

The Metropolitan Tabernacle

CHRIST'S LONELINESS AND OURS

A Sermon

Delivered by

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Jesus answered them, "Do ye now believe? Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me." — John 16:31, 32.

“**D**o ye now believe?” Then it seems that faith held them fast to Christ; but, as soon as fear prevailed, they were scattered, and left their Master alone. Faith has an attracting and upholding power. It is the root of constancy, and the source of perseverance, under the power of God’s Spirit. While we believe, we remain faithful to our Lord; when we are unbelieving, we are scattered, “every man to his own.” While we trust, we follow closely; when we give way to fear, we ungratefully forsake our Lord. May the Holy Spirit maintain our faith in full vigour, that it may nourish all our other graces! Faith being strong, no faculty of the inner man will languish; but if faith declines, the energy of our spiritual nature speedily decays. If ye believe not, ye shall not be established; but ‘the just shall live by faith,’ to the fullest force of life.

This being noted, our meditation shall now be fixed alone upon the Saviour's loneliness, and the measure in which the believer is brought into the same condition.

I. THE LONELINESS OF THE SAVIOUR.

Note *the fact of it*. He was left alone, — alone just when most, as man, He needed human sympathy. Solitude to Him, during His earthly life, was often the cause of strength; He was strong in public ministry because of the hours spent in secret wrestling with God on the lone mountain side; but when He came to the hour of His agony, His perfect humanity pined after human sympathy, yet it was denied Him. He was alone in the garden of Gethsemane; though He took the eleven with Him, yet must He leave eight of them outside at the garden gate; and the three, the choice, the *élite* of them all, though they were brought somewhat nearer to the scene of His passion, yet even they must remain at a stone's cast distance. None could enter into the inner circle of His sufferings, where the furnace was heated seven times hotter than it was wont to be heated. In the bloody sweat and the agony of Gethsemane, the Saviour trod the winepress alone. His specially-favoured disciples might have watched with Him, wept with Him, and prayed for Him; but they did not. They left His lone prayer to ascend to heaven unattended by sympathetic cries.

He was alone, too, when put upon His trial. False witnesses were found to bear lying testimony against Him, but no man stood forward to attest the honesty, quietness, and goodness of His life. Surely one of the many who had been healed by Him, or of the crowds that had been fed by His bountiful hand, or likelier still, some of those who had received the pardon of their sins and enlightenment of their minds by His teaching might have come forward to defend Him. But no, His coward followers are silent when their Lord is slandered. 'He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter' but no pitying voice entreats that He may be delivered. True, His judge's wife tries to persuade her husband to have nothing to do with Him, and her vacillating husband offers to liberate Him if the mob will have it so; but none will raise the shout of "loose Him, and let Him go." He was not literally alone upon the cross, yet He was really so, in a deep spiritual sense. Though a few loving ones gathered at the foot of the cross, yet these could offer Him no assistance, and probably dared not utter more than a tearful protest. Perhaps the boldest there was that dying thief ¹ who called Him "Lord," and expostulated with his brother-malefactor, saying, "This man

hath done nothing amiss.” Few indeed were the voices that were lifted up on behalf of the Man of Sorrows. From the time when He bowed in agony amid the deep shades of the Mount of Olives, till the moment when He entered the thicker darkness of the valley of death-shade, He was left to suffer alone.

This was the fact — what was *the reason for it*? We conclude that fear overcame the hearts of His disciples. It is natural that men should care for their lives; but these men pushed this instinct of self-preservation beyond its legitimate sphere; and when they found that the Master was taken, and that probably the disciples might share His fate, they each one, in the panic of the moment, fled in haste. They were not all traitors, but they were all cowards for the time. They meant not to desert their Lord, they even scorned the thought when it was put to them in calmer moments; but they were taken by surprise, and like a flock of sheep they fled from the wolf. They rallied after a little, and mustered courage enough to follow Him afar off; they did not quite forget Him; they watched Him to His latter end, they kept together after He was dead; they united to bury Him, and they came together instinctively on the first day of the week. They had not altogether cast off their loyalty to their Lord and Master, for He was still keeping those whom the Father had given Him that none of them might be lost; yet fear had, for a while, defeated their faith, and they had left Him alone.

There was a deeper reason, however, for the Saviour's loneliness; it was a condition of His sufferings that He should be forsaken; desertion was a necessary ingredient in that cup of vicarious suffering which He had covenanted to drink for us. We deserved to be forsaken, and therefore He must be. Since our sins against man, as well as our sins against God, deserved that we should be forsaken of men, He, bearing our sins against God and man, is forsaken. It cannot be that a sinner should enjoy true friendship. Sin is a separating thing; and so, when Christ is made the Sin-bearer, His friends must leave Him. Besides, this was one jewel in the crown of His glory. It was said, in triumph, by the great hero of old, who typified our Lord, “I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me.” To make that true in the severest sense, it was needful that the Captain of our salvation should, by His single arm, defeat the whole of hell's battalions. His are the sole laurels of the war; for ‘His right hand, and His holy arm, hath gotten Him the victory.’

Can you, for a moment, enter into *the sorrow of that loneliness*? There are men to whom it is a small matter to be friendless; their coarse minds scorn the gentle joys of fellowship. Sterner virtues may tread beneath their iron heel the sweet flowers of friendship; and men may be so defiantly self-reliant that, like lions, they are most at home amid congenial solitudes. Sympathy they scorn as womanish, and fellowship as a superfluity. But our Saviour was not like them; He was too perfect a man to become isolated and misanthropical. His grand gentle nature was full of sympathy towards others, and therefore sought it in return. You hear the voice of grief at the loss of brotherly sympathy in the mournful accents of that gentle rebuke, "What, could ye not watch with me one hour?" How could they sleep whilst He must sweat; how could they repose while His soul was 'exceeding sorrowful, even unto death'? He showed the greatness of His soul, even in its depression, when He lovingly excused them by saying, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

How sad to Him it was that they should desert Him! The brave Peter and all the rest of them, all taking to their heels! Worse still was it to receive the traitor's kiss with the word, "Hail, Master," as the son of perdition betrayed his Friend to win the blood-money! David lamented the villainy of Ahithophel, but the Saviour, inasmuch as He was of a more tender spirit than the son of Jesse, even more keenly felt the treachery of Judas. For Peter to say that he knew Him not, and with cursing and swearing to deny Him three times in succession, was terribly cruel; there was such an element of deliberation about that denial, that it must have cut the Saviour to the very quick. But where was John, — John who leaned on His bosom, — 'that disciple whom Jesus loved,' — where was John? Did not he say a word, nor even interject a single syllable for his dear Friend? Has Jonathan forgotten his David? The Master might have said to John, "Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women;" but, alas! John is gone with the rest; he has naught to say for his Master! Though he remains at the foot of the cross to the last, yet even he cannot defend Him. Jesus is all alone, — all alone; and the sorrow of His lonely heart none of us can fully fathom.

This is a painful meditation, and therefore let us notice *the result of our Saviour's loneliness*. Did it destroy Him? Did it overwhelm Him? It pained Him, but it did not dismay Him. "Ye shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone," saith He, "because the Father is with me." The effect of that solace in His soul was wonderful. Our Saviour did not turn aside from the purpose of redeeming His people, though they proved so unworthy of being

redeemed. Might He not well have said, "You have forsaken me, so I will forsake you"? It would have seemed but natural for Him to have exclaimed, "You are types of all my people, you care little enough for me: I have come into this world to save you, but you do not try to rescue me; you have deserted me, so I leave you to your fate." But no, 'having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end;' and although they forsook Him, yet He fulfilled to each one of them His ancient promise, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." The baptism wherewith He was to be baptized He would still accomplish, and be immersed in the floods of death for their sake.

Nor did He merely exhibit constancy to His purpose; He displayed great courageousness of spirit. He was all alone, but yet how peaceful He was! The calmness of the Saviour is wonderful. When He was brought before Herod, He would not utter one hasty or complaining word. His perfect silence was the fittest eloquence, and therefore He was majestically mute. Before Pilate, until it was needful for Him to speak, not a syllable could be extorted from Him. All along, in patience He possessed His soul. In the garden, and afterwards, He was quiet as a lamb, surrendering Himself to the sacrifice without a struggle. His solemn, deliberate self-surrender, in His loneliness, has an awfulness of love in it, fitter for thought than words. His brave spirit was not to be cowed, though it stood at bay alone, and all the dogs of hell raged around Him.

Mark, too, not only the constancy and the courageousness of our Saviour, but His matchless unselfishness; for, while His disciples forsook Him, and fled, He forgave them in His inmost heart, and cherished no resentment against them. When He rose again, His conduct to these runaways was that of a loving shepherd or a tender friend, — He fully forgave them all. If He did mention it, it was only in that gentle way in which He inquired of Peter, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" — reminding him of his failure, for his lasting improvement and benefit, and giving him an honourable commission as the token that it was all forgiven.

Inquire awhile *the reason for this result*. Why was it that our Saviour, in His loneliness, thus stood so constant, and courageous, and forgiving? Was it not because He fell back into the arms of His Father when He was forsaken by His friends? It was even so: "*The Father is with me.*" Look carefully at that word. As the Saviour uttered it, it was true that the Father's presence was with Him, but I beg you to remember that it was not true, in

every sense, all the way through His passion. The Father was not with Him on the cross in the sense of manifested personal favour. His cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”² shows that our Saviour did not, at that time, derive comfort from any present revelation of the love of God to Him as man. The conscious presence and display of love were taken away.

There is, therefore, another meaning in these words, “Because the Father is with me;” and, surely, it is this, *the Father was always with Him in His design*. The enterprise He had undertaken was the salvation of His people, and the Father was wholly and ever with Him in that respect. In that sense, He was with Him even where He deserted Him; it was but a form of the Father’s being with Christ that He should be forsaken of God. I am not quite stating a paradox; and if it should sound like one to any here, let me expound it. It was in pursuance of their united great design that the Father forsook the Son. Both were resolved upon the same gracious purpose, and therefore the Father must forsake the Son, that the Son’s purpose and the Father’s purpose in our redemption might be achieved. He was with Him when He forsook Him; with Him in design when He was not with Him in the smiles of His face.

Furthermore, *the Father was always with our Lord in His co-working*. When Jesus was in Gethsemane, and the staves and lanterns were being prepared, the God of providence was permitting or arranging all. When Jesus was taken before Caiaphas, and Herod, and Pilate, and Annas, God was allowing all things to be done; the Father was with Christ fulfilling the prophecies, answering the types, and accomplishing their covenant engagements. Through the whole sad chapter it might be said, “My Father worketh hitherto.” Even amid the thick darkness and the dire suffering of Christ, the Father was with Christ, working those very sufferings in Him, for ‘it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He hath put Him to grief.’ Into this fact Christ sinks as into a sea of comfort: “The Father is with me.” “It is enough,” saith He; “my own chosen friends forsake me, and my dearest earthly friends leave me, those whom I have purchased with my blood deny me, but my Father is with me.” By a matchless exercise of faith, our Redeemer realized this, and was sustained even in that dread hour.

We shall make practical use of our subject by considering:

II. THE CHRISTIAN IN HIS LONELINESS.

No believer traverses all the road to heaven in company; lonely spots there must be here and there, though the greater part of our heavenward pilgrimage is made cheerful by the society of fellow-travellers. 'They go from company to company; every one of them in Zion appeareth before God.' Christ's sheep love to go in flocks. 'They that feared the Lord spake often one to another.' We take sweet counsel together, and walk to the house of God in company; yet, somewhere or other on the road, every man will find narrow defiles, and close places where pilgrims must march in single file.

Sometimes, the child of God endures loneliness arising from *the absence of godly society*. It may be that, in his early days as a Christian, he mixed much with gracious persons, was able to attend many of their meetings, and to converse in private with the excellent of the earth; but now his lot is cast where he is as a sparrow alone on the housetop. No others in the family think as he does, he enjoys no familiar converse concerning his Lord, and has no one to counsel or console him. He often wishes he could find friends to whom he could open his mind. He would rejoice to see a Christian minister, or an advanced believer; but, like Joseph in Egypt, he is a stranger in a strange land. This is a very great trial to the Christian, an ordeal of the most severe character; even the strong may dread it, and the weak are sorely shaken by it. To such lonely ones, our Lord's words, now before us, are commended, with the prayer that they may make them their own: "I am alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me." When Jacob was alone, at Bethel, he laid him down to sleep, and soon was in a region peopled by spirits innumerable, above whom was God Himself. That vision made the night at Bethel the least lonely season that Jacob ever spent. Your meditations, O solitary ones, as you read the Bible in secret, and your prayers, as you draw near to God in your lonely room, and your Saviour Himself in His blessed person, will be to you what the ladder was to Jacob. The words of God's Book, made living to you, shall be to your mind the angels, and God Himself shall have fellowship with you. If you lament your loneliness, cure it by seeking heavenly company. If you have no companions below who are holy, seek all the more to commune with those who are in heaven, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God.

God's people are frequently made lonely *through obedience to honest convictions*. It may happen that you live in the midst of professing Christians, but you have received light upon a part of God's Word which

you had formerly neglected, either a doctrine merely, or an ordinance, or some other matter, and having received that light, if you are as you should be, you are at once obedient to it. It will frequently result, from this action on your part, that you will greatly vex many good people whom you love and respect, but to whose wishes you cannot yield. Your Master's will once known, father or mother may not stand in your way; you do not wish to be singular, or obstinate, or offensive, but you must do the Lord's will even if it should sever every fond connection. Perhaps, for a time, prejudiced persons may almost deny you Christian fellowship; many a baptized believer has been made to know what it means to be almost tabooed and shut out because he cannot see as others see, but is resolved to follow his conscience at all hazards. Under such circumstances, even in a godly household, a Christian who fully carries out his convictions may find himself treading a separated path. Be bold, my dear brethren, and do not flinch. Your Saviour walked alone, and you must do so too.

Perhaps this lone obedience is to be a test of your faith. Persevere; yield not a particle of truth. These very friends, who now turn their backs on you, if they are good for anything, will respect you all the more for having the courage to be honest, and perhaps the day will come when, through your example, they will be led in the same obedient way. At any rate, do not mar your testimony by hesitancy or wavering, but 'follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.' Fall back upon this truth: you may displease and alienate friends, and be charged with bigotry, self-will, and obstinacy, but you are not alone when you follow the path of obedience, for the Father is with you. If what you hold is God's truth, God is with you in maintaining it. If the ordinance to which you submit was ordained by Christ, Jesus is with you in it. Care not how either the church or the world reviles you; serve your Master, and He will not desert you. With all due deference to others, pay yet greater deference to the Lord who bought you with His blood; and where He leads, follow without delay; the Father will be with you in so doing.

The solitary way is appointed to *believers who rise to eminence of faith*. In these days, the common run of Christians have but struggling faith. Should you sift the great mountain of visible Christianity very carefully, will you find so much as ten grains of faith in the whole? When the Son of man comes, keen as His eyes are to discover faith, shall He find it on the earth? Here and there, we meet a man to whom it is given to believe in God with mighty faith. As soon as such a man strikes out a project, and sets about a

work which none but men of his mould would venture upon, straightway there arises a clamour, "The man is over zealous," or he will be charged with an innovating spirit, rashness, fanaticism, or absurdity. Should the work go on, the opposers whisper together, "Wait a little while, and you'll see the end of all this wildfire." Have we not heard them criticize an earnest evangelist by saying, "His preaching is mere excitement, the result of it is spasmodic;" at another time, "The enterprise which he carries out is Quixotic; his designs are Utopian"? What said the sober semi-faith of men to Luther? Luther had read this passage, 'By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight' He went to a venerable divine about it, and complained of the enormities of Rome. What was the good but weak brother's reply? "Go thou to thy cell, and pray and study for thyself, and leave these weighty matters alone." Here it would have ended had the brave Reformer continued to consult with flesh and blood, but his faith enabled him to go alone, if none would accompany him. He nailed up his theses on the church door, and showed that one man at least had faith in the gospel and in its God. Then trouble came, but Luther minded it not because the Father was with him. We also must be prepared, if God gives us strong faith, to ride far ahead like spiritual Uhlans, who bravely pioneer the way for the rank and file of the army. It were well if the Church of God had more sons swifter than eagles, and bolder than lions, in God's service; men who can do and dare alone, till laggards gain courage from them, and follow in their track. These Valiant-for-truths full often pursue a solitary path, but let them console themselves with this word of the solitary Saviour, "Yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me." If we can but believe in God, He will never be behindhand with us; if we can dare, God will do; if we can trust, God will never suffer us to be confounded, world without end. It is sweet beyond expression to climb where only God can lead, and plant the standard on the highest towers of the foe.

Another form of loneliness is the portion of *Christians when they come into deep soul-conflict*. My brethren, some of you understand what I mean by that. Our faith, at times, has to fight for very existence. The old Adam within us rages mightily, and the new spirit within us, like a young lion, disdains to be vanquished, and so these two mighty ones contend till our spirit is full of agony. Some of us know what it is to be tempted with blasphemies we should not dare to repeat, to be vexed with horrid temptations which we have grappled with and overcome, but which have almost cost us resistance unto blood. In such inward conflicts, saints must be alone. They cannot tell their feelings to others, they would not dare to do so;

and if they did, their own brethren would despise or upbraid them, for the most of professors would not even know what they meant, and even those who have trodden other fiery ways would not be able to sympathize in all, but would answer them thus, "Those are points in which I cannot go with you." Christ alone was tempted in all points like as we are, though without sin. No one man is tempted in all points exactly like another man, and each man has certain trials in which he must stand alone amid the rage of war, with not even a book to help him, or a biography to assist him, no man ever having gone that way before except that one Man whose trail reveals His nail-pierced feet. He alone knows all the devious paths of sorrow. Yet, even in such by-ways, the Father is with us, helping, sustaining, and giving us grace to conquer at the close.

We will not, however, dwell on this aspect of solitary walking, for we have three others to mention. Many dear brethren have to endure *the solitude of unnoticed labour*. They are serving God in a way which is exceedingly useful, but not at all noticeable. How very sweet to many workers are those little corners of the newspapers and magazines which describe their labours and successes; yet some, who are doing what God will think a great deal more of at the last, never saw their names in print. Yonder beloved brother is plodding away in a little country village; nobody knows anything about him, but he is bringing souls to God. Unknown to fame, the angels are acquainted with him, and a few precious ones whom he has led to Jesus know Him well. Perhaps yonder sister has a little class in the Sundayschool; there is nothing striking in her or in her class; now and then, a little child ascends to heaven to report her success, and occasionally another comes into the church; but nobody thinks of her as a very remarkable worker; she is a flower that blooms almost unseen, but she is none the less fragrant. Or shall we think of the humble City Missionary? The Superintendent of the District knows that he goes his regular rounds, but he has no idea of the earnest prayers and deep devotedness of that obscure lover of Jesus. The City Mission Magazine puts him down as trying to do his duty, but nobody knows what it costs him to cry and sigh over souls. There is a Bible-woman; she is mentioned in the Report as making so many visits a week, but nobody discovers all that she is doing for the poor and needy, and how many are saved in the Lord through her instrumentality. Hundreds of God's dear servants are serving Him without the encouragement of man's approving eye; yet God is with them.

Never mind where you work; care more about how you work! Never mind who sees or does not see you, so long as God approves your efforts. If He smiles, be content. We cannot be always sure when we are most useful. A certain minister with very great difficulty reached a place where he had promised to preach. There was deep snow upon the ground, therefore only one hearer came. However, he preached as zealously as if there had been a thousand. Years after, when he was travelling in that same part of the country, he met a man who had been the founder of a church in the village, and from it scores of others had been established. The man came to see him, and said, "I have good reason to remember you, sir, for I was once your only hearer; and what has been done here has been brought about instrumentally through my conversion under that sermon." We cannot estimate our success. One child in the Sabbath-school, converted, may turn out to be worth five hundred others, because he may be the means of bringing ten thousand to Christ. It is not the acreage you sow, it is the multiplication which God gives to the seed, which will make up the harvest. You have less to do with being successful than with being faithful. Your main comfort is that, in your labour, you are not alone, for God, the eternal One, who guides the marches of the stars, is with you.

There is such a thing — I would that we might reach it, — as *the solitude of elevated piety*. In the plain, everything is in company; but, the higher you ascend, the more lonely is the mountain path. At this moment, there must be an awful solitude on the top of Mont Blanc. Where the stars look silently on the monarch of mountains, how deep the silence above the untrodden snows! How lonely is the summit of the Matterhorn, or the peak of Monte Rosa! When a man grows in grace, he rises out of the fellowship of the many, and draws nearer to God. Unless placed in very happy circumstances, he will find very few who understand the higher life, and can thoroughly commune with him. But then the man will be as humble as he is high, and he will fall back, necessarily, and naturally, upon the eternal fellowship of God. As the mountain pierces the skies, and offers its massive peak to be the footstool of the throne of God, so the good man passes within the veil, unseen by mortal eyes, into the secret place, of the tabernacle of the Most High, where he abides under the shadow of the Almighty.

The last solitude will come to us all *in the hour of death*. Down to the river's brink they may go with us, a weeping company, — wife, and children, and friends. Their kind looks will mean the help they cannot give; to that river's brink they may go in fond companionship, but then, as with

our Lord the cloud received Him out of His disciples' sight, so must we be received out of sight of our beloved ones. The chariot of fire must take Elijah away from Elisha. We must ascend alone. Bunyan may picture Christian and Hopeful together in the stream, but it is not so; they pass each one alone through the river. Yet we shall not be alone, my brethren; we correct our speech; the Father will be with us; Jesus will be with us; the eternal Comforter will be with us; the everlasting Godhead in the Trinity of persons shall be with us, and the angels of God shall be our convoy. Let us go our way, rejoicing that, when we shall be alone, we shall not be alone, because the Father will be with us, as He is with us even now.

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¹ SP.025 (MTP.1881) "*The Dying Thief In A New Light*" and SP.026 (MTP.2078) "*The Believing Thief*"

² SP.027 (MTP.2133) "*Lama Sabachthani?*"