

Passiontide Sermons  
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SERMON IX.  
THE SOLITUDES OF THE PASSION.  
Preached at St. Paul's on Palm Sunday, April 14, 1878.

Ps. xxii. 11.

O go not from Me, for trouble is hard at hand, and there is none to help Me.

THIS is one of the cries of the Ideal or Superhuman Sufferer, of Whose agonies, both of mind and body, we have so complete a picture in Psalm xxii. Many attempts have been made to explain this Psalm by some of the circumstances of the life of David, or the life of Hezekiah, or of other persons in Jewish history who have combined eminent piety with great misfortunes. But these attempts, one and all, have been unsuccessful. The Psalm describes a kind and degree of suffering of which we have no records in the Old Testament, and to which, most assuredly, nothing in the known life of David at all corresponds. Yet there is no doubt whatever—as the best scholars agree—that the Psalm is from David's own hand; and the question is how David could have ever brought himself to write as though he were himself feeling and thinking as he here describes. The answer is that the picture of a Great Sufferer presented itself to David's soul; took possession of it—such entire possession that (as in the highest natural poetry may sometimes happen) the writer forgot himself, and lost himself in the subject which possessed him. The words were David's words, but the thoughts, the experiences, the hopes, the fears, the anguish, the exultation, were those of another and a higher than David. David was but a copyist; David was writing down, for the good of the times to come, what, in his illuminated spirit, he saw with his eyes and heard with his ears. His picture of an Ideal Sufferer was laid up among the sacred writings of Israel; but many centuries had to pass before men could know what it meant, and to Whom it referred.

When Jesus, our Divine Lord, hung dying upon the Cross, He interpreted this Psalm of Himself by using its first verse as the fourth of those Seven last Words which He uttered in those solemn hours: "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" as uttered by the Redeemer in the darkest hour of His Sufferings, give the key to all that follows. Henceforth we Christians read the Psalm as if repeated throughout by Jesus in His Passion or by Jesus on the Cross. As His dying Eye surveys the multitude of human beings, in whom an unreasoning hate of truth and goodness had for the time quelled all other thoughts and emotions, in whom the wild beast that is latent in human nature had asserted his sway with frightful power, Jesus might say, "Many oxen are come about Me: fat bulls of Bashan close Me in on every side. They gape upon Me with their mouths, as it were a ramping and a roaring lion. Many dogs are come about Me; and the council of the wicked layeth siege against Me." As He glances down at His mangled Body, His pierced Hands and Feet; as He feels the parching thirst, the inward collapse, the exhaustion of approaching death; He murmurs, "I

am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint: My heart also in the midst of My body is even like melting wax. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and My tongue cleaveth to My gums: and Thou shalt bring Me into the dust of death. . . . They pierced My hands and My feet; I may tell all My bones.” As He listens to the taunts which fall upon His ear; as He watches the doings of the men who crowd around the foot of the Cross on which He hangs; He complains, “They that see Me laugh Me to scorn; they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying, He trusted in God, that He would deliver Him - let Him deliver Him, if He will have Him. . . . They stand staring and looking upon Me; they part My garments among them, and cast lots upon My vesture.” As He strains the Eye of His Human Soul to gaze into futurity, to pierce the veil which parts the agony and desolation of the moment from the triumph and the peace beyond; He cries, “The Lord hath not despised, nor abhorred, the low estate of the poor; He hath not hid His face from Him, but when He called unto Him, He heard Him. My praise is of Thee in the great congregation; ... all the ends of the world shall remember themselves, and be turned unto the Lord. . . . My seed shall serve Him: they shall be counted unto the Lord for a generation.” The Psalm is throughout written, as if to order, to describe, as from within, the Sufferings of our Divine Lord upon the Cross; nowhere else in the Old Testament does the Holy Spirit more vividly, in a single composition, “testify beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.”

In this Psalm there is one feature of our Lord’s Sufferings upon which particular stress is laid; I mean His desolation or solitude. It is the keynote of the Psalm; the very first words of which complain, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” And it finds expression again and again; nowhere, perhaps, more pathetically than in the cry, “O go not from Me, for trouble is hard at hand, and there is none to help Me.” Some centuries after David a Figure passed before the soul of the greatest of the prophets, that shadowed out the same aspect of a superhuman suffering, but from another point of view. It was the form of One coming as from Edom, coming with garments dyed in the vintage of Bozrah—emblems of a struggle which meant wounds and blood—glorious in His apparel, His moral apparel of righteousness and mercy, and travelling in the greatness of His strength. And when the seer gazed intently at this Figure, and asked who He was, the reply came, “I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save.” And when a further question was ventured, “Why art Thou red in Thine apparel, and Thy garments like him that treadeth in the winefat?” it was answered—as though this was of the essence of the conflict—“I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the people there was none beside Me.” Yes, in His Sufferings Jesus was alone; alone in spirit, though encompassed by a multitude. In His Passion He experienced a threefold solitude: the solitude of greatness, the solitude of sorrow, and the solitude of death.

## I.

The loneliness of the great is one of the ironies of human life. The great are lonely because they are great; had they peers and companions they would cease to be what they are in relation to those around them. This holds good of greatness in all its forms, whether greatness of station, or greatness of genius, or greatness of character.

(a) Take the word “great” in its most popular but least warrantable sense. What is the case of the “great” in station? The solitude of the throne is proverbial. Not that the

monarch is without companions; from the nature of the case the monarch can command companions as can no other person in the realm. No court in the world is wanting in deferential ministers of the Royal will, whose business it is to furnish companionship to Royalty, whose hourly effort is to carry out the wishes of the Sovereign, and to thwart or screen from his sight all that may traverse his passing inclinations. But companionship such as this is perfectly compatible with solitude. That free, buoyant intercourse of mind with mind, of heart with heart, that entire reciprocity of sympathies which knows no limits save those which are imposed by truth and charity, is banned by the exacting etiquette of a court; is hardly, if at all, possible for the occupants of a throne. The “divinity which doth hedge a king” has its drawbacks, and is costly. A monarch is always more or less of a solitary; alone in his joys, alone in his sorrows; reverence and envy conspire to deprive him of his rightful share in the hearts of men around him. And this solitude of the throne—let us not forget it—is one reason for the claim of its occupants upon the prayers and charity of the Church; this tribute of the best sympathy is one means of redressing the privations and of lessening the dangers of a great position, occupied for the public benefit. (β) Then, again, there is the greatness of genius. Even when genius unbends, and is fruitful and popular, even when it ministers to the enjoyment and instruction of millions, it is by instinct solitary; it lives apart. The mountain peaks which are the crowning beauty of a vast and fertile plain purchase their prerogative elevation at a great cost; they are cold, bleak, inaccessible. Genius lives in distant realms of thought; genius lives amidst flashes and aspirations which do not exist for others; in the presence of these, it is alone. We may be sure that a man like Shakespeare was familiar with much which he never thought of communicating to the quiet, sensible, commonplace people among whom, for the most part, he passed his days. In his highest and deepest thought he was, from the nature of the case, a solitary.

(γ) Then there is greatness of character. This is the most legitimate use of the word; and this true greatness might seem at first sight to be very far from solitary,—to be, on the contrary, unselfish, communicative, beneficent. Undoubtedly such greatness draws to itself human hearts, and wins human interest.

Yet how often are there features in a really noble character which, when they become plain to the mass of mankind, repel rather than attract. The unswerving adherence to known truth; the resolute sacrifice of immediate advantage to the claims of principle; the flashes of severity which radiate from the purest and highest love,—these are not popular qualities.

History is full of examples of men whose benevolence and kindness and activity have at first won general applause and admiration, but who have been deserted, hated, denounced, perhaps even put to death, when the real character of their greatness was discovered. Such a man was Savonarola. His story has been made familiar to Englishmen—we may well and gratefully remember in this place—by the pen of Dean Milman. Savonarola, amid imperfections which are inseparable from our human weakness, was one of the greatest religious teachers that the world has seen. He aimed, as all sincerely Christian minds must aim, at carrying Christian principles into the public and social life of man. He held that politics might be no less Christian than personal conduct. The people which had welcomed his teaching with passionate enthusiasm assisted at his cruel and ignominious death. Savonarola was too great even for Florence. And there have been few ages in the world’s history where this lesson has not repeated

itself; and where integrity of character and elevation of aim have not experienced the alternate vicissitudes of popular favour and popular dislike, or even violence. Certainly our own age and country are not exceptions to the rule.

Now our Lord in His Passion was great in these various ways. He was indeed, as it seemed, “a worm, and no man; a very scorn of men, and the outcast of the people;” and yet, as He said before Pilate, He was a King; and He felt, as no other can have felt, the isolation of His Royalty. Then His mental Eye took in vaster horizons than were even suspected to exist by any around Him; He had meat to eat that they knew not of, in this as in so many other ways; He lived in a sphere of thought which was for them impossible. And above all, in character He was not merely courageous, true, disinterested, loving—and this in a degree which distanced the highest excellence around Him—He was that which no other in human form has been before or since: He was Sinless. Thus, as He went forth to die, He was in a solitude created by the very prerogatives of His Being; His elevation above His fellows itself cut Him off from that sympathy which equals can most effectively give; and hence one motive of the prayer of His Human Soul to the Father, “O go not from Me, for trouble is hard at hand, and there is none to help Me.”

## II.

There is the solitude of greatness; but there is also the solitude of sorrow. Certainly sorrow is a link of human fellowship; sooner or later, all men suffer; man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards. No condition of life, no variety of temperament, can purchase exemption from this universal law of suffering. To some it comes as the chastening which is necessary to perfection; to others as the penalty which is due to sin; but sooner or later, in whatever shape, it comes to all. Yet, though suffering is universal, no two men suffer exactly alike. There is the same individuality in the pain which each man suffers that there is in his thought and character and countenance; no two men, since the world began, among the millions of sufferers, have repeated exactly the same experience. This is why human sympathy, even at its best, is never quite perfect: no one merely human being can put himself exactly, by that act of moral imagination which we term sympathy, in all the circumstances of another. Each sufferer, whether of bodily or mental pain, pursues a separate path, encounters peculiar difficulties, shares a common burden, but is alone in his sorrow.

“Each in his hidden sphere of joy or woe

Our hermit spirits dwell.”

Especially was Jesus our Lord solitary in His awful Sorrow. We may well believe that the delicate sensibilities of His Bodily Frame rendered Him liable to physical tortures such as rougher natures can never know. But we know that the mode of His Death was exceptionally painful. And yet His bodily Sufferings were less terrible (it might seem) than the Sufferings of His mind. The Agony in the Garden was of a character which distances altogether human woe. Our Lord advisedly laid Himself open to the dreadful visitation; He embraced it by a deliberate act; He “began to be sorrowful, and very heavy.” He took upon Him the burden and misery of human sin,—the sin of all the centuries that had preceded and that would follow Him—that He might take it to the Cross and expiate it in Death. As the Apostle says, “He bore our sins in His own Body on the tree.” But the touch of this burden, which to us is so familiar, to Him was Agony; and

it drew from Him the Bloody Sweat, which fell from His forehead on the turf of Gethsemane, hours before they crowned Him with the thorns or nailed Him to the Cross.

Ah, brethren, we endeavour to enter into the solitary sorrows of the Soul of Jesus, but they are quite beyond us. We may, at some time in our lives, have found ourselves in a family circle, when a heavy blow has just fallen on it, and have noted the efforts of the younger children to understand the gloom or misery of their elders. The elders know what has happened. They know that all upon which the family depends for daily bread is irretrievably lost. Or they know that some loved one—a father, a mother, air eldest child—has just been taken away, it may be by a swift and terrible catastrophe, and they have no heart to speak. Or they know, worst of all, that some misery worse than death, some crushing burden of shame and sorrow, has fallen on the family through the misconduct of one of its members. And so they sit, silent in their grief; and the young children gaze wistfully up into their faces, as if trying to make out what is so strange and so beyond them, as if wishing to sympathise with what is to them an incomprehensible woe. They are doing their best; they are concerned at beholding the sorrowing faces; they note the subdued tones, the quiet movements, the hushed sighs, the darkened room: but alas! they are trying to understand what they cannot understand; they are but touching the fringe of a sorrow that is above them. And so it is, brethren, with all of us, in presence of the Sorrows of Jesus Christ, expiating the sins of a guilty world. Before Him we are, indeed, but children; happy if we share their simple and free sympathies, but certainly, like them, unable to do more than watch, with tender and reverent awe, a mighty burden of misery which we cannot hope to comprehend. All that we can do is to lay to heart the words which sound everywhere in believing souls around Gethsemane and Calvary: “Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold and see, if there be any sorrow like unto My sorrow?”

### III.

Lastly, there is the solitude of death. Death, whenever it comes to any, must be an act in which no other can share. Even if I die at the same moment with another, I cannot sympathise with him in the act of dying; I have no solid reason to presume that each of us would even be conscious of what is happening to the other. Death strips from a man all that connects him with that which is without him; it is an act in which his consciousness is, from the nature of the case, thrown back upon itself, and absorbed in that which is occurring to itself. A dying man may be distracted up to the moment, but not in the moment, of death. Warm-hearted friends may press around him; well-remembered objects may be placed before his failing eyes; at one deathbed, the prayers of childhood, at another, so it has been, soft strains of familiar music, may fall upon the ear. But when the soul by a wrench which no experience can anticipate, breaks away from the bodily organism with which, since its creation, it has been so intimately linked, it enters upon a lonely path, which may, indeed, be brightened by the voices and the smiles of angels, but into which no human sympathy can follow.

Few things, my brethren, are so tragic as the sharp contrast between the crowd that may surround a dying man, and the necessary solitude of the soul in death. When the cholera, many years ago, struck its victims in a crowded drawing-room, the world was hushed with a passing awe; but the same contrast may be found tinder more accustomed

circumstances. What can be more pathetic, for instance, than the deathbed of the French statesman who played so great a part under the Republic and the First Empire, and who lived down into the boyhood of those among us who are yet in middle life? Talleyrand passed the last forty-eight hours of his life sitting on the side of his bed—he could not bear to lie down—and leaning forward on two servants, who were relieved every two hours. In that posture he received, on the morning of the day on which he died, King Louis Philippe and his Queen; and he never for a moment, we are told, forgot what was due to the etiquette of the Court: he received his visitors with the distinction and the attentions to which they were accustomed. Outside his room, in the antechamber, all that was distinguished in the society of Paris was assembled; Talleyrand's death was viewed as a political and social event of the first importance. Politicians, old and young, even grey-haired statesmen, crowded the hearth and talked with animation; while young men and young women exchanged bright compliments that formed a painful contrast with the deep groans of the dying man in the adjoining room. Talleyrand, who was first a bishop and then an apostate from Christianity, made some sort of reconciliation with Heaven: God only knows its real value. But no sooner had the long agony terminated in death than (to use the words of the narrative) it might have been supposed that a flight of rooks was leaving the mansion; such was the eagerness with which each rushed away to be the first to tell the news in the particular circle of which he or she was the oracle: and the corpse of Talleyrand, lying in those deserted rooms, was a visible emblem of the solitude of the soul in the act of death.

Nor can we refer to such a subject to-day without reminding ourselves that only three days since death has claimed as its own a man whom the Church of England will always honour with affectionate reverence.<sup>1</sup> It is for those who had the happiness of knowing him intimately to say, as no doubt they will say, what Bishop Selwyn was in his private life and conversation; what were the thoughts, the enthusiasms, that gave impulse and shape to such a splendid life. We, who have revered him from afar, can merely note that his was a figure of Apostolic proportions; that he was one of that comparatively small band of men who reproduce, in our age of clouded faith and softness of manners, the virtues and the force by which long centuries ago the Christian Church was planted on the ruins of heathendom. Surely many of us have accompanied him with the reverent sympathy of our prayers, in his last hours of pain and weakness: nor can we doubt that for him the solitude of death has been brightened by all that our gracious Master has in store for those who, by their words and their lives, turn many to embrace His righteousness and His truth.

In the Death of our Lord Himself it might be supposed that this sense of solitude would be escaped. Living in hourly communion with the Father, and surrounded by hosts of angel guardians, how, we may ask, could He taste of the solitude of death? Was not His Human Nature so united to His Divinity that even in death the Union was not forfeited? And how is this reconcilable with the supposition that He experienced the loneliness of dying, as we men experience it?

The answer is that our Lord, by a deliberate act, became "obedient unto death." Whatever might have been the law of His Being—as Sinless Man, united to a Higher Nature—He did not, if I may dare so to say, claim its privileges. He laid Himself open

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<sup>1</sup> George Augustus Selwyn, Bishop of Lichfield (and previously Bishop of New Zealand), died April 11th, 1878.

without reserve or stint to all the ills to which our flesh is heir, without at all excepting its last and lowest humiliation. He selected as a mode of dying that which conspicuously involved most pain and shame; and He would not most assuredly defeat His purpose by sparing Himself that accompaniment of death, which causes so much apprehension to us sinful men—its solitariness. He might have prayed to His Father for twelve legions of angels; but He would be alone. He might have enjoyed unceasingly the joy of those who always behold the Face of the Father in heaven; but He willed to share the agony of the souls who cry in their last moments—some, we may be sure, every day that passes—“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” He submitted Himself to all those elements of our nature which sterner characters affect to scorn; to its sense of dependence, to its craving for sympathy, to its consciousness of weakness. “O go not from me, for trouble is hard at hand, and there is none to help me,” is the natural language of the feeblest sufferer in the poorest lodging in London; but it was also the language of our Divine Saviour, contemplating, with true human apprehension, the loneliness of approaching death.

Yes! when as on this day He rode in triumph towards the Holy City, surrounded by a great multitude who cried “Hosanna,” and spread the branches of the palms and the garments which they wore along the path of His advance, even at this moment of seeming triumph He was really alone. He knew what was before Him; the surging multitude around was for Him as if it was not. We may see men in Cheapside, in the middle of the day, when it is difficult to force a passage along the footway from this Cathedral to the Bank, in whose faces some unconcealed care or some absorbing passion proclaims their virtual solitude amid the crowd. “Never less alone than when most alone” is the motto of the soul as it gazes upwards towards the heavens; “never more alone than when least alone” is the motto of the soul when, under a great stress of pain or doubt, it looks down towards the earth. The crowds which sang “Hosanna” as Christ entered Jerusalem, and the crowds which cried “Crucify Him,” as He passed along the Way of Sorrows, touched but the surface of His awful Solitude, as He rode on, as He walked on, to die.

This solitude of our Lord in His Passion is surely full of comfort for us. It shows us first that at the moment of death, and before it, the best Christians may experience a desolation of spirit which is no real gauge of their true condition before God. Many of the best men in the Christian Church have done so; and it has been supposed by those who do not sufficiently reflect upon the teaching of the Passion that this desolation of the soul must needs imply its rejection by God. No conclusion can be less warranted. The confident assumptions of a deathbed which follows upon a life of disloyalty to known duty or truth may indeed be only physical illusions: but the anguish of a saintly soul, which fears, on the threshold of eternity, that God has left it to itself, is but a token of conformity to the Divine Saviour.

And, secondly, we see in the solitude of Jesus Christ crucified a warrant of His sympathy with the dying. “In that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted.” Nothing that we may experience, in His good will, no anguish of soul, no weariness or torture of body, has been unexplored by Him Who overcame all the sharpness of death before He opened the kingdom of heaven to the great company of the faithful. May He take pity upon us, His weak and erring children, and suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from Him.<sup>2</sup> May He “look upon us with the eyes of His mercy, give us comfort, and sure confidence in Him, defend

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<sup>2</sup> Prayer in the Order for the Burial of the Dead.

us from the danger of the enemy,"<sup>3</sup> and so bring us to our eternal home, for His own infinite merits.

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<sup>3</sup> Prayer in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick.