

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

THE INTERMENT

AFTER ALL THE SCENES we have been witnessing, how beneficial to our spirits is the solemn stillness that now reigns on Calvary! It is the preparation for the Sabbath, and to us it seems just as if we heard the gentle sound of the Sabbath bells reaching us from a distance. The Gospel narrative which details to us the circumstances attending our Lord's being taken down from the cross - his being laid in the grave - and the watch which was set over it - produce in us a tranquil and peaceful feeling.

It is our last meditation on the history of our Saviour's passion. May the peace of God, which passeth understanding, be the precious fruit that we shall derive from it! May it prepare our hearts for the wonder of His resurrection!

The crowd have vacated the summit of Calvary. The Roman guard, however, remains. Whether John was also there, we are not informed. Profound silence reigns around. The bodies of the two malefactors are taken down from their crosses, and their graves are being dug. The crucified Redeemer, with His head crowned with thorns and reclining upon His breast, still hangs solitarily between heaven and earth. Who is to inter Him? According to the law, it was the duty of the executioners to bury Him on the place of execution.

But God ordered it otherwise. After the great High Priest's atoning sacrifice had been offered up, He was not to be subjected to any further ignominy. This would have been contrary to the order of the divine statutes. If He had brought His cause to a successful and triumphant termination, honor and glory alone were henceforth His due. Such was also the judgment of Almighty God. A funeral was to be given to His Son, in the circumstances attending which even the blindest might perceive the overruling hand of Eternal Love. Two honorable men - honorable not only in the eyes of men, but also before God - are entrusted with the interment of Immanuel's corpse; and a company of tried female disciples are to be joined with them.

Let us not anticipate the narrative. We leave Mount Calvary for a few moments, and take our stand in the city of Jerusalem. Who is it that is walking so hastily up the street that leads to the palace of the Roman governor? The man seems to be the bearer of some important commission. His countenance expresses it, and his haste betrays it. Who is he? Jerusalem knows him, and numbers him among her principal and most estimable citizens.

It is Joseph, surnamed of Arimathea, his birthplace which lay on the mountains of Ephraim - a man honored with the universal confidence of his tribe, and at the same time a member of the highest Jewish court of justice - the Sanhedrin. As such, he had been personally present at the whole of the proceedings against Jesus; and in the course of them had acquired a vital conviction, not only of the perfect innocence of the Accused, but also something more. He **“had not consented to the counsel and deed”** of his associates, but yet he had not had the courage to enter a strong and decided protest against it. Christ was led away to execution, and Joseph in spirit with Him, so far as he was severely judged and condemned by his own conscience.

The bloody execution took place. We know not whether Joseph beheld it from a distance, or learned its details from another. We see him sitting solitarily in his chamber at Jerusalem, and hear him say in broken sentences, “He is therefore dead! They have slain Him whom they ought to have bound to the earth by a thousand ties of love.

Woe to the murderers! They have extinguished, in His own blood, the fairest star that ever shone from heaven upon the world. They knew not what they did, but I knew. Why did I not appear in His behalf? Why did I not confess myself to be His disciple? I never bowed the knee to Him, and suffered Him to be slain without solemnly protesting against it!”

Such was the language which we may suppose Joseph uttered to himself in his solitude, while with a grieved heart, he covered his face with his mantle. But suddenly rising up, he exclaims, “Thou whom I ought to have honored in life, let my homage in death be acceptable to Thee!”

So saying, he leaves his chamber and his dwelling, and mingles with the crowd which throngs the streets.

What is Joseph’s object? He is proceeding directly to the governor to ask his permission to take down the Saviour from the cross, and honorably inter Him in his own family sepulcher. He arrives at the Roman palace, and after having been announced, he appears in the presence of Pilate, and says with firmness and in plain terms, “I am come to beg of thee one thing - that thou wouldst give me the body of Jesus that I may prepare an honorable grave for Him as He deserves.”

Pilate is not a little astonished at such a request from the lips of a Jewish senator. He immediately sends for the commander of the guard, and inquires most carefully respecting the three men that had been crucified.

In spite of the quiet official mien which he seeks to put on, it does not escape us that he sympathizes with the deeply affected senator. Even in the surprise with which he hears the news that Jesus is already dead, I think I see reflected something of the powerful presentiments which his soul was unable to resist at the thought of Him who was crucified. Besides, his conscience accuses him respecting his conduct toward One whom he knew to be guiltless; and that He should experience now that He was dead, an honorable funeral such as Joseph intended, corresponded so entirely with his own wishes and feelings that he readily gives his permission, as if his own heart were relieved by so doing.

Joseph heartily thanks the governor, and hastens from him as joyfully as if he had gained a great treasure, in order first of all to purchase the finest linen he can procure, and at the same time the most costly ointment and spices. And if the whole world should wish to know for whom they were intended, he would have testified aloud that they were for his Lord and King. And though the Sanhedrin should warn, or go so far as to threaten him with a removal from office, or even something worse, Joseph will still more loudly exclaim that it is for his King, his Lord, and his Prince of Peace, that he is making these funeral preparations.

The narrative states that “**he went in boldly to Pilate;**” but to him it did not seem too bold. He would gladly have sacrificed anything for Jesus, if by so doing he could have made amends for what he had neglected to do while He was living.

We leave him, and return to the place of execution.

O see who has meanwhile arrived there! We recognize the man who is standing mute and motionless beneath the cross, and is looking up with devout and tearful eyes to the deceased Sufferer. Joseph finds in him a companion in spirit; for he has to repent of the same thing, and burns with desire, like him, to make amends for his fault. And who is this contemplative stranger?

It is Nicodemus, Joseph’s colleague in office, that Pharisee who came to Jesus desirous of learning and anxious for salvation, but by night; because in him also the fear of the Jews at least equaled his love for the truth. He likewise has thrown aside the disgraceful fetters which bound him.

Truly we see marvelous things occurring in the vicinity of the cross.

Who is it that has suddenly opened their eyes? It is the Spirit of the living God. The germ of faith which manifests itself so gloriously and so fully developed had long lain in their hearts, though bound, and as if under the sod. From out of the thunder-cloud that brooded over Calvary, abundant grace has proceeded, and hence it is that we see it so freely and powerfully manifested.

After Nicodemus has meditated awhile with unspeakable emotion at the sight of the cross, Joseph also reaches the summit of Calvary; and how cordially does he greet his associate in mind and spirit! Then after conversing a short time confidentially together, and making the soldiers acquainted with the permission they have received from the governor, they begin their mournful labors. Ladders are fetched, and planted against the cross of the Prince of Peace, and they reverentially ascend to the corpse, feeling at the same time as if they were mounting the steps of some sacred temple.

The two friends have just reached their departed Master’s wounded feet. There they devoutly bow their heads, and cover them with kisses and tears, for He is worthy of it. They then ascend higher to His lacerated head. It is not tender sympathy, but something more, with which they behold His blood-stained countenance.

They do not fail to perceive what lofty majesty sits enthroned on that pallid brow, and that over the closed eyelids something hovers like the dawn of resurrection. Their minds are deeply affected by the anticipation of what may still come to pass respecting Him; and they then begin, tenderly and gently, to draw out the nails from His hands and feet. That precious corpse reclines upon their shoulders, and after they have wrapped it in linen, they gently let it down from the cross to the ground.

Let us imitate their example.

Jesus teaching at Nazareth, or preaching on the mount of the beatitudes, or even transfigured on Mount Tabor, will not suffice us. Christ crucified must be the object of our affections. Therefore ascend to Him on the spiritual ladder of sorrow for sin, longing for mercy, and belief in the efficacy of His sufferings and death.

Detach Him from the accursed tree, and deposit Him in your hearts as your only consolation in life and death. That it is the real saving love to Jesus which burns within us, and not a mere caricature of it, may be best ascertained by its being first enkindled by the sight of Him, bleeding and dying on the cross, and then embracing Him as the ever-living One. He on the contrary who turns away from the dead Christ, and imagines that the living Christ, going about doing good, teaching, and setting an example, suffices him, miscalculates, and on the day of His coming, notwithstanding his greeting of "**Rabbi! Rabbi!**" will hear from His lips the awful words, "**I never knew thee!**"

Let us return to our two friends.

We see them descending the hill with their precious burden. The funeral is without pomp, but rendered distinguished by the tenderness and courageous conduct of the two who carry the corpse. No mournful peal accompanies the quiet procession, but in the future it is so much the more abundantly celebrated.

From how many thousand towers in the present day do the solemn bells resound over the cross and grave of Jesus, on the annual return of the day which is sacred to the memory of His death and burial! No mournful dirge precedes it, no funeral torches flame. But what more costly flambeaux can there be than those of inextinguishable love and reverence, the offspring of heaven? And only listen; there is also no want of a burial-service.

An inspired seer has chanted it nearly a thousand years before, the prophet Isaiah in chapter 53:9, "**he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.**"

We have reached the place, and enter a quiet plot of ground partly inclosed by rocks. It is Joseph's garden. The sun is just casting its last rays upon it, and the twilight of evening its first cool shades.

In this peaceful seclusion the Holy One is to find His last earthly resting-place.

He who had not where to lay His head possessed no grave of His own. and therefore required that one should be lent Him for His transient repose. But how happy Joseph thought himself to have the honor of being permitted to prepare Him a sepulcher; and how pleasing is the prospect to him of eventually, when his last hour shall arrive, entering, in death, into the closest fellowship with Him whom in life he had, alas! so basely deserted!

When the two friends reach the rocky grotto with their beloved burden, they perceive that there is no want of a train of mourners. The faithful women, Mary Magdalene, Mary Joses, and many other courageous female friends had followed them at some distance; for they also were anxious to see the place where the object of their entire hope and love was to be deposited.

Joseph and Nicodemus heartily welcome them, and gladly accept of their services to aid them in the interment. The sacred body is then gently laid on the ground, and, while the women, almost more with their tears than with the water they have brought, wash the bloody spots from His head and breast, the men fill the white linen in which the body is to be wrapped, with myrrh, aloes, and other of the most costly spices, of which they had brought a large quantity with them, Nicodemus even a hundred pounds weight.

Then, after having wrapped the body in the customary linen bandages, they once more look in silence at the pallid yet regal face of the dead, and spread the napkin over it.

The entire business of interment is, however, not yet ended; but the nearness of the Sabbath requires them to delay the actual embalming until the close of that festival, and, for the time, leave the corpse simply with those preliminary labors of love.

If Mary, the sister of Lazarus, was also among the burial train, she would remember that no further work of that kind with the Master's corpse was necessary, since, according to His own express assurance, He had already received from her hands in Bethany the anointing for the day of His burial.

The friends now again lift up the beloved corpse and bear it, gently and solemnly, into the new, clean sepulcher in the rock, where they softly lay it down to rest, as though it were only asleep, in a large and high-arched niche. Once more they look at it deeply affected, then forcibly tear themselves away, leave the vault, roll a great stone before its door, and because the Sabbath lights are already seen glimmering from a distance, return to their dwellings in profound sorrow, but not without hopeful anticipations. We leave them, and linger a few moments longer at the sepulcher, from whence a vital atmosphere proceeds, and the peace of God is breathed upon us. There He rests, the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

How grateful is the feeling to us, after all the ignominy and suffering He has endured, to see Him at least once again honorably reposing, and that too upon a couch, which love, fidelity, and tenderness have prepared for Him! Who does not perceive that even in the circumstances of His interment, the overruling hand of God has interwoven for our consolation a gentle testimony, that His only-begotten Son had well accomplished the great task which He was commissioned to perform?

How clearly the taking down from the cross, and the interment of the Redeemer before the setting in of night and the Sabbath, shows the fulfillment of the ancient ordinance of Israel respecting those who were hanged on a tree! And how distinctly are we convinced that the curse is now removed from a sinful world, and that the eye of God again looks graciously and well-pleased down upon the earth!

There He slumbers. Well for us that He was willing to pass through this dark passage on our behalf! Nothing hindered Him from taking up His life again on the cross, and returning from thence immediately to His Father. But had He done so, our bodies would have been left in the grave, and you know how much more we are wont to fear the grave, than even death itself.

There, where corruption reigns, it seems as if the curse of sin still hung over us, and as if no redemption had been accomplished. In order to dispel this terror, He paternally took into consideration all our necessities, and suffered Himself to be laid in the grave before our eyes. He did not indeed see corruption, because He was not a sinner. **“Thou wilt not suffer thine Holy One to see corruption,”** said David in Psalm 16:10, impelled by the spirit of prophecy.

Our flesh, on the contrary, which is poisoned by sin, must necessarily pass through the process of the germinating seed corn, and be dissolved into its original element before its glorification. But the difference between our lot and that of our divine Head is not an essential one. The chief thing continues to be that we know our bodies are not lost in the grave, but that they rest there in hope. This is confirmed and guaranteed to us by Christ. The way we have seen Him go we shall also take. That which His obedience merited for Him as the Son of man, it merited and acquired for us, because Christ yielded it in our stead.

If, therefore, the second Adam's rest in the grave was only a peaceful Sabbatic repose, ours cannot be anything more. If, on the third day, He was called forth from the prison in which the king of terrors had confined Him and was crowned with glory and honor; the same thing, in due time, awaits our bodies, if we have entered into union with Him by faith and love. If, henceforth we say that Christ by His burial has consecrated and shed light upon the darkness of our graves, we give utterance to something incomparably more than a mere poetic mode of speaking.

The Apostle Paul writes, in I Corinthian 14:13, that our bodies will be raised again, that if this were not the case, Christ Himself would not have risen. Who therefore will deny that grave-yards may not justly be termed, “Resurrection fields!” Yes! those who are bought with the blood of the Lamb rest in their graves under the Almighty's wing, and over their remains a divinely sealed hope casts a radiant and transfiguring light.

The Prince of Peace reposes in His sepulcher. A venerable man approaches it in silent devotion. It is Paul of Tarsus, and he writes upon the tombstone a mighty inscription. You may read it in Romans 6, where it is testified:

“Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

What is the meaning of this inscription? It asserts nothing less than this, that Christ has endured the curse of sin on the cross for us. **“There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.”** But even though regenerate, we still bear the remains of the old sinful nature in and upon us. This is our grief and cross, and impels us to utter the anxious inquiry, **“O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”** May God enable us to say, with him who uttered it, **“I thank God, through our Lord Jesus Christ!”**

The first night which succeeded the great and momentous day is past. The body of the deceased Redeemer slumbers solitarily in the prison of the tomb.

The morning at length dawns, and movements are heard about the sepulcher.

They are no longer the beloved forms of His friends that we see hasting so early through the garden. The latter, accustomed to obey every commandment, remain quietly in their habitations during the great Sabbath. It is enemies whom we see so active and busy at the first dawning of the morning.

The previous evening, an anxious solicitude had seized their hearts. Their excited evil consciences saw visions. The remembrance of so many sayings of the Nazarene occurred to them, in which He had most dearly announced a resurrection by which His heavenly Father after His crucifixion would glorify Him before the whole world.

The hypocrites pretended that they were far from supposing that such fanatical fancies would ever be realized; but they think otherwise in their hearts. Even in death the crucified Jesus asserts His regal influence on their minds, and in His grave terrifies them by His majesty.

Careless about the Sabbath or the Passover festival, the high priests and Pharisees go in solemn procession to the governor’s palace, in order to induce him to take measures for securing the grave of the crucified Jesus. They are admitted into the presence of Pilate, who is not a little surprised at such an early visit from the notables of Israel.

“Sir,” say they, **“we remember that that deceiver** (shame upon them to speak in such a manner of the Holy One of Israel, contrary to their better light and knowledge) **said, while he was yet alive, After three days, I will rise again.** (Thus they confirm it, that He had really asserted this.) **Command therefore that the sepulcher be watched until the third day, lest his disciples come by night and steal him away, and say unto the people, he is risen from the dead, so the last error shall be worse than the first.”**

Observe how cunningly these wicked men try to conceal their real thoughts and feelings.

One would suppose that they were afraid only of a possible deception. But if they were merely anxious to repel the poor disciples, would any such measures as they demanded have been requisite? But the mighty acts which they had seen the murdered Man perform cause them to think everything possible; and the terrific events which had accompanied His death were not calculated to dispel or alleviate their anxiety.

They scent the air of Easter morning, and are afraid of a resurrection of the buried corpse. But if the latter were to ensue, of what avail would be a guard, or the lime and plaster with which they intended to fix the stone? So we might well inquire, and doubt whether any serious apprehensions of Jesus' restoration to life could have actuated His enemies.

But fear is foolish, and sin is blind, and gropes in the dark, however wise it may think itself. Pilate, who probably felt very peculiar emotion thrill through him while listening to what the rulers of Israel had to say, very willingly granted their request, and, pointing to a band of armed soldiers which he saw parading before the palace, says, "**Ye have a watch, go your way, make it as sure as you can.**"

Not a little pleased at having attained their object, the deputation, together with the Roman guard, repair to Joseph's garden. After having convinced themselves by inspection that the body still lay in its place, the heavy stone which they had rolled away from the mouth of the sepulcher is replaced, and the work of fixing and sealing commences.

The adversaries act as if they were the victors, but inwardly they are the vanquished. The slumbering Hero of Judah took from them the armor of careless confidence, and filled their souls with a cloud of terrific and oppressive forebodings. What do they mean by their extensive preparations? They are fighting for the cause of death against life; and would gladly establish and maintain the throne of death, and keep down and immure the throne of life. Let them do their utmost. An all-overruling God controls their designs, and permits them to assist death by still more strongly forging his fetters, in order that the bursting of them may appear so much the more glorious. And thus they are suffered to deprive life of all scope, and to wall up every outlet, that when it bursts through every barrier, it may the more evidently prove itself to be divine.

We depart from the sepulcher of our Lord - not in grief and sorrow, but full of joyful expectation of what is shortly to take place. We already behold in spirit the first glimmer of the dawning resurrection morn upon the rocky tomb. Only twenty-four hours more till the trumpet of God shall sound, and Joseph's garden present a different spectacle. Then every seal will be broken, not from the Redeemer's tomb only, but also, from the mystery of the whole of His passion. An "Amen!" from on high, the most glorious and stupendous that ever reo sounded under heaven, will then announce to the world that reconciliation has been made, and that the Prince of Life, crowned with glory and honor, as the Conqueror of all the terrific powers which were opposed to us, offers the first Easter salutation of peace to the favored race of man, from the ruins of His shattered tomb. Let us then tune our harps, and hold our festive garlands in readiness, while awaiting the mighty moment that shall put an eternal end to all the sadness and anxiety of the human heart.

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