

## PRESENT SUFFERING

It belongs to us, brethren and sisters, peculiarly on the present occasion, to contemplate "*the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow.*" Of course, we can only do so in a cursory and superficial manner, for the phrase when thoroughly followed out in all its significance covers the whole ground of what God has been pleased to reveal to us, both in its practical bearing upon us in the matter of duty, and in its future relation to us as a matter of hope. Still, **a little edification is better than none**, and we cannot look upon the sufferings of Christ, or the glory which is to follow, without being edified.

Christ was a sufferer in a sense which perhaps few people realize. The majority of persons are apt to look at the cross, and the cross only, and to imagine that the sufferings of Christ relate only to the physical pain he experienced in being put to so cruel a death, or at most to the anguish of feeling to which he was subjected in being mocked and insulted by a crowd of soldiery. To those, however, who study Christ's life attentively, and particularly in the light of what the spirit of Christ has testified in the Psalms as to the sufferings of Christ, it becomes manifest that those sufferings were much more widely spread over his life than is popularly imagined; that they consisted largely of the **mental suffering** caused by the present evil state of things among men; that, in fact, he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. His sorrow and his grief were of a sort that many, and we might add, that nearly all, are unsusceptible of.

Christ had a high conception—far higher than ever we can hope to reach—of what men ought to be, and of the position that God ought to occupy among men, and therefore he felt a pain that none could experience who were not of the same state of mind, in mingling with men who were, on the whole, as regards God, like the brutes. We find that we come into fellowship with the sufferings of Christ in proportion as we grow up to him, and become like him, drinking in his spirit, sharing his tastes, and laying hold of his hopes. We come to find that it is no empty metaphor which likens the people of God to strangers and pilgrims, having here no continuing city. We come to feel that David did not speak extravagantly when he said, "*My flesh longeth as in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is.*" "*I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert.*" If you examine the Psalms where these expressions of misery occur, you will find that they all have relation to the moral and mental attitude of the men around him. David suffered from the godlessness of those who became his enemies, and from the proud indifference or brutish inertia of men whose portion is in this life, and who have not set God before them. In this, David was a preliminary exhibition of Christ, for the spirit of Christ was in him and made use of him to paint, in advance, so to speak, the portrait of the inner personal experiences of  
of the Lord.

Now anyone who lays hold of the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, with the result which those things were given to produce, will feel in fellowship with his sufferings on these points; he will feel alone; he will feel that the present is an evil world in a high sense; he will feel a pilgrim in the midst of

it. It is well to see this; for in proportion as we see it, we are able to reconcile ourselves to our position and to go through our course with much less chafe than we should experience if we were to go upon the supposition that we were to find things satisfactory in the present. If we act upon the idea that we are now to find edification, comfort, pleasure in all around, or to any great extent anywhere, we shall be grievously disappointed, because we shall be finding at every step that it is impossible at present to realize the aspirations of our hearts -- impossible for a great variety of reasons. Even if the world were all we could wish, we are now in ourselves only flesh and blood, and that is a weak thing both physically and spiritually. We do not require to live in the first century to fellowship the sufferings of Christ. We may have thought so in the first days of our spiritual childhood. We all, no doubt, had the idea that we required to be put in prison, and to have the officer of the law come into our houses and take our things, or that we should be led forth to the stake or have our heads cut off, before we should suffer with Christ. We come to see the fallacy of that idea as we grow older. In one respect we are called upon to endure a more difficult martyrdom than the faggot or the block. Many have undergone that kind of martyrdom whom Christ will not acknowledge in the day of his coming. In the early centuries, many rushed into that kind of martyrdom upon the same principle as that which leads the votaries of the Roman Catholic religion to submit to painful penances. Dreadful things have been suffered in the way of penances. The Emperor Charles V, who was one of the mightiest potentates in Europe for nearly half a century, after his abdication, lacerated his flesh, with thorns and instruments of torture, ordered his coffin and lay in it, conducted his own burial service, and went through many physical sufferings, with the idea that by going through all those sufferings he would appease God for all the misdeeds of his life, and earn a place in the world to come. But Charles V was an unjustified sinner.

We know that God is not pleased with will worship, that is, with anything man can devise for His satisfaction. He is pleased only with our compliance with what He appoints; and all His appointments aim at the very contrary result secured by penances. For, if you examine such matters to the root, you will find that they have their root in self-satisfaction and the desire to pay God off. Wicked people feel that God has a claim on them, so to speak, and they want to pay Him off, and be independent; whereas, the true worship which God exacts excludes that feeling entirely, and brings us to the recognition of the fact that we cannot pay God off. All we can do is to obey Him in thanksgiving for His goodness in offering us forgiveness on the recognition of our position. The poor creatures who allow themselves to be crushed under the car of Juggernaut have just as much ground for hoping they will be saved as the Emperor Charles V, and the multitudes who, under the influence of a similarly perverted idea, in the second, third and fourth centuries, rushed to the faggot under the delusion that they were making themselves sure of a heaven before uncertain. It is painful to read the writings of professed Christians of that time. One of the fathers of the so-called Christian Church—Ignatius—takes the lead in that kind of pernicious teaching, by which men were taught to regard martyrdom as the true way into the kingdom of God.

The age of true martyrdom has not passed away. We are invited to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God, and that is a far more difficult kind of sacrifice to offer than that which is at an end almost as soon as the pain is felt. Death by the sword or at the stake is sharp, short, and decisive, but a living sacrifice is a living

martyrdom. It is a living mortification—a tedious and protracted suffering; it is a waiting for God in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation; it is an obeying of commandments which are irksome to the natural man it is submitting to a trial which is not joyous, but grievous. How is that? Because God forbids those who are invited to be heirs of His kingdom to be friends with the world, or to seek for pleasure in the present time. Those who are at liberty to be friends with the world, and to seek for pleasure in the present time, have a great deal to entertain them; and those who accept the calling to which God has called all who have ears to hear, experience the deprivation; though I admit that after a while, the deprivation is felt in a different direction. What I mean by that is this: they do not feel the deprivation of present gratifications such as they are called upon to leave, for they learn to hate these, seeing that they are built on the wrong foundation.

The world disregards God; they follow pleasure for its own behoof, and a saint learns to have no pleasure in anything from which God is absent, so that if he could, he would not take part; but he feels the deprivation in another way. He learns not only to hate those things, but to love another set of things, and the things he loves are not present to him except by faith. If they were present to us now, there would be thousands who would make the exchange; indeed, it is possible that three-fourths of the human race would make the exchange at once, if as soon as a man believed and obeyed the Gospel he became immortal, and the subject of glory and honour. But then, they would do it for the sake of getting something better than they had, and God is not pleased to bestow the highest good on that principle. He offers the highest good on condition of pleasing Him, and not pleasing ourselves. This uninviting religion of faith gives us that opportunity. God is not pleased with anything short of it. "Without faith it is impossible to please him"; but He has given us an opportunity of pleasing Him. What a great honour if we could only realize it! What a great dignity for mortal men to have placed in their hands the power of giving satisfaction to the Creator of heaven and earth. He has given us that opportunity in Christ; but in giving us that opportunity He requires that the good things spoken of in the Gospel he postponed, and the deprivation, therefore, relates to our being cut off, for the time being, from the things that are to come.

Nevertheless, we see them. Abraham saw them: he lived a long time ago, but he saw them, and was glad. That is Jesus' testimony: "*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad.*" Abraham is the father of the faithful; that is, he is the leading specimen of the kind of people with whom God is well pleased. We also look forward; we see, and we are glad; but our rejoicing is only in hope, and is mixed with weakness and with fear. We are told to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Why with fear? The question is answered: "*Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.*" That is an apostolic reply to the question. With all our joy in looking forward to the rest before us, our rejoicing is moderated by the apprehension that possibly we may fail to enter in. Christ said, when Peter asked him upon the point, that many should seek to enter in but should not be able. Why not able? Because they are not in earnest about it; they do not give enough energy to it. "*We ought to give the more earnest heed,*" says Paul, "*to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.*"

Many fail to attend to the things in this earnest way; they lay hold of the kingdom of God, but, at the same time, keep hold of twenty other things. They devote their best faculties and their principal time to the promotion of objects unconnected with Christ entirely, and which are not even necessary for them in the provision of their livelihood. A man, of course, must labour for his daily bread, and, in fact, that may be made a service of God; for it is one of the teachings of Paul that whatever a man doeth, he is to do it heartily as to the Lord, and not unto men. He says that to servants; so we have it in our hands to turn everything to spiritual account if we are wise. I am referring, however, to people who are under no obligation to attend to things they have in hand, but who choose them as a matter of special taste, as a matter of honour, or as a matter of respectability. These things engross all their energies, run away with their time, and steal their hearts, so that the things of God have little hold upon them, and, therefore, they fail.

Our rejoicing therefore is mixed with fear, and ought to be so. No one should slacken his hand until his course is run. Never put off the day of wisdom. If we reject wisdom for our own convenience, wisdom will reject us. It is one of the delusions we have to be on our guard against.

"While the lamp holds out to burn,  
The vilest sinner may return."

That is what is said by the false prophets of modern religion. The Spirit of God says: "*Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.*" It will be too late for a man to hurry up and to be spiritually-minded when he finds himself in the grasp of death.

What a refreshing thing it is to see men and women under the power of the fear of God. We need not fear men; we need not fear what brother this or brother that may say, because in a short time, in the order of nature, all men will be in their graves, and there will be no reality in relation to us then except God, His mind, His purpose, and His judgment. Therefore we need not vex ourselves, or encumber our spiritual operations with anxieties about the opinions of our fellows; let us be right with Christ. To be right with him, requires that we be in earnest, and all the time in earnest. Recollect his somewhat abrupt declaration to a young man who came to him, saying, "*Lord, I will follow thee, but suffer me first to go and bury my father,*" and to whom Jesus said, "*Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God.*" What is the application of that saying, unless it be to suggest that the young man in question by proposing to do something else besides seeking the kingdom of God, was as a man turning his hand from the plough? Christ's stern declaration is that such a man is not fit for the kingdom of God. That implies that there are some who are "fit," and some who are "not fit," and it also shows who are they that are "fit." Those who are fit are those who lay hold with full purpose of heart and accept the calling in Christ in its entirety. That calling is a thing that is very exacting indeed; it claims absolute ascendancy with those of whom it lays hold. It is a very different thing from the religion preached from the pulpits of the churches and chapels. The clergy give the people to understand, though they do not say so in express words, that they need not be very much taken up with religion, that a

sprinkling of it will be sufficient; whereas the truth of Christ demands to be the object of life, the principle of action, the subject of supreme affection—the engrossing thing.

How reasonable this seems when we allow ourselves to realize all the surrounding facts of the case, and the end of every human being. Walk through a cemetery, for instance, and read the tombstones. There you have a sleeping congregation of people, who have done with life. There are all sorts -- from the grey-haired captain who acquired military or naval honours in various parts of the world, and in the language of Parliamentary compliment, "deserved well of his country," to the unknown pauper who drivelled out his inglorious days in the workhouse. There are merchants under these sods, who, in their day, had risen to the top of the social scale by their industry and by talents which were highly applauded as their own, and who died in the lap of luxury. And there are beautiful daughters of rich men, who pined away in the surfeit of luxury, when, perhaps, a fair battle with the rough responsibilities of life might have saved them from an early grave. And there are also strong young men and beautiful children, with whom parents had to part, and whom, too, notwithstanding breaking hearts, they have had to follow into the grave. There they lie a common mass of corruption, "unknowing and unknown," forgotten in the land of the living.

Now, let us imagine that we are included in that congregation, as we certainly shall be if the Lord arrest not the course of nature by his coming, and let us imagine the time for resurrection come. On the one side of the resurrection-line there is the past—the human past, with its dropped burden of human anxieties and human business; and on the other side, what is there? God's business; God's business on a large scale. Christ is at the head of it. He puts aside the kings first and all their governments, and his great business is to exalt the name of God in the earth, and to bring the nations into subjection and harmony with him. Now, whom of all that congregation of the dead, whose mortal days and mortal concerns are all gone, whom of them would you select to be companions of Christ in this mighty work upon earth, which has as its object the exaltation of the honour of God's name for ever and ever, in the countless population with which the earth is yet to be peopled? Would you think it a large price to ask of any of that dead, rotting congregation, for the privilege of immortal partnership in this work, that they should have devoted their mortal affections, their mortal energies, their mortal day, their mortal opportunities, to holding up the name of Christ in the day of his disgrace? I am sure that no one realizing the matter would falter in the decision. Everyone would say, it was most reasonable that people who lived for themselves should reap what they had sown. The great majority of the dead lived for mortal life; and they cannot complain that they get and perish for what they worked. All they worked for was to have good things to put into their mouths, fine clothes to put on their backs, and the satisfaction of "respectability" in their day and generation. They got what they worked for; they had their reward; therefore, what would you bring them forward into the kingdom of God for? The kingdom of God is for those only who seek it first, and work for it in a practical, enthusiastic way, and are considered fools for their pains.

Let us then, brethren, never listen for a moment to those who would hinder in the good fight by recommending what is called "temperance" and "moderation" in the things of Christ. Their exhortations are altogether misplaced, and altogether uncalled for. The tendencies of the sluggish beast of the natural man are sufficiently powerful

in that direction to render it quite needless for anyone to exhort us in that line. We need exhorting the other way. We want continually to be pulled up in the direction of the path which the Captain of our Salvation himself has trodden before us, and in which he is, so to speak, leading us on. We know what sort of path that was. We know he was no "mild" and "moderate" man in the things of God. We know he had no schemes in hand but the one scheme of God's purpose. We know that he was never found trimming his sails to worldly breezes, or emulating or inculcating worldly principles; he devoted himself solely to the work which the Father gave him, and his relation to the world was one of continued antagonism. Our work, and our attitude, if we are his brethren, will be the same. The work may be different now in its external form, but it is the same work for all that, based upon the same testimonies and the same principles, and aiming at the same end—the purifying of a peculiar people for the inheritance of the kingdom of God. Let us not fear to give ourselves to it with all our hearts. We shall not regret it when that day comes to us, or when we shall gasp out the vital energy which keeps us going for the time being. We shall look back with satisfaction on our little course if we are able to say, "Well, I know my efforts were weak, and I know my shortcomings were many, but I have sought to serve Christ to the extent of my mortal possibilities as circumstances allowed, and although it has been a toilsome career, hard work, and unsatisfactory in some respects, I am glad to look back upon it, and would do as I have done if I have to live it over again." On the other hand, the men or the women who have merely mild notions of Christ, and who have been devoting themselves to personal aims connected with this mortal life, as the object of their exertions, when they get through their comfortable drive and come to die, will be far other than satisfied with the account they will have to look upon; they will be filled with consternation when they come to present it.

It is a glorious day that is coming, but glorious only in a certain line of things. The greatness and the glory of the day of Christ are all on a certain foundation. The glory, and the foundation of the glory, are both visible in the Psalm that has been read. Let us glance at them for a moment. "*The Lord reigneth.*" What is the leading feature of the system of government and of human life when the Lord reigneth? "*The Lord is great in Zion; he is high above all the people. Let them praise thy great and terrible name; for it is holy.*" "*Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship at his footstool; for he is holy.*" The recognition of the greatness of God is the foundation of the glory of those glorious "good times coming." It is testified that all nations shall come and worship before God; and that the knowledge of the glory of God shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea; God's will shall be done upon earth as it is done in heaven. There will be glory to God in the highest at the time that there is peace on earth.

Now, in contrast to this, just look at the world at present. What does it know or care for the greatness and the glory of God? What conception has it of His holiness? Speak to it of such matters, and your speech is to them the speech of a madman. This helps us to realize how thoroughly evil the world is. Some people have a difficulty in realizing the truth on this point. They certainly think the world was bad at the time of the Roman emperors, and at the time that Christ appeared; but they have an idea that now we are advancing by slow degrees towards an age of progress and enlightenment, and that in fact the world as a whole is already tolerably righteous. The prevalence of this idea is only proof of the ignorance that exists as to the nature of true enlightenment and true civilization. The world lieth in wickedness now as

much as it did in the days of John. The wickedness has only changed its form a little. Wickedness in our day is refined; it is cultivated; it is methodical; it has got on a beautiful skin outside, but according to the Divine standard, it is, perhaps, more reprobate than the untutored barbarism of early days. It is more proud and more blind to its weakness and dependence. The barbarians had some notion of a God, and entertained some idea that they must give some service to that God; but this miserable world of modern civilization is like to burst with exaggerated notions of its own importance. It is ripe for destruction. It is respectable enough according to current notions of respectability; but, in the eyes of God, it is sunk in corruption as much as it was before the flood, when mankind had corrupted His way upon the earth. Mankind have now utterly corrupted His way, and are walking after a thousand imaginations of their evil hearts, fearing not the Possessor of heaven and earth, regarding not His law, nor caring to know the state of the poor. Christ is, with them, a byword.

We are close to the time when it is revealed that the angel—the symbolic angel with the sickle—will gather the harvest of the earth and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God, that it may be trodden by him to whom alone is allotted this great mission, even the Man of Sorrows who, in his day, bore testimony to the wickedness of the world; who upheld the faith and the honour of God, and who is to have the great honour of executing the work of judgment when the time arrives. To that work and that great honour we are called if we are of his spirit, if we are his brethren, if we have a family likeness to him. The family likeness in this case, is a thing of principle and not of flesh and blood, and the principle shines through the gorgeous picture of the kingdom presented in this Psalm. It is the greatness of God and holiness unto Him. *"Be ye holy,"* Christ said to his disciples, and, therefore, to us. We may imagine him standing here this morning and saying, *"Be ye holy";* and his apostles coming after him and saying the same thing: *"Be ye holy in all manner of conversation."* This is a practical exhortation. There are things which we ought to dismiss as inconvenient and unbecoming in sons of God, and Paul mentions among them covetousness, jesting, and foolish talking. These are things which waste and burn up the mind. There are indulgences in common follies which dry up the spiritual sap and engender aversion to spiritual things. Let us avoid them. Remember, we are going on to the state symbolized by the four heraldic living creatures of the Israelitish commonwealth, full of eyes, and which rest not day and night, saying, *"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come ... Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created."* We are to be incorporated in those four living ones if we are acceptable to Christ at his coming; and that acceptability will only exist then if we are now constituents of the peculiar people. Christ is working now; purifying the people unto himself, and he has been working at this work ever since he went away, through the instrumentality employed.

It is hard work in our generation. The world is in such a wretched plight with regard to the truth, that we cannot begin where the apostles began. The apostles began straight off, whereas we have to convince men of the elementary principles. We have to begin at the very foundation, and show that man is mortal; that Christ is coming, and that the kingdom of God is to be established on earth. Consequently, there is the tremendous danger that people getting to know these elementary things may think they are all right, whereas the fact of the matter is that the foundation is

only laid for the work of fashioning them into the likeness of the people prepared for the Lord. Well, if the difficulties are great, no doubt Christ's sympathies are great; if our situation is peculiarly discouraging, no doubt our welcome before him, if we overcome, will be correspondingly cordial. He may say: "Many believed on me who saw the signs and wonders of the apostolic age, but ye saw them not, and yet believed: blessed are ye; enter now into the glory revealed." In prospect of that, and with the desire for such a reception, let us continue patient in this well-doing; breaking bread from Sunday to Sunday, daily reading the word and persevering under all circumstances, however discouraging, in the patient observance of all the things that Christ has commanded.

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