

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

Meditations on the Last Days of Christ

By

F. W. Krummacher

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CHAPTER TWENTY

THE FALL OF PETER

IN ADDITION to all His other sufferings, our blessed Lord had also to endure that of being denied by one of the little company of His confidential disciples, on whose fidelity He ought to have been able to reckon under all circumstances. His heart was not to be a stranger to any grief or pain, in order that He might be to us in all things a compassionate High Priest.

But how would the Scriptures have been fulfilled, had He not also experienced the fate of His living prototypes - Joseph, delivered up by his brethren, and David forsaken in the season of his calamities - or how could He have verified the prophetic language of the Psalmist, "**Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness**"?

Let us join ourselves in spirit to Simon Peter.

If anyone was ever ardently attached to the Saviour, it was he; but he was only partially conscious of what it was that he loved in Jesus. The mystery in His vicarious character, and the consequent necessity for the offering up of Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, were still concealed from him. He had only a kind of general perception that his salvation in some way depended upon fellowship with Jesus, and that without Him he would infallibly perish.

In Peter, as in many churches where the Gospel is not preached in all its fullness, faith and love preceded religious knowledge and discernment. More the subject of feeling than of a divinely enlightened understanding, Peter reminds us of that class of our brethren, of whom we are wont to say that though they possess the burning heart, yet they are still in want of the light of the Holy Spirit. The new life is implanted in its germ, but the development itself is still far behind, and much remains for the Holy Spirit to enlarge and complete.

Peter was like the man in the Gospel, who went to war without first sitting down and counting the cost. He might have already perceived that he was acting foolishly, when after his rash assault on the servant of the high priest and the Lord's subsequent resignation of Himself to the hands of His enemies, his zeal was instantly extinguished, so that he was cowardly enough to take to a disgraceful flight with the rest. True, he again bethought himself after a time; but that which induced him to follow his captive Lord at a distance, was, in reality, more the spur of pride, than the noble impulse of a "**love strong as death.**"

He had spoken openly and loudly of never denying his Master, and even of going to death with Him; and what would be thought of him if he were now to break his vows and vanish from the field? No, he was resolved never to be regarded as a coward. Where his Master is, there he must be. He goes forward with feeble knees and inward reluctance. What would he give if some unavoidable and obvious hindrance were to block up his way and prevent his further advance!

In fact, such a wished-for obstacle seems to present itself, in the gates being closed as soon as the band, with their captive, have entered into the court yard of the high priest's palace. If we mistake not, he is already preparing to depart; but before the entrance, he meets with a friend and fellow-believer, who was known to the high priest; and who, being on amicable terms with him, went freely in and out of his house. The latter addresses a few words to the door-keeper, and Peter, whether willingly or unwillingly, is admitted.

Simon passes with tottering steps over the threshold of the opened gate, and thus sets foot on the scene of his trial.

O that he had now cast himself down in prayer before God! But instead of this, he still depends upon himself, and upon the chance of accidents and circumstances. Satan and the world already stand armed against him on the field. He had no need to fear them, if he had only put on the breastplate of faith.

Let us now consider the melancholy event which took place in the court yard of the high priest.

At the moment when Simon is admitted, at the intercession of his friend, the damsel that keeps the door, holding up her lantern to his face, regards him with a look as if she knew him, but is not quite sure of it. Peter, seeing this, turns away his face, and hastens as quickly as possible past the woman, lest she should recognize him. In the center of the court yard the soldiers had kindled a fire, to protect themselves against the raw, cold, morning air, and, crowding round it, pass the time in talking and joking; while inside the house the proceedings against Jesus are going on.

Peter, who feels uncomfortable enough in such an atmosphere, approaches the noisy group, and with a careless mien, as if only anxious to warm himself, takes his place among them. In fact, his denial had now commenced, for his intention was evidently to appear to the mercenaries as if he belonged to their party, and shared their sentiments with regard to the Nazarene. Not a little pleased at having thus attained a twofold object - the safety of his person, and the being able to say that he had manifested his courage in thus mingling with the adversaries, and fulfilling his promise not to forsake his Master - the pitiable hero sits there and expects that he will be able to witness the future course of events without danger to himself.

Of a sudden, a painful stop is put to these calculations. The portress, who wished to assure herself whether or not she had mistaken the stranger whom she had admitted, steals thither unobserved, and mingling among the soldiery, discovers, by the light of the flickering flame, the lurking guest; and looking over his shoulder into his face, she asks him, with a triumphant and malicious leer, "**Wast thou not also with Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou not one of his disciples?"**

Who can describe Peter's confusion at this question? At the moment when he thought himself so safe, to be so suddenly assailed! However, he recollects himself, and replies with the emphasis of one whose honor is assailed, "**Woman, I know him not.**"

Alas! Alas! He that offered to take up the gauntlet for Jesus, even if thrown down by the king of terrors, succumbs at the first idea of danger, suggested by the question of a menial servant!

Who does not perceive from his language the tempest of accusing and excusing thoughts which rages within? "I am not; I know him not," is first uttered with tolerable decision. But then, condemned by conscience, he seeks to bear out this denial in some measure by adding, "I know not what thou sayest. What dost thou mean? I do not understand thee."

While stammering out this lamentable prevarication, he rises from his seat, under the influence of alarm and inward rebuke, and retires unobserved from his dangerous position. He bends his steps toward the gate, in the hope of finding it open and being able to make his escape.

The cock now crows for the first time, but the state of excitement which he is in does not suffer him this time to hear the warning sound, the more so, since the way is unexpectedly blocked by another maidservant, who, calling to the soldiers who assemble round her, says, in a more definite manner than the former, "**This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth!**"

The mercenaries are gratified by the stripping off of Peter's disguise, since it affords them the desired materials for additional joke and pastime. "Art **thou not also one of his disciples?**" they ask, in a rude and threatening tone - "Thou belongest also to the sect!"

What is the poor man to do now? After his foot has once slipped, we see him fall into a state of complete vacillation. The way to the second transgression is always rapidly traversed after the commission of the first. Peter now denies his Lord again, and this time more boldly than before, "**Man,**" says he, "**I am not,**" and then adds an asseveration; nay, even so far forgets himself as to speak of his Master in a contemptuous tone while saying, "**I know not the man!**"

They believe him, since no one would speak thus of his friend, if he were not the refuse of faithlessness and falsehood. They do not imagine Peter to be capable of such baseness, and therefore they let him go.

O what a disgrace for the disciple to have convinced the troop that he could not be Jesus' friend.

Restless and fugitive, like a stricken and chased deer, the unhappy disciple wanders about the remote parts of the courtyard, but to his horror finds every outlet of escape closed against him.

For a while he succeeds in withdrawing himself from the view and further molestation both of the spearmen and domestics. Then, after the lapse of about another hour, a fresh crowd surrounds him, who have at length come to the conclusion that the stranger must certainly belong to the disciples of Jesus.

“**Surely,**” say they, with greater confidence than before, “**thou art also one of them;**” and when he again begins to defend himself, they convict him of falsehood by his own words, and exclaim, “**Thy speech bewrayeth thee; thou art a Galilean.**”

Another soldier, attracted by the noise, looks him full in the face, and adds his confirmation to their assertion, by saying, “**Of a truth this fellow also was with him.**”

Last of all, a servant of the High Priest approaches, a kinsman of him whose ear Peter had cut off at Gethsemane, and says, “**Did not I see thee in the garden with him?**”

Peter now finds himself completely entrapped. How is he to act? Two ways are open to him, either to reveal his disgraceful denials by a candid acknowledgment, or else to act his lamentable part completely through, in which case he must carry his barefaced falsehoods to the utmost.

In a state bordering on desperation he decides upon the latter.

In the confusion of the moment, he is quite the old fisherman, the rough sailor again - nay, even much worse than he had ever been before, and heaps oath upon oath, and curse upon curse, to confirm his assertion that he knew not the Man. Abjuring his salvation, he exclaims, “**I know not the man of whom ye speak.**”

And he gives them this assurance with a gesture and in a tone as if no one under heaven was more despicable in his esteem than “that man,” and as if a more outrageous injury could not have been inflicted upon him than by such a supposition.

He is apparently beside himself at the grievous wrong which he is enduring.

But the more violently he protests and cries out, the more obvious is his Galilean dialect; and the more this is the case, the more certain at length are the mercenaries that they have not been mistaken in him. The measure of his sin is now full. The soldiers leave him to himself without giving him any further trouble, and turn their backs upon him, either out of contempt, as deeming such a renegade unworthy of being stamped as a martyr, or else because, by the opening of the doors of the judgment hall, a new spectacle attracts their attention in a higher degree.

We break off, for the present, with painful feelings.

Is it, then, possible for the children of God to fall so far back into their former state?

Yes, my readers, if, instead of commending themselves, in true humiliation of spirit, to the grace of God, they enter the lists in presumptuous self-confidence, and rush themselves into danger.

In this case, there is no security against their experiencing similar defeats. The new man, in those who are regenerate, does not attain to such an unlimited superiority over the old, as no longer to require, on all occasions, the continuance of divine influence for the overcoming and restraining of the latter.

It is true that the former will never yield to the flesh for long together, but in due time will again trample it under foot. It may, however, be the case, as it was with Peter, that the old Adam, under the pressure of seductive and darkening influences, may again burst his fetters, and, manifesting his depravity before God and man, may obtain a considerable advantage over the new man. Hence the Lord's pointed admonition to His disciples to watch and pray lest they fall into temptation.

Simon Peter vowed and promised, certainly with the purest intentions, but neglected to watch and pray.

What was the consequence? The first blast of temptation miserably overthrew him, and all his vows and promises were scattered to the winds.

Therefore, **“Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.”**

In the kingdom of God, indeed, a defeat may bring more blessings than a victory. But woe unto him whom this truth would render reckless! Such a one would be in danger of being never raised up from his fall by the hand of divine grace. And though he might rise again, yet no one can calculate how far a relapse into sin might affect at least the present life, by its destructive consequences.

Let us ever bear in mind the apostolic exhortation, **“Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil;”** as well as those other words of the same apostle, **“Endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.”**

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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