

Now let us return to our scene.

Jesus said, “You have asked Me if I am the Son of God, the Messiah. I am. You do not believe it. Then let Me remind you of another of your Messianic predictions that speaks of the Son of man coming to the Ancient of Days for crowning and dominion and power. I am that Son of man. You do not believe the spiritual claim; you shall have it wrought out into your sight. I stand here in the midst of you, beaten and baffled as it seems. You have encompassed My death by lying, treachery, meanness. You have suborned false witnesses, to whom I have given no answer; and now you ask Me on oath to make declaration, and your face indicates incredulity as I make My declaration. Nevertheless, henceforth, from this hour of mock injustice, from henceforth the Son of man of Daniel’s vision, shall ascend to the place of power, and you shall see it.”

And did they see it?

They nailed Him to the Cross; they bartered His life away; they flung Him out; and one can imagine that after He was dead, buried in Joseph of Arimathea’s grave, they said, Now He is done with!

Within four days they began to find out that He was not done with; they had to reckon with Him as on the throne of empire; and in a very little while we find them gathering a little group of fishermen with perturbation in their hearts and terror in their souls, saying to them, **“Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”**

What does that mean? It means that the Son of man had ascended to the throne, and received dominion from the Ancient of Days, and all the things that they had tried to encompass were nothing to Him. So that either He was all that He laid claim to be, or Caiaphas was right when He charged Him with blasphemy. We have no middle course to-day any more than they had; He is a liar, or incarnate Truth; an impostor, or God the Son, raised to the place of eternal Empire.

We have looked at the King; now let us look at the things seen incidentally.

Is there anything in human history that compares with this for a travesty of justice; it was a lie in the name of truth, wickedness in the name of religion.

This was not a Roman court, but a Hebrew court, and by the laws of the Hebrew people it was illegal for the Sanhedrim to meet in the night to try a case such as this, but they arraigned Him in the night. It was illegal for the Sanhedrim to pass sentence on the day that the prisoner was arrested, but they did it in this case in a few hours.

Mark the travesty of justice in the witnesses.

“Now the chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death; But found none: yea, though many false witnesses came, yet found they none. At the last came two false witnesses.”

After Christ’s great claim we see the high priest rising, and we hear the clamour of his angry voice, **“What further need have we of witnesses?”** and then he rent his garments, and in the doing of it violated the law under which he served as a priest.

We have but to turn to Leviticus and we find it distinctly ordered that the high priest shall not rend his garments in the hour of sorrow or anguish. It was but a little thing, but it was symbolic of the whole attitude; they were trampling upon law, violating justice to encompass the death of this Man.

The verdict of the council was shouted out in hot anger, and was followed by brutality to the prisoner as they buffeted Him. That is human nature, and that is human nature as it is to-day, but for the grace of God.

The story of Peter is a very familiar one.

We may first of all say that, making allowance for his failure, all allowance for the awfulness of his denial, we must not forget that we must account for Peter by one word, and that word is love.

He loved his Lord throughout all the process. Truly love works through faith. Love needs faith as its central element, and Peter’s faith in Jesus never failed, his love never failed. Christ had said to him a little before, **“Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat, But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.”**

His courage failed, his hope failed, his faith that Jesus would accomplish the thing Peter thought He was going to accomplish, failed; but His faith in Jesus never failed, his faith in the Person never failed, he believed in Him all through. And so as we trace the story it is one of love, blundering love, foolish love, but it is love.

Let us notice three things about Peter.

- Love at a distance and curious, He **“followed Him afar off”** to see what the end would be.
- Secondly, love challenged and cowardly, until he denied.
- Finally, love remembering and contrite, **“He went out, and wept bitterly.”**

Love at a distance, and curious. That was Peter’s failure. Love challenged, and cowardly. That was the devil’s sifting. Love remembering, and contrite. That was Christ’s victory.

First, love at a distance and curious. We need not lay any undue stress upon this, but it is certainly interesting to read the first Psalm when we read about Peter. As we read this Psalm we think about Christ.

**“Blessed is the man that walketh not
in the counsel of the ungodly.
Nor standeth in the way of sinners,
Nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.”**

But negatively Peter is there also. There is the process; we can hardly say progress, for it is a downward movement.

Walking, standing, sitting; that is exactly what Peter did.

- Walking, **“He followed Him afar off.”**
- Standing, he went **“into the porch”** and stood among these people.
- Sitting, he **“sat without in the palace”** by the fire that the enemies of Christ had built.

He was following afar. But why did Peter come there at all? And if he could speak he would say because I loved Him, I wanted to see the end.

I was disappointed, He was doing nothing of what I thought He would do. Ah yes, but love merely curious, that walks with sinners and stands with sinners, and sits to gain its warmth by the fire that sinners have built, is in peril. That was Peter’s failure.

Then mark that love was challenged. One damsel spoke to him, **“Thou also.”** Why the also? John was there somewhere, Judas was lurking somewhere. **“Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee,” “Surely thou also art one of them.”**

He tried to evade denial the first time. **“I know not what thou sayest.”** We know and understand that. Challenged, we do not deny, but we evade! That also is a lie.

Then another maid did not speak to him, but spoke to the whole company and said, **“This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth.”**

Then it was that he put himself on oath, for that is the meaning of swearing here. He took his oath that he did not know Him.

Then the whole of them spoke to him presently, saying, Really you are one, your very speech betrays you, you have the Galilean accent, you cannot escape that way! Then he added curses to the oath. That was Satan’s sifting. Long ago Jesus had said, Satan will sift you! Someone has quaintly said Peter shut the door to all the upper things and opened it to all the downward things. Peter was finding himself out.

Never a man that loves Jesus Christ but that he comes into circumstances sooner or later that will reveal what is in him. He is brought into them in order that he may be delivered from the things that are in him.

And then the last thing.

It is so full of light and color even in the darkness. The whole thing is so dramatic if we could but see it. He had just uttered that last protestation and had cursed; and outside in the darkness was heard the crowing of the cock; and he remembered.

One cannot read it without forgetting Peter, and thinking of Christ. Christ had said to him, **“before the cock crow, thou shalt deny Me thrice.”**

It was such a simple thing, such a childish thing, that does not seem to have anything in it. But He will employ the chirping of a sparrow to win a soul to God. He will press into the business of restoring a wandering one, the crowing of a cock in the dawning of the morning. He remembered, and we need not follow him out, as he went weeping; the evangelist with a fine delicacy leaves him a brokenhearted man, because he had denied his Lord.

So we see hate murdering the King, and love denying the King; and it seems as though the King says to us two things.

- First, come, see if there ever was sorrow like Mine!
- But perhaps the final thing He said was, From henceforth the Son of man is on the throne of power!

Let us trust Him and follow Him, even though it be through darkness.

~ end of chapter 69 ~

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