

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of CHRIST

By

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE CONVERSE BY THE WAY

WE LEFT the Lord JESUS proceeding to the lonely garden, to which He was wont to resort, in the darkness and stillness of the night. His mind is occupied with the thought of His approaching death. His followers press more closely around Him, as is usually the case when the moment of separation is at hand, and the grief of parting overwhelms the oppressed mind. Conversation becomes brief and monosyllabic, and long pauses of entire silence intervene. JESUS now opens His mouth. The thought of Himself and His approaching sufferings retires into the background. That which affects Him more deeply is His love for and care of His flock.

Addressing Himself to Peter, who appears to be the most grieved, and who clings to Him the closest, He says, "**Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat**" (Luke 22:31).

What language is this, rendered doubly appalling by the darkness, and the circumstances under which it is uttered! At the very moment when the disciples are to be deprived of their only help and shield, they are informed of the approach of the most dreadful of enemies. The Lord expresses Himself strangely, and in a manner calculated to excite the greatest astonishment. "**Satan,**" says He, "**hath desired to have you**" - that is, he has challenged you, laid claim to you, and begged to have you, that he might manifest his power in you, in order to prove that your goodness is naught, and your conversion only specious and deceptive.

The Lord occasionally permits the wicked one to try his power to tempt the redeemed to a certain point. He does so, in order to prove to the infernal spirits the invincibility of those who confide themselves to Him, and thereby to glorify His name; and also, that He may purify His children as gold in such a furnace of temptation, and draw those, who live no longer to themselves, deeper into the fellowship of His life.

It was an ordeal of this kind to which the disciples were now to be subjected.

The murderer from the beginning had wagered, so to speak, that if liberty were given him, he would cause their entire apostasy. CHRIST sees the infernal vulture wheeling round the heads of His followers. He dares not conceal it from them, lest the assault should take them by surprise; and He therefore says to them emphatically, fixing His eye especially upon Simon, whom the adversary had principally in view, "**Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat.**"

They are now aware of the adversary's design. O that they would take every syllable of this address to heart! Warning and comfort are here wonderfully mingled. "**Like wheat,**" says He, would they be sifted - an operation which, as is well known, only scatters the chaff, while the noble grain remains. The result, therefore, is salutary. It will only be a cleansing and purifying - certainly not according to the devil's plan and design, but wholly through the intervention of divine grace. Those who are thus sifted overcome indeed, but only after being made painfully conscious of their own weakness; and hence they know more assuredly to whom their victor's crown in reality belongs.

But let us listen to the Lord JESUS further.

He displays to us, still more deeply, the greatness of His affection. After uttering the appalling warning just mentioned, He looks kindly at His disciples, and, as if He would encourage them, says to Simon, "**But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.**"

O where is there a faithful friend and guardian to be compared to Him? The Gospel narrative often conducts us to the scene of His acts and miracles, and not infrequently removes the veil from His more quiet converse with His beloved disciples, and reveals to us the sacred spots where He exercised His priestly office; but here it favors us with a look into the solitude of His closet.

Scarcely was the Lord aware of the intended assault, especially upon Peter, than He sought retirement, and in prayer, commended the endangered disciple to the protection and preservation of His heavenly Father. And the object of His prayer was that Simon's faith might not fail in the storm of temptation.

Do not, however, suppose that Simon alone was privileged above other believers, in being the object of such affectionate solicitude. Listen to the Saviour's intercessory prayer, in John 17, and you will be convinced of the contrary. Hear Him exclaim, "**Holy Father, keep, through thine own name, those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are.**" "**I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil.**" "**I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.**"

Think not that these sublime words have reference only to our Lord's immediate disciples; for, listen further - "**Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word. That they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee.**"

Thus hath the faith which the Holy Spirit produces in us, a pledge of endurance in our Lord's intercession. It may be assaulted, tried, and shaken, but cannot be extinguished or annihilated. Simon was given to know this, in order that he might be in possession of a sufficient weapon when assailed. But in case of his succumbing, this consciousness was to serve him as a staff by means of which he might successfully leap over the abyss of despair.

"I have prayed for thee," says Our Lord, **"that thy faith fail not."**

He knows that Peter will fall. He already sees in him the faithless disciple who denied his Master; and yet He feels toward him only like a tender mother, in seeing her darling child in danger. The Saviour's chief care is lest Simon should despair after his fall; and that, at the proper time, he should take courage to return to Him. Hence, He says, with the kindest forethought, **"And when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."**

After thy unfaithfulness, thou mayest again take comfort in thy Good Shepherd. Nay, thou shalt be still further empowered, for when thou hast returned to Him, thou shalt strengthen thy brethren; thou shalt continue His apostle, and, in future, feed His lambs.

"When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." Scarcely are we able to cease listening to these words. It almost seems as if Simon would only become a real apostle after his fall. And such was really the case; for otherwise GOD would not have permitted it.

The first and essential quality of a herald of the Gospel is ever a thoroughly broken and contrite heart. For it is only after having obtained mercy as guilty criminals, that we are in a position to **"strengthen the brethren."** After having ourselves vitally experienced that without CHRIST we can do nothing, but everything with Him, we then become real evangelists, able also to **"bind up the broken-hearted,"** and to **"confirm the feeble knees."**

Simon does not enter into the spirit of our Lord's words.

"Lord," he exclaims almost angrily, as if some false imputation had been cast upon him, **"though all men should be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended. I am ready to go with thee to prison and to death."**

How excellent, and yet how full of self-confidence! Nevertheless, a zeal for his Master flames forth from him, which I can only wish pervaded us likewise.

A holy earnestness dictated Peter's words: but ah! he promised too much!

"How so?" you inquire with astonishment.

"Had not Jesus prayed for him, that his faith might not fail?" Assuredly; and had Peter founded his confidence on this, he might have vowed unshaken fidelity even unto death. But Simon vaunted himself on his own strength, and meant to say, "My love is a pledge to thee that I will not deny thee."

"The heart of man is deceitful above all things;" and he who depends on sensations and feelings leans upon rotten supports. However spiritually rich and strong we may believe ourselves to be, let us never promise anything in self-dependence, nor ever plant our feet upon the waters until the Lord calls to us to come, and stretches out His helping hand toward us. But he who rests on the strong arm of Immanuel, and seeks strength from Him, may say more boldly still than Simon, **"Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both to prison and to death!"** The Lord will not put his faith to shame, but be a strong refuge for him in the midst of the storm.

Scarcely has Simon, in all simplicity, uttered his heroic assertion, than he receives a second warning from his Master's lips. The Lord now informs him plainly what threatens him: **"I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day before thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me."**

The Lord foresaw Peter's denial; then why give him the warning?

It was directed to the restoration of the fallen. After Peter had denied his Master, he could say to himself, "He told me beforehand what would occur. He saw it coming, and warned me. Although He perceived that I rejected His warning, yet He did not reject me, but spoke kindly and graciously to me as before."

The Lord appointed the cock to incite him to repentance, and by his morning call, at the proper time, to bring the fallen man again to Himself, and cause him to shed tears of contrition. Thus the Saviour's affectionate solicitude extended far beyond the temptation and the conflict; and prepared a remedy for the wounds occasioned by the denial.

After the Lord had finished speaking to Simon, and arranged everything for the restoration of the zealous disciple, in the season of contrition and weeping, He turned to the disciples in general.

"When I sent you without purse, and scrip, and shoes, lacked ye anything?"

The disciples did not call to mind that they had ever been in want, and cheerfully confessed it to their Master's honor, by saying, **"Lord, never!"** The Lord had acted toward them as He generally acts towards His children whom, in the time of their first love, He leads very gently, and with parental care and kindness.

It might be thought that after this declaration of His disciples our Lord would say, "Be not careful, therefore, in future, for such will always be the case." Instead of which, He tells them just the reverse, and that in the future they would not infrequently find it otherwise. **"But now,"** says He, with reference to the whole of their future course of life, **"he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip. But he that hath none, let him sell his garment and buy a sword."**

How are these words to be understood? Generally speaking, they announce to the disciples, that conflict, danger, distress, and manifold trials awaited them, for which they must prepare; but that they might then firmly confide in Him, whom they had ever found a faithful Friend in time of need.

At the same time, He gives them clearly to understand that henceforth they must not rest too confidently on the same obvious and wondrous guidance which they had hitherto experienced, because their life would in future partake more of the common course of human affairs, and that the direct interposition, by means of which the hand of eternal love had hitherto sustained and provided for them, would give place to a more indirect divine aid, for which faith would be required.

It would then be necessary, besides prayer and looking up to heaven, to apply the ordinary means of provision, defense, and aid. Let him who had a purse and a scrip not cast them away, but take them, and make use of them. Manly resolution, foresight, and prudent calculation are no longer to be despised, but to be practiced and employed. Nay, he that had no sword ought to sell his garment and buy one.

But then, as if the Lord had intended to say, "Be not astonished at that which I have just told you, for the disciple is not above his Master, and what is hostile to Me, will also be so to you:"

He reminds them that His own path would terminate in ignominy and suffering: **"For I say unto you, that this that is written of me, must yet be accomplished in me, and he was reckoned among the transgressors; for the things concerning me have an end."**

The Lord here refers to Isaiah 53, particularly to the 12th verse of that chapter, and expressly testifies that what is written there of The Lord's servant, - that He should bear the sin of many, make intercession for the transgressors, and by His obedience and vicarious sacrifice, justify and eternally redeem His people - is said of Himself.

He thus dispels every doubt respecting the only correct interpretation of that portion of Scripture.

It treats of Him, His person, work, and kingdom. He also affords His disciples a strong light upon the mysterious obscurity of His approaching passion; and, finally, points out to them that the way to the crown is by the cross and that His people ought scarcely to expect a better fate, in this evil world, than He, who would have to endure the accursed death of the cross, and to be numbered with transgressors, and accounted and rejected by the world as the offscouring of all things.

But what does our Lord mean by the words which immediately follow - **"For the things concerning me have an end?"**

Certainly not what He had intended to convey in the words, **"This that is written must yet be accomplished in me."**

The Lord unmistakably refers to the warning previously given to His disciples; and the import of His language is threefold. He intends to say, in the first place, "You must not arm yourselves on My account, nor in My defense; for, as the Lamb of GOD, slain from the foundation of the world, I must patiently resign Myself to the appointed sufferings, which are indispensable for your reconciliation to GOD."

Next, "The measure of that agony on which your redemption depends is exhausted by My passion. You may, therefore, boldly go forward, as being by one offering forever perfected."

And, lastly, "Whatever you may have to suffer in future has nothing to do with your reconciliation to GOD, since that which had to be endured to atone for sin and to extinguish guilt, is laid upon and has an end in Me. If you suffer, it is only for your purification, and while it does not become Me, it is befitting for you to defend your lives and preserve them for My service, for the brethren, and, in case of need, to protect them by all legitimate means."

Such was our Lord's meaning, which, however, the disciples do not comprehend, but explain it as a call upon them to protect Him by force against His enemies, as Peter actually endeavored to do in the sequel. Under this idea, they show Him the swords, with which two of them, including Simon, were armed, as was customary with wandering Galileans, and childishly, though with the best intention, say, "**Lord, behold, here are two swords!**"

"**It is enough,**" rejoined the Saviour, breaking off mournfully - as if He had said, "Let us leave the matter for the present; you will better understand My meaning later."

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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