

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

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CHAPTER FORTY

THE DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM

THE ROAD FROM JERUSALEM to Mount Calvary is crowded with people. O that it were so now in a spiritual and ecclesiastical sense, for no other leads to life and salvation! Certainly, those whom we meet with there are not such as sympathize with Jesus in His sufferings; on the contrary, the number of such is probably very small. But let us rather meet with decided opponents on the way to the cross, than that the road to it should remain solitary and waste.

Alas! in the present day, it lies very desolate. Crowds are seen on the way to the idol temples of the world, and the pavilions of the lust of the eye and the flesh. But how few there are whose hearts are wont to beat louder when it is said to them:

“The passion-week has returned, and we are again preparing for our pilgrimage to Calvary, where the foundations of our eternal redemption are laid.”

Numbers, I fear, continue to fall a prey to spiritual death.

Few of them succumb under acute diseases; the majority die of the chlorosis of complete indifference. With them it has gradually come to such a pass that even that which is the most sublime under heaven fatigues them, and the words, “Church, divine service, and sermon,” make them yawn. Unhappy mortals!

They know not that in these characteristic features they already bear the brand marks of impending judgment, and the signs, if not of rejection, yet of the capability of it. Satan even does not seem to think these people worthy of an energetic attack. Like dead trees, they fall to him of themselves, and he finds them in his net before he spreads it. You do not belong to this pitiable race.

We still meet you in spirit on the way to Calvary. It is true this is the way to heaven, but beware! it has also its fissures and pits which terminate in endless deserts. We read in Luke 23:27 that a great multitude of people followed Jesus. These were by no means all of them adversaries and bad characters. Many of them only wished to see what would become of Him, and therefore took at least a historical interest in His person and His cause. Know, however, that this does not suffice to save you. Take it to heart that your situation may be the same as that of these people.

We meet also, in the present day, with not a few, and their number is increasing, who have directed their attention to religion, the Church, and the affairs of the kingdom of God, as others do to politics, the arts, or any other subject. What progress Christianity is making in the world - what may be done to promote public worship - what this or that sect believes and teaches - nay, even in what sense this or that doctrine is to be apprehended, and the best mode of expressing it - these are the objects for which they interest themselves. All this is beautiful and praiseworthy; but it may be the case that in the midst of the Holy Land in which their attention is engaged, they may be ripening for perdition.

There is a natural feeling for divine things which may even become very active, by which the “**old man**” is not in the least injured, nor the game of the prince of darkness spoiled. How this feeling may even extend to the scenes of our Saviour’s passion may be easily conceived. But such a sympathy is not essentially different from any other, and has nothing in common with the life of faith, on which alone the eye of God is fixed.

Of a somewhat nobler nature is the interest felt by those whose sympathy with the history and cause of Christ is excited by their veneration for Him as the Holy One of Israel. Some of these characters were also among the crowd that followed; and we do not infrequently meet, in our own circles, with such as are thus of a more refined nature. Christ presents Himself to their admiring gaze as the perfect model of all moral human greatness. Nor does anything hinder them from celebrating with lively emotion, the Lord’s passion, while magnanimously irritated against the reckless race that could crucify the only immaculate One that ever trod the earth.

But do they also pray with us, and say, “O Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us?” O no! This never occurs to them. Hence these worthy people go with us, indeed, on the path of the Church, and, in a certain sense, even the way to Calvary; and yet it is beyond a doubt that they are entirely deficient in the first and most essential requirements of true inward religion - a contrite heart, and a living faith in Christ as the Mediator, and equal with God.

Exasperated against the murderers of Jesus, they unconsciously join in signing the sentence of death against Him.

For since they refuse to rise above His human nature, they stamp Him, who declared on oath that He was essentially one with the Father, as a blasphemer who was worthy of death. While reproaching the Pharisees, they are in reality of the same mind with them; for they are as unwilling to know anything of a Jesus who treats them as sinners, and calls upon them to let themselves be redeemed by Him.

The women whom we see following the Divine Sufferer with weeping and lamentation present to us a third kind of relation to Christ, and particularly to Christ as suffering. Here we seem to meet with the true kind of devotion for the solemn occasion. For we perceive heartfelt sympathy with the Man of Sorrows, fervent emotion at the sight of His cross, nay, even tears wept in the presence of the reviling adversaries by whom He is surrounded; and in all this a decided confession that an innocent

Man is being conducted to the place of execution, who is worthy of supreme love and esteem, instead of scorn and hatred. What do we require more than we see here?

Nor does the Lord omit to deign attention to these sympathizing witnesses of His sufferings. He turns to them. For what purpose? To praise and console them, and to cheer and strengthen Himself at the sight of them? To praise and console them, and to cheer and strengthen Himself at the sight of them? By no means. The Lord Jesus rejects the grief of the mourners as mistaken, and judges their tears to be useless and unprofitable. He who, everywhere, and even in the deepest sufferings, was able to preserve the most perfect serenity and presence of mind, and never for a moment lost sight of pastoral solicitude for the lost sheep of the house of Israel with which He was entrusted, says to the weeping women who followed Him, "**Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for Me, but weep for yourselves, and your children.**"

These serious words deserve to be taken to heart also by many among us. They reprove all those whose devotion for the cross likewise consists in a mere natural emotion, excited by the tragical end of the righteous Jesus, and who have nothing else but tears of pity and sentimentality for the Saviour. How much pleasing emotion, occasioned by a lively representation of the Redeemer's passion in musical oratorios, ecclesiastical solemnities, or liturgical devotions, is here rejected! It is scarcely to be conceived what a fullness of impenitence and self-righteousness may be concealed beneath such outbursts of feeling.

There are some who ascribe the tears of sympathy, which the sufferings of Christ draw forth, as a species of righteousness, and exalt them as testimonials of goodness of heart, thus making them a ground of consolation and hope. O lamentable mistake! "**Weep not for me,**" says our Lord. Do you hear it? He forbids the lamenting and condoling with Him. He is not some unfortunate person of a common kind.

He does not succumb to any superior power, either human, or the force of oppressive circumstances. If He pleased, He could in a moment stand before us in a crown, instead of with a cross.

He freely gave Himself up to His sufferings, in order to accomplish that which His Father had given Him to do; and the idea of "a tragical end," in its usual acceptation, is by no means applicable to the passion of our Lord.

Tears of sentimentality and pity are nowhere so much out of place as on Calvary. While resigning ourselves to such emotions, we mistake the Lord Jesus - nay, even degrade Him, and as regards ourselves, miss the way of salvation marked out for us by God. Hence the Saviour exclaims, once for all, "**Weep not for me!**" thus placing Himself entirely out of the ranks of the wretched and unfortunate of this world.

"Do tears, therefore, not belong to Our devotions on this solemn occasion?"

Doubtless they do; but their object must be a different one to the person of the Lord. Hear Him say Himself, "**Weep not for me, but for yourselves and your children!**" "Ourselves!" you exclaim.

Yes. In the immolation of Christ, the measure of the world's iniquities was full. It was sinful from Paradise downward. That this was the case was strikingly evident in the days of Noah, Nimrod, the judges, and kings of Israel. But "**The transgression of the Amorites was not yet full.**" That even the last pretense for excuse and leniency might disappear, and the hatred of holiness, the base ingratitude and abominable self-seeking of the children of Adam might be manifested still more evidently, opportunity was afforded the human race to exhibit its real and inmost nature, when holiness in person was placed in contrast with it, and the Lord God poured upon it the fullness of His compassion.

Both these took place in the mission of Christ, the only-begotten Son, the good Shepherd. And how did the world act? It loved darkness rather than light; was filled with animosity against Him who came to redeem it from sin; and rejected Him who hurt its pride by the call to regeneration and conversion. It nailed to the cross the herald and bearer of the grace of God.

"The world?" you ask. Yes, the world. Only look a little more closely and you will find yourself amid the crowd which yonder conducts the Lord of Glory to the slaughter. In one or other of those individuals you will see your own likeness. If not in Judas, yet in Annas; if not in Annas, in the hypocritical Caiaphas, or the world-minded Pilate, or else in one of the unprincipled senators, or some other individual, you will somewhere meet with the mirror which reflects your own moral form.

Look around and say if the scenes on Gabbatha and Calvary are not incessantly renewed? If, even at present, a certain degree of courage is not required openly to confess the name of Jesus? If those who love Christ are not still reviled as pietists and hypocrites; and if those who wish to recommend the Prince of Peace to others are not every where angrily repulsed? Nay, feel in your own bosom and say if by nature you would gladly have to do with Jesus?

What feelings are excited in you when He places you among publicans and malefactors, or calls upon you to offer up to Him your mammon, or some other idol? Or when He meets you, with a reproving gesture, on the path of sensual enjoyment and requires that you should live to God and not to the world and walk in God's ways and not in your own; what are you then wont to feel. Does it ever occur to you to melt in gratitude at the Saviour's feet, when you hear it announced that "**God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life**"?

O my friends, to this hour Christ appears to stand among us, only that by His presence our corruption and depravity may be the more conspicuous! How is it, then, that you do not understand the words, "**Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves?**" Truly all appropriate devotion at this sacred season begins with lamenting over ourselves and judging, condemning, and acknowledging ourselves worthy of eternal death.

The daughters of Jerusalem hear terrible things said to them, but not that they may sink into hopeless despair. On the contrary, it is here the love that seeketh that which is lost, which speaks to them, and would gladly lead them, at the proper time, to repentance. "**Weep for yourselves and your children.**"

This is an unmistakable allusion to the dreadful malediction which the infatuated crowd at Gabbatha called down upon themselves, and with it, the indication of that sin which was principally to be lamented as Israel's chief crime, and consequently as the chief source of all their subsequent misery.

The Lord Jesus says in continuation, "**For behold the days are coming, in which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck.**" What an announcement! That which was previously mourned over in Israel as a great misfortune and an equally great disgrace - the being barren and childless - will then be commended as an enviable privilege.

"**Then,**" continues our Lord, obviously referring, both here and previously, to passages in the prophecies of Isaiah and Hosea, for He lived in His Father's word, as in the proper element of His holy soul - "**Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us, and to the hills, Cover us.**"

The Saviour's sphere of vision evidently extends itself here beyond the terrible days of the destruction of Jerusalem. His words manifestly generalize themselves and point to the judgment of the last day. Those who will then be found rejecting through obstinate unbelief and persevering impenitence, their truest Friend and only Saviour will find themselves in a position in which they will prefer annihilation to a continuance of existence. They will call upon the hills to crush them and bury them forever beneath their mass of ruins. But the mountains stand and fall at God's command, and He, who will then be their enemy, has decreed for them another fate than that of annihilation. They will then implore the rocks to hide them from the face of the angry Judge; but no outlet of escape will be found on the whole earth or under it, which will remove them from the searching look of Him "**whose eyes are as a flame of fire.**"

What a prospect! And only consider, that He who thus lifts the veil is not some wild zealot, to whose threats no great importance need be attached; but it is He who is at the same time the truth and loving-kindness itself. How does this strengthen the emphasis of that address by which we are called to repentance in a more powerful and impressive manner than was ever before heard upon earth.

Our Lord concludes His speech to the daughters of Jerusalem with the words, "**For if they do these things in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry?**" We cannot misunderstand these words. In them the great Cross-Bearer represents Himself as a mirror of the wrath of God. Since He is the Just One and the Life, He calls Himself "**the Green Tree.**" Glory and happiness became Him individually, and not suffering; yet He endured unparalleled disgrace and torture.

But that which He experiences must be of the same nature and description with that which is threatened, and which awaits the ungodly. Had it been otherwise, the inference which the Lord bids us draw from His sufferings, with regard to the future fate of the impenitent sinner would not be true, and the comparison He makes inappropriate. If they were only merciful sufferings which befell the Saviour, how could they serve as a criterion for the future lot of those with whom divine grace had nothing more to do?

But Christ's sufferings were vicariously endured punishments; and His words have now a meaning, which is this: "I, the Green Tree, bear imputatively only the sins of others; and the thrice holy God is not angry with Me personally. Yet how horrible is the cup which is given Me to drink! Judge from this what will eventually be the fate of those, who, as dry wood and unfruitful trees, will have to suffer for their own iniquities, and at whose judicial visitation, the wrath of a holy God will by no means conflict with His love and tenderness."

Therefore let us not overlook the danger in which we are, so long as we are found carnally-minded, estranged from God, and unthankful despisers of the delivering grace of Him, whom the Almighty tore from His paternal bosom, in order that by Him He might deliver us unworthy creatures from destruction, and bring us back to Himself. Let us be conscious of our enormous guilt, and no longer delay, with the holy grief of a publican or a Magdalene, sincerely and heartily to weep over ourselves.

It is thus, I repeat it, that our devotion should begin, when commencing the solemnities of the passion week. But should they begin with it only, and not end in the same manner? Look at the Saviour. Why does He travel the path of suffering? Because He intends to pay our debt, and blot out our iniquities. Let us follow Him in spirit; for how much are we interested in this His passage to Calvary! He goes to nail the handwriting that was against us to His cross. The Green Tree gives itself up to the flames which ought to consume the dry. The path He treads is a sacrificial one, a path of satisfaction and mediation. Had He not trodden it, we should have been the heirs of eternal death, or else the throne of God must have sunk into ruin and the justice of God would have degenerated into injustice. But He did pass through it, and now deliverance is secured, however heinous our guilt. Let us approach His cross in spite of Satan and the world, open before Him the tear-bedewed pages of our book of transgressions, implore mercy upon our knees, lay hold of the great forgiveness in the blood of the Lamb, and resign ourselves entirely and unconditionally to the thorn-crowned King, that, along with the bands of the curse, He may also loose us from those of the world and the flesh. After this has been done, we may say with propriety that we have celebrated the passion of our Lord.

May He grant us all such a celebration! We implore it the more fervently now that we are about to enter the Most Holy Place of the history of our great High Priest's sufferings. Let us prepare ourselves for this solemn approach by calling to mind the infinite blessings which Christ has purchased for His people by His death on the cross, and by loving Him, who thus loved us, and gave Himself for us!

~ end of chapter 40 ~

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