

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

THE SIGNS THAT FOLLOWED

SCARCELY HAS THE LORD of life and glory bowed His head and expired on Calvary, than the awful scene is changed. Heaven no longer withholds its recognition of the Man of Sorrows. The cry of the dying Mediator, "**It is finished!**" receives the most brilliant confirmation; and in lieu of the hostile tumult which has hitherto raged around Him, a sublime celebration of His incomparable triumph ensues.

Follow me first into the temple of Jerusalem. It is three o' clock in the afternoon, the hour, therefore, when the Israelites assembled in its sacred courts for the evening sacrifice. The priests begin their customary duties, when at the very moment in which Christ on Calvary exclaims, "**Father into thy hands I commend my spirit!**" who can describe the astonishment of the sons of Aaron! The thickly-woven heavy veil, without being touched by any human hand, is rent in twain, in the midst, from the top to the bottom, and the mercy-seat with the ark of the covenant and the golden cherubim, that sacred depositary which the high priest alone was permitted to approach, not without blood, and only once a year, stands suddenly naked and unveiled to the view of every one.

It was the Almighty at whose nod this event occurred. And what did it imply?

First, a renewed intimation that the Levitical service, though divinely ordered and prophetically significant, contained only types of a coming salvation, which, now that the latter was accomplished, were rendered void, even as the blossom is expelled by the fruit.

Secondly, a symbolical and obvious representation of the blissful effects which should attend the bloody death to which the Lord of Glory had just devoted Himself on Calvary. The most holy place in the temple was the shadow and type of the throne-room of heaven, from which we had been ejected and excluded by a divine decree. The veil which separated us from it was our sinful flesh.

"**Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in his holy place?**" had been the question hitherto; and the answer was, "**He that hath clean hands and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity.**" But who could boast of being thus blameless in the sight of God? There was none righteous, no not one.

“Who among us,” was the inquiry, **“can dwell with devouring fire? Who can dwell with everlasting burnings?”** And the reply was, he that doeth righteousness. But what remained for any one, except the mournful ejaculation of the prophet, **“Woe is me, for I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips!”** Righteousness had departed, sin reigned.

Suddenly the sign in the temple announces that our position, as regards the habitation of the Most High, had undergone a great and thorough change. That which hindered our access to the sanctuary of God was done away. That which elevated itself as a wall of separation between us and Him fell down. There is no longer any risk in casting ourselves into the hands of Him before whom even the angels are not pure.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and then thou mayest boldly and with childlike confidence enter the Father’s holy habitation which henceforward stands open to thee day and night.

Wash thy robes in the blood of the Lamb, and then cast thyself with childlike confidence on the Father’s heart, and pour everything that harasses and oppresses thee into His bosom.

O lay hold of the blissful idea, which in God’s intention, and by His immediate arrangement, the rent in the veil of the temple portrays to thee! Thy Saviour by His death threw open every door and gate in heaven.

But wouldst thou still inquire whether we are really justified in giving that rent in the veil of the sanctuary such an encouraging meaning, know that we are fully authorized to do so.

Read what the apostle says in Hebrews 10:19-23, **“Having, therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having an High Priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.”**

Thou seest, therefore, that access to the holy place is opened to us, and that the way to our Father’s house is prepared for us.

- “By whom?” By Jesus Christ.

- “In what manner?” By means of a rent in the veil.

This veil was the flesh of the great High Priest. The veil was rent when He offered up His human nature on the cross for us, after taking, by imputation, our sins upon Himself. By this act of mediation, He answered and fulfilled everything requisite for our justification in the sight of God, and, therefore, also for our admission before the throne of God. Hence at the moment when He expired, that took place substantially which the same moment occurred typically in the temple.

We leave the edifice at Jerusalem which has now lost its importance, and return to Calvary, where a second miracle meets us.

The earth quakes, and the rocks rend. What does this imply? Something great and glorious. The death of the Mediator has decided the future of the old world. It is, with all its concerns, devoted to destruction, and awaits a great and comprehensive change. Hear what is said in Hebrews 12:21, 26, **“Whose voice then shook the earth; but now he hath promised, Saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.”**

The present creation is not what it was originally.

Sin entered into it and overspread it with mortality and endless destruction. But after sin had been again put away through the satisfaction made by the Redeemer, its consequences must also naturally find their grave.

The blood of the Lamb demands the restoration of the original state of created things. And the quaking of the earth to its very foundations, the tottering of the hills and mountains, the rending of the rocks which attended the Lord’s death, all these are nothing else but an amen of Almighty God to the demand of the blood of His Son.

The third wonder ought to affect our hearts in the most powerful manner. Not only do rocks in the neighborhood of Calvary rend, but ancient sepulchers of saints long fallen asleep are opened, and the corpses they conceal, invigorated by new life, after the resurrection of the Illustrious Sleeper, likewise go forth from their chambers, and appear unto many in the holy city.

What an event!

It is certainly somewhat veiled in mysterious obscurity, and gives rise to a variety of questions. It seems to me that the graves only opened as a preceding intimation of what would afterward occur; while the reunion of the departed spirits with their bodies took place three days after, on the great Easter morning. But the fact itself is beyond a doubt, and would stand fast even without being confirmed by many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to whom the evangelists appeal for its historical truth.

But that which God intended by this miracle is sufficiently evident.

The powerful effects of Christ’s vicarious death reach down even to the domains of the dead. By the offering up of His own life, He became the Prince of Life. Even in the appalling regions of corruption, He overthrew the throne of him who, according to the Scriptures, **“had the power of death,”** and acquired the authority not only to conduct the souls He had redeemed to the mansions of eternal peace, but also to wrest their bodies from the bonds of the curse, and in due time to present His people to His Father in bodily as well as spiritual glorification. This truth the Almighty intended primarily to confirm by the miracle of the opening of the graves, connected with the death of Christ, and then by the actual resurrection of the bodies of the saints on the third day.

Who were these first trophies of the glorious Conqueror of the king of terrors?

Was Abraham among them, to whom it was promised that he should see, in a very peculiar manner, the day of the Lord?

Was Moses, of whom the apostle Jude relates that Satan strove with the heavenly powers about his body?

The narrative leaves us without a reply, and is also silent as to the appearance presented by the risen saints, who were made visible to many in the holy city; and when, where, and in what manner they were afterward taken up to heaven.

The mission of those who were thus called from the dust of the grave was limited to one thing, namely, to represent the death of Jesus as an event which operated with creative power, both in the past, the present, and the future, and not less in the depth than in the height, and to give actual proof of the exceedingly abundant and well-grounded cause we have to rejoice beneath the cross of Christ, and to say with the apostle, **“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law; but thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”** (I Corinthians 15:55-57).

Thus the atoning death of Christ was solemnized in a majestic manner by divine signs and wonders which commenced immediately beneath the cross.

He who first attracts our attention is the Roman centurion, the commander of the band of soldiers who watch the cross. Mute, and apparently lost in thought, he stands and looks up to the cross of the divine Sufferer. He has witnessed the whole course of the crucifixion. He beheld the admirable behavior of the mysterious Man. He listened to the words which proceeded from His bleeding lips, and at the moment when the Just One expired, he felt the earth tremble beneath his feet; and he saw also with his own eyes how the hills around tottered, and the rocks were rent asunder. The emotions which had till then affected his soul, compressed themselves into one powerful and appalling impression, and he gives vent to his feelings in the loud and unambiguous exclamation, in which he praised the true God, the God of Israel, saying, **“Certainly this was a righteous man!”**

We must not be too anxious to know what the centurion meant by the later expression. He was certainly no dogmatician, nor a Jew instructed in the catechism, but only a poor blind heathen. But according to all that he had seen of the Man of Nazareth, he doubted not that He must be more than a Man, and according to the presentiment which had taken possession of his soul, he regarded Him as in fact, no other than the Son of God, foretold in the Jewish scriptures.

But see! Not only the centurion, but also several of his troops are overpowered by feelings similar to his own; and astonished and thrilled with a sacred reverence, join in his confession, or murmur something of the kind. What a pleasing and significant occurrence! A number of blind heathen, among them probably even those who had been the instruments of Jesus' crucifixion, give Him, in spite of a world of opponents, the glory of the candid confession that He is the Son of the living God.

You have seen and heard not merely that which those heathen saw and heard, but something infinitely greater and more important.

You are witnesses of the fact that Christ's death on the cross not only rent the rocks and made the hills to tremble, but lifted the whole order of the old world from its joints and hinges, and pushed it into an entirely new path. You saw from that death a resurrection-beam dart not merely over a few bodies of sleeping saints, but the fiery stream of a new and divine life pour itself over the whole graveyard of the earth.

You are not only aware of the rending of the veil in the temple at the moment when the great Sufferer expired, but also of the rending of a prophetic covering which had existed for four thousand years, in order that what was concealed under it might be realized in the world, even in its minutest features.

You not only heard the dying Saviour majestically gladden the heart of a single malefactor with the promise, "**This day shalt thou be with me in paradise;**" but are aware that to this hour no one under heaven attains to thorough peace amid the darkness and storms of this life, till he has lifted up the eye of faith to that thorn-crowned head.

All these things have been brought before you, and you are daily conversant with them; and can you delay to detach yourselves, resolutely, from an unbelieving world, and to make the confession of those heathen soldiers your own?

The Roman mercenaries are not however the only individuals on Calvary who pay tribute of reverence to the deceased Saviour. It is done more profoundly and fervently by the group of weeping women who followed the Master from Galilee and ministered unto Him. Even in death they cannot leave Him. They still cling to Him with their love and hope, like ivy to the fallen tree.

Duly mark the sacred fire which burns in the center of their hearts. It is the fire of the purest enthusiasm for Christ and His kingdom. Beloved souls, do not despair of this kingdom, even though the whole world should declare it to be an idle dream. It alone is reality, and will have the victory under all circumstances. Let us therefore all join ourselves to it. Let us all address the crucified Redeemer, and say, "We side with Thee, thou beauteous Morning Star!" Let us give our word and our hands, that we will walk in His paths, through whatever straits and difficulties they may lead us. Extend toward us Thy hand, therefore, Thou who are estranged from all that is low and vain, and teach us to elevate our nature by following in Thy steps!

Let these be the ejaculations which rise from our breasts beneath the cross. But know that the celebration of His death does not terminate in such enthusiasm for the Lord and His kingdom.

The women had found in Jesus more than a model of humanity and a guiding star in the path of virtue. They felt their need, above all things, of a Surety, who should mediate their reconciliation with God, in order that the beginning of a new life might be made.

And they believed that they had really found the object of their ardent desires in their great Master. But did they give up their belief at His death? It was doubtless deeply shaken by the sanguinary exit of their divine Friend out of this life; but the signs they had just witnessed, swelled the sails of their hope anew, and seemed to them nothing less than a voice of their heavenly Father, saying to them, "Endure and wait, for He is nevertheless the Man whom you held Him to be."

And however weak might be their confidence, they celebrated their reconciliation through the blood of the Lamb, although more in hope than in clear consciousness.

O let us enter into the fellowship with them! The only real, true, and full celebration of the death of Christ is that which is based upon the song of the blest above, "**The Lamb that was slain, is worthy to receive praise, and honor and glory!**"

Let such be also our celebration of it.

We read in the Gospel that many who had likewise been witnesses of the divine wonders at the cross, returned to Jerusalem, in great amazement, beating their breasts.

The state of these people points out to you the preparation for a real "Good Friday." Be aware what enormous guilt apart from your other sins you incur, by refusing due homage and submission to a Lord and King so powerfully accredited as Jesus upon the cross.

O that you would take this deeply to heart, and now begin to humble yourselves before God!

~ end of chapter 51 ~

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