

*THE LIFE OF CHRIST ACCORDING TO ST.
MARK.¹*

LI. THE THREEFOLD MOCKING, XV. 29-32.²

THE agony and shame of a malefactor were a welcome public spectacle ; and the crowd gathered to witness the execution, jeered at the would-be Messiah, whose sufferings seemed a clear proof of imposture. They had heard that He had promised to destroy the Temple and build it again in three days. Surely then He could release Himself from the cross ; or, at any rate, God would release Him. Passers-by wagged their heads at Him and shouted—

“ Oh, thou destroyer of the Temple, who art to build it again in three days, save thyself, and come down from the cross.”

They spoke indeed with some lingering remnant of apprehension—suppose even now He were to come down from the cross. It was not too late for some terrible portent of Divine judgment. Standing at some distance, a group of women who had followed Jesus from Galilee³ watched the scene, not without a corresponding hope—faint and desperate—of deliverance.

Priests and scribes were there, making sure that the sentence was actually carried out, and that their victim did not escape them at the last moment. They were too dignified to join the common people in noisy derision, but amongst themselves they spoke in contemptuous scorn :—

“ He saved others, but himself he cannot save. Let

¹ These studies do not profess to be an adequate historical or dogmatic account of Christ ; they simply attempt to state the impression which the Second Gospel would make upon a reader who had no other sources of information as to Jesus, and was unacquainted with Christian doctrine.

² Verse 28 does not seem to have belonged to the original text ; it was perhaps introduced from Luke xxii. 37.

³ Mark xv. 40, 41.

this Messiah, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.”

They also spoke not without a dim, lurking apprehension that He might indeed come down ; and some quieted an uneasy conscience with the thought that after all they were only putting Jesus to a final test. If He were indeed the Messiah, God would deliver Him. If God left Him to die, clearly He must be an impostor.

His companions in misfortune joined in the general scoffing. They, too, had thought that deliverance might come to this crucified Messiah, and that they might be rescued with Him. Disappointment aroused a sense of injury.

LII. THE DEATH OF JESUS, XV. 33-41.

As time went on the spectacle lost its novelty ; at that busy season men had little leisure, and there was much to distract their attention ; the crowd thinned, and the jeers became fewer. Now and then men passed by, coming and going from the crowded city, and paused for a while to look on ; there were new outbursts of derision. Throughout it all the guards remained about the crosses, and the women stood aloof to watch. Nothing else happened ; God did not rescue Jesus ; there was no sign on earth or in heaven. No voice from on high reached His ear ; no message of Divine comfort came to His heart. Pain tortured His body ; the sense of public disgrace and conspicuous failure crushed His spirit ; and the slow hours passed by and brought no relief.

Noon came and went, and the hope of deliverance waned and disappeared. When the followers of Jesus, especially the women who were spectators, recalled this terrible interval in after years, it seemed as if midnight had fallen in those noontide hours. It mattered not whether the sky

was bright or overcast ; for them the light of life was quenched, " Darkness fell over the whole earth."

About the middle of the afternoon, Jesus broke His long silence ; a wild cry rang from the cross :—

ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI.

" My God ! My God ! Why hast thou forsaken me ? "

To the women these words were a confirmation of their despair.

But some of the bystanders, hearing imperfectly, thought that He called for Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah. Who could tell what might follow this awful call ?

Even now, when the life of Jesus was almost spent, the prophet who brought down fire from heaven might appear, swift and terrible, to deliver the Messiah, and execute vengeance on His enemies. Moved by an unknown impulse, perhaps by the desire to be found ministering to the Messiah in case Elijah came, one of the spectators filled a sponge with vinegar, put it on the end of a reed, and put it to the lips of Jesus that He might drink. The guard would have stopped him, but he pleaded—

" Let me alone, let us see whether Elijah is coming to take Him down."

And they waited to see ; the heavens did not open to let Elijah come in his chariot of fire ; but their suspense was soon ended ; the expectant silence was broken by another terrible cry from the cross ; and when they looked they saw that Jesus was dead.

Thus the shrine in which the Blessed Spirit of Jesus had lodged was dismantled, and left empty of its Guest ; the veil of the temple was rent asunder, and the Divine Presence departed. But even in its departing, neither pain, nor despair, nor public shame, nor the clutching hands of death could wholly obscure the glory of that Presence.

The last moments of Jesus wrung a testimony to Himself from a heathen spectator. The centurion in command of the guard stood opposite Jesus watching Him ; as he heard His last utterance and saw His end, he exclaimed—

“ Certainly this man was a son of God.”

LIIII. THE BURIAL, XV. 42-46.

The day drew on towards its close ; the dead body was left hanging on the cross ; and the women still watched. Some one, however, took the news of the death of Jesus into the city. His friends were anxious that His body should be rescued from the indignity of public exposure ; and if anything were to be done, it must be done at once. In an hour or two the sun would set, the Sabbath would begin, and no respectable Jew would help to take the body down from the cross. If it were not removed now, it must hang till the Sabbath was over. The Apostles had either disappeared or did not dare to take the risk of interfering, and the dangerous task was left for one who had been less intimately associated with the Master, a certain Joseph of Arimathea, a man of position, and a member of the Sanhedrim. Apparently, he was not actually a disciple, for we are simply told that he was “ one of those who looked for the Kingdom of God.” Such a man might not see his way to the formal acceptance of Jesus as Messiah, and yet might be full of love and reverence towards Him, and greatly moved to indignation and pity by His crucifixion. He plucked up courage, obtained audience of Pilate, and begged for the body of Jesus.

Pilate, as we have seen, had no feeling against Jesus, and had no objection to His being honourably buried ; but on other grounds he hesitated to grant this request. Sometimes a similar permission had been granted a little prematurely ; it had turned out that the criminal had not

actually expired, and his friends had taken down a man supposed to be dead and had succeeded in restoring him to life. Crucifixion was a lingering death, and Jesus had succumbed long before the usual time. Was He really dead? Pilate sent for the centurion, and questioned him as to the time of death. When he had satisfied himself that Jesus was certainly dead, he gave Joseph permission to bury the corpse.

Joseph bought a linen cloth, and having procured assistance, went to the place of crucifixion, took down the body and wrapped it in the cloth. Then he had it carried away, and placed in a tomb hewn in the rock. They closed the opening by rolling a heavy boulder against it.

LIV. THE WOMEN AT THE TOMB, XV. 47-XVI. 8.

All this was done hurriedly, that it might be finished in the short interval that remained before the beginning of the Sabbath. It was not the full and final burial, but only a temporary disposing of the body. Those who loved Jesus would wish to supplement these maimed rites; and it was perhaps intended to remove the body later on to some other grave. Two of the women had followed, and marked where the body was laid. A little later the sun set; it was the Sabbath, and nothing more could be done. But when another evening had come and the Sabbath was over, three of the women bought spices with which to anoint the body. It was too dark to go that evening, but they set out the first thing the next morning, with the earliest glimmer of light, and reached the grave soon after sunrise. Hitherto they had been too absorbed in their beloved Master to think of anything else, but as they drew near they remembered the huge boulder that blocked the entrance. Who would roll it away for them? What were they to do?

When they looked, however, they saw that the entrance

was clear, and the grave was empty—at least so it seemed ; but they ventured in, and saw a youth in white sitting on the right hand. As they stood, speechless with astonishment, the youth said,—

“Do not be astonished, you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him ; but go and tell his disciples, and tell Peter, ‘He is going before you into Galilee. There shall ye see him, as he told you.’ ”

But when the women recovered from the first shock of surprise, the removal of the boulder and the absence of the body suggested to them some awful happening, and they saw in the youth a visitant from another world. Half mad with fear, trembling in every limb, they made their way out of the cave as best they could, and fled, too frightened to tell any one what they had seen and heard.¹

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Here the narrative breaks off abruptly, probably through the accidental loss of concluding paragraphs. We may imagine the reader whose impressions we have tried to put into words learning that in the course of centuries the followers of Jesus formed societies spread over almost the whole world, embracing a large proportion of the human race and controlling powerful states ; learning in short that the personality of Jesus became the greatest influence in the world. He would be eager to discover the solution of the problem how all this had been the sequel of the Cross and the empty tomb.

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¹ Verses 9–20 were not part of the original text