

JOHN 18

JESUS, THE MODEL SUFFERER

The Cedron Brook was never more than a mountain stream, and it is now dry; but its stony bed shows where it used to flow through the valley that separated Mount Zion from the Mount of Olives. The main road which led from the city gate, over the Mount of Olives to Bethany and Jericho, crossed this brook by means of an ancient bridge – from which, on this particular night, a fair scene must have presented itself. Overhead, the Passover-moon was shining in full-orbed splendor, seemingly turning night into day. Beneath, the little stream was flowing down the valley, catching the moonlight on its wavelets. On the one side of the brook were dark, thick woods – above which, the ancient walls and gates of Jerusalem rose. And on the other side, there were the slopes of Olivet. Presently, the Lord Jesus emerged out of the shadows of the woods, engaged in earnest conversation with His Apostles. They crossed the bridge; but instead of continuing on the path as it wound upward toward Bethany and Bethphage, they all turned into a large enclosure – well-known as the Garden of the Oil-press, and which we know best as Gethsemane. Surely, somewhere within this enclosure, there stood the rock-hewn trough in which the rich, juicy olives were trodden by bare feet.

The account of what took place after our Lord and His disciples entered that garden was so fully narrated by the other evangelists, that there was no need for John to tell of the awful anguish, the broken cries, the bloody sweat, the sleep of the chosen three, or the strengthening angel. He confines himself almost entirely to the circumstances of the Savior's arrest. Probably only two hours had passed since Judas had left the supper-table in the upper room, but that had given him all the time needed for the completion of his wicked plans. Hastening to the authorities, he had told them that the favorable moment had arrived for his Master's secret arrest. He told them that he knew the lonely spot to which He often resorted for meditation and prayer, and that he only needed the assistance of a band of armed men in order to overpower all possible resistance on the part of Himself or His followers. This the leaders were able to supply from the guards of the Temple. They were going against One Who was deserted and defenseless, yet these soldiers were armed with sticks and staves. They were about to arrest One Who would make no attempt at flight or concealment, and the moon was full and bright; yet – lest He should make His escape to some limestone grotto, or into the deep shadows – they carried torches and lanterns.

The Lord had just awakened His disciples for the third and last time when His ear detected the tread of hurrying feet, the muffled clank of swords, and the

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ *Jesus is betrayed and captured in the Garden of Gethsemane – verses 1-12*
- ❖ *He is examined by Annas and Caiaphas – verses 13-27*
- ❖ *He is brought to Pilate so that He might be sentenced to death – verses 28-40*

stifled murmur of an advancing crowd. Perhaps He even saw the glancing lights as they advanced through the garden shrubs and began to encircle the place where He had prayed. He now knew that His time had come; and so, without waiting for His enemies to find Him, He went forth to meet the rabble-band with calm and dignified composure. He stepped out into the moonlight and saluted them with the inquiry, "Whom seek ye?"

Here, however, let us pause for a moment and turn our eye upon the leader of this band: Judas the betrayer. As he enters the garden to carry out his evil deed, he is not to be regarded as an extraordinarily inhuman monster, nor as an innocent and misguided enthusiast. Both these false extremes in the interpretation of the character of Judas are held by modern writers. But the fact is that his development in this awful crime had been perfectly normal and natural, and this renders a solemn warning to all professing followers of Christ. Judas is simply the illustration of a person who cherishes a besetting sin, and who yields to an evil passion – despite repeated warnings and the enjoyment of abundant light – until at last, he hates the light, and then he takes his place on the side of the enemies of Christ. Let us pray to the Lord and ask Him to bestow grace and strength upon us, for Judas is an example of the triumph of selfishness; and there is not one of us who is incapable of the same traitorous thoughts, and who does not need to be on our guard against treacherous deeds which imperil the cause of our Master.

But now let us turn away from beholding the black portrait of this wicked man; and let us only use the hideous spectacle as something which stands in striking contrast to the Lord Jesus, in His Divine majesty and His loyal love. See how He voluntarily offers Himself to His enemies, even though He knows their murderous purpose! And yet His one thought is for the safety of His followers. The soldiers are so awed by His appearance and His words that they fall backwards on the ground. As they hesitate to arrest Him, He again offers Himself to them; but He requests that His disciples may be allowed to keep their liberty. He did not want them to be tempted to give up their faith by being constrained to share His fate, even in part; for He never allows us to be too sorely tempted, and never beyond what we are able to endure.

Peter rashly attempts to defend his Lord by using his sword to attack one of the servants of the high priest; but Jesus rebukes him with a word full of deep significance, showing the voluntary character of His atoning death. "Put up the sword into the sheath," He orders; "the cup which the Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" And what is this "cup"? It is not merely physical death, but it is death as the Bearer of sin. And so He yields Himself to the power of the traitor and his murderous band with a calmness that is majestic and Divine.

Throughout this Gospel, John has repeatedly asserted that unbelief is due to sin, moral perversity, and love of evil; and this fact could not have been more clearly demonstrated than when Jesus is brought before His enemies for a mock-



ery of a trial (verses 12-27). In reality, the Lord Jesus was the Judge at these court-proceedings; the Jewish rulers were the ones who were really upon trial, and here they condemned themselves. John recounts only a preliminary examination of Jesus at the home of the high priest; but the narrative shows the true spirit of the Sanhedrin who, accord-

ing to the other Gospels, later pronounced upon Him the sentence of death. It is a revelation of the hatred, insincerity, malice, cruelty, and rage which always characterize the open enemies of Christ. "The high priest ... asked Jesus of his disciples, and of his teaching" – not because he wished to obtain information; but only because he desired to entangle Jesus in His words, and extort from Him some word or claim which he could place before the Sanhedrin as a ground for condemning Him. Jesus replied that His teachings had always been public and open, and that there were witnesses who could testify as to what He had said. This was an implied rebuke of the high priest; and so "one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, Answerest thou the high priest so? Jesus answered him, If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why smitest thou me?" They could offer violence to Jesus, but they could not produce any witness that His teachings had been false! This was their dilemma: they wished to condemn Him to death, but they had no proof of any guilt or fault – and this has always been the dilemma of His enemies. People may hate Him and reject Him, but they cannot disprove His perfect sinlessness; and while they are rejecting Him, they are actually doing nothing more than condemning themselves – just like His enemies of old.

During Jesus' examination, an incident occurred in the court of the palace. This incident was real evidence of the character of Jesus, and it is full of significance for His followers. Peter denied – three times – that he knew his Master. Thereby, he showed the Divine foresight of the Lord – Who, only a few hours before, had predicted this denial. But herein Peter also revealed the weakness of his flesh, and the peril of self-confidence. The disciple who had sworn that he was willing to die for Jesus, and who had rashly drawn his sword in His defense, now blushes and stammers before a few servants in the dim light of a fire – declaring that he does not belong to His band of disciples. Let us note that it was not Peter's faith that failed, but his courage. As soon as the rooster's crow reminds him of his Savior's words, he goes out and weeps bitterly. He loves his Lord! He is not a Judas. He will be restored, and he will be commissioned to great service in his Master's name.

Although the sentence of death was pronounced upon Jesus by the Jewish court called the Sanhedrin (as we read in the other Gospels), it could not be executed by the Jews themselves; for Rome had taken away from them the power of inflicting capital punishment. It was necessary, therefore, to bring Jesus be-

fore the Roman governor in order to have a confirmation of the sentence of the Jewish tribunal. In this Roman court, the judge was Pontius Pilate, who – among all the figures of the Gospel-narrative – stands out as peculiarly pitiful, weak, and contemptible. Yet he – like Judas – is certainly not a monster of depravity who is so far separated from us that he can give us no warning. He is simply an example of a person who lacks decision of character, who does not possess the courage of his convictions, who tries to compromise with wrong, and who disobeys conscience through fear of personal loss.

First of all, the Jews ask Pilate to confirm the death sentence without any process of trial (verses 28-32); and this, the Roman governor very properly refuses to do. And how ridiculous is the hypocrisy of the Jews! They will not enter the palace of the Gentile prince for fear of ceremonial defilement; but all the while, their hearts are black with murderous hate, and they are asking Pilate to condemn an innocent Man! At first, Pilate desired to dismiss the case and hand Jesus back to them to be punished with a minor penalty (but not death) according to their own laws. When they are compelled to admit that since death is the penalty that they desired, and so the case had to be tried in the Roman court, they accuse Jesus of a political crime; they say that He has called Himself a King. This charge, Pilate then investigates. “Art thou the King of the Jews?” he asks. Evidently, he expected Him to give a simple negative answer. But the matter was not so simple as he had supposed. There was a sense in which Jesus was indeed a King; for He was the Messiah, the true King of Israel. But He makes it clear that if, by the word *king*, Pilate had in mind a political ruler who is attempting to seize power by rebellious force of arms – then he is mistaken. But if he is suggesting real influence and authority over the lives and hearts of men, then Jesus is most assuredly the one and only King. His instrument of power is not the sword, but the truth; and everyone who loves truth will be His willing subject. “What is truth?” Pilate then asks. But He sees that whether Jesus is a fanatic or a prophet, He is definitely guilty of no capital crime; and so he determines to release Him. He wishes, however, to secure the favor of the Jews; and so he attempts a compromise. Real justice would have granted Jesus an immediate acquittal, but self-interest suggests two other methods to Pilate to help him get out of this difficult situation – both of which fail and lead to the final tragedy. The first of these two compromises is seen in the concluding verses (38-40) of this chapter. Pilate offers the people – as a special favor – the release of Jesus, Whom they had welcomed into the city as a king, only a few days before; for he understood that the plot against Jesus was formed by the Jewish rulers, out of pure envy. Pilate, however, was disappointed; for the rulers persuaded the people to clamor for the release of a robber and murderer named Barabbas, and to demand the death of Jesus.

We give You thanks, O wonderful Savior, for the voluntariness of Your supreme sacrifice, and for Your deep amazing love that achieved our redemption! Amen.