EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE.

BY THE REV. J. C. RYLE, B.A.,

CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD,

VICAR OF STRADBROKE, SUFFOLK;  
*Author of* “*Home Truths,*” *etc.*

ST. MATTHEW.

LONDON:  
WILLIAM HUNT AND COMPANY, 23, HOLLES STREET,  
CAVENDISH SQUARE.  
IPSWICH: WILLIAM HUNT, TAVERN STREET.

[this edition published after 1861AD and before 1880AD.]

first published 1856AD

MATTHEW XXVI. 1–13.

1 And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said unto his disciples,

2 Ye know that after two days is *the feast of* the passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified.

3 Then assembled together the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders of the people, unto the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas,

4 And consulted that they might take Jesus by subtilty, and kill *him.*

5 But they said, Not on the feast *day*, lest there be an uproar among the people.

6 Now when Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper,

7 There came unto him a woman having an alabaster box of very precious ointment, and poured it on his head, as he sat *at meat.*

8 But when his disciples saw *it*, they had indignation, saying, To what purpose *is* this waste?

9 For this ointment might have been sold for much, and given to the poor.

10 When Jesus understood *it*, he said unto them, Why trouble ye the woman? for she hath wrought a good work upon me.

11 For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always.

12 For in that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did *it* for my burial.

13 Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this Gospel shall be preached in the whole world, *there* shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.

WE now approach the closing scene of our Lord Jesus Christ’s earthly ministry. Hitherto we have read of His sayings and doings: we are now about to read of His sufferings and death. Hitherto we have seen Him as the great Prophet: we are now about to see Him as the great High Priest.

It is a portion of Scripture which ought to be read with peculiar reverence and attention. The place whereon we stand is holy ground. Here we see how the Seed of the woman bruised the Serpent’s head. Here we see the great sacrifice to which all the sacrifices of the Old Testament had long pointed. Here we see how the blood was shed which “cleanseth from all sin,” and the Lamb slain who “taketh away the sins of the world.” (1 John i. 8; John i. 29.) We see, in the death of Christ, the great mystery revealed, how God can be just, and yet justify the ungodly. No wonder that all the four Gospels contain a full account of this wonderful event. On other points in our Lord’s history, we often find that when one Evangelist speaks the other three are silent; but when we come to the crucifixion, we find it minutely described by all four.

In the verses we have now read, let us first observe *how careful our Lord is to call the attention of His disciples to His own death.* He said to them, “Ye know that after two days is the feast of the passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified.”

The connection of these words with the preceding chapter is exceedingly striking. Our Lord had just been dwelling on His own second coming in power and glory, at the end of the world. He had been describing the last judgment, and all its awful accompaniments. He had been speaking of Himself as the Judge, before whose throne all nations would be gathered: and then at once, without pause or interval, He goes on to speak of His crucifixion. While the marvellous predictions of His final glory were yet ringing in the ears of His disciples, He tells them once and again of His coming sufferings. He reminds them that He must die as a sin-offering before he reigned as a king; that He must make atonement on the cross, before He took the crown.

We can never attach too much importance to the atoning death of Christ. It is the leading fact in the Word of God, on which the eyes of our soul ought to be ever fixed. Without the shedding of His blood, there is no remission of sin. It is the cardinal truth on which the whole system of Christianity hinges. Without it the Gospel is an arch without a keystone, a fair building without a foundation, a solar system without a sun. Let us make much of our Lord’s incarnation, and example, His miracles and His parables, His works and His words, but above all let us make much of His death. Let us delight in the hope of His second personal coming and millennial reign, but let us not think more even of these blessed truths, than of the atonement on the cross. This after all is the master-truth of Scripture,—that “Christ died for our sins.” To this let us daily return: on this let us daily feed our souls. Some, like the Greeks of old, may sneer at the doctrine, and call it “foolishness;” but let us never be ashamed to say with Paul, “God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Gal. vi. 14.)

Let us observe, in the second place, in these verses, *what honour Christ loves to put on those that honour Him*.

We are told that when He “was in the house of Simon the leper,” a certain woman came while He sat at meat, and poured a box of precious ointment on His head. She did it, no doubt, out of reverence and affection. She had received soul-benefit from Him, and she thought no mark of honour too costly to be bestowed on Him in return. But this deed of hers called forth disapprobation from some who saw it. They called it “waste;” they said it might have been better to sell the ointment, and give the money to the poor. At once our Lord rebuked these cold-hearted fault-finders. He tells them that the woman “has wrought a good work,” and one that He accepts and approves; and He goes on to make a striking prediction: “Wheresoever this Gospel is preached in the whole world, there shall also this that this woman hath done be told for a memorial of her.”

We see, in this little incident, how perfectly our Lord knew things to come, and how easy it is for Him to confer honour. This prophecy of His about this woman is receiving a fulfilment every day before our eyes. Wherever the Gospel of St. Matthew is read, the deed that she did is known. The deeds and titles of many a king, and emperor, and general, are as completely forgotten as if written in the sand; but the grateful act of one humble Christian woman is recorded in one hundred and fifty different languages, and is known all over the globe. The praise of man is but for a few days: the praise of Christ endureth for ever. The pathway to lasting honour is to honour Christ.

Last, but not least, we see in this incident a blessed foretaste of things that will yet take place in the day of judgment. In that great day no honour done to Christ on earth shall be found to have been forgotten. The speeches of parliamentary orators, the exploits of warriors, the works of poets and painters, shall not be mentioned in that day; but the least work that the weakest Christian woman has done for Christ, or His members, shall be found written in a book of everlasting remembrance. Not a single kind word or deed, not a cup of cold water, or a box of ointment, shall be omitted from the record. Silver and gold she may have had none; rank, power, and influence she may not have possessed; but if she loved Christ, and confessed Christ, and worked for Christ, her memorial shall be found on high. She shall be commended before assembled worlds.

Do we know what it is to work for Christ? If we do, let us take courage, and work on. What greater encouragement can we desire than we see here? We may be laughed at and ridiculed by the world. Our motives may be misunderstood; our conduct may be misrepresented; our sacrifices for Christ’s sake may be called “waste,”—waste of time, waste of money, waste of strength. Let none of these things move us. The eye of Him who sat in Simon’s house at Bethany is upon us. He notes all we do, and is well pleased. Let us be “steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as we know that our labour is not in vain in the Lord.” (1 Cor. xv. 58.)

MATTHEW XXVI. 14–25.

14 Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests,

15 And said *unto them*, What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver.

16 And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him.

17 Now the first *day* of the *feast of* unleavened bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying unto him, Where wilt thou that we prepare for thee to eat the passover?

18 And he said, Go into the city to such a man, and say unto him, The Master saith, My time is at hand; I will keep the passover at thy house with my disciples.

19 And the disciples did as Jesus had appointed them; and they made ready the passover.

20 Now when the even was come, he sat down with the twelve.

21 And as they did eat, he said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.

22 And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I?

23 And he answered and said, He that dippeth *his* hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me.

24 The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born.

25 Then Judas, which betrayed him, answered and said, Master, is it I? He said unto him, Thou hast said.

WE read, in the beginning of this passage, how our Lord Jesus Christ was betrayed into the hands of His deadly enemies. The priests and scribes, however anxious to put Him to death, were at a loss how to effect their purpose, for fear of an uproar among the people. At this juncture a fitting instrument for carrying out their designs, offered himself to them in the person of Judas Iscariot. That false Apostle undertook to deliver his Master into their hands for thirty pieces of silver.

There are few blacker pages in all history than the character and conduct of Judas Iscariot. There is no more awful evidence of the wickedness of man. A poet of our own has said, that “sharper than a serpent’s tooth is a thankless child;” but what shall we say of a disciple who would betray his own Master: an apostle who could sell Christ? Surely this was not the least bitter part of the cup of suffering which our Lord drank.

Let us learn, in the first place, from these verses, *that a man may enjoy great privileges*, *and make a great religious profession*, *and yet his heart all the time may not be right before God*.

Judas Iscariot had the highest possible religious privileges. He was a chosen apostle, and companion of Christ. He was an eye-witness of our Lord’s miracles, and a hearer of His sermons. He saw what Abraham and Moses never saw, and heard what David and Isaiah never heard. He lived in the society of the eleven Apostles. He was a fellow-labourer with Peter, James and John: but for all this his heart was never changed. He clung to one darling sin.

Judas Iscariot made a reputable profession of religion: there was nothing but what was right, and proper, and becoming in his outward conduct. Like the other Apostles, he appeared to believe and to give up all for Christ’s sake. Like them, he was sent forth to preach and work miracles. No one of the eleven seems to have suspected him of hypocrisy. When our Lord said, “One of you shall betray Me,” no one said, “Is it Judas?” Yet all this time his heart was never changed.

We ought to observe these things: they are deeply humbling and instructive. Like Lot’s wife, Judas is intended to be a beacon to the whole Church. Let us often think about him, and say, as we think, “Search me, O Lord, and try my heart, and see if there be any wicked way in me.” Let us resolve, by God’s grace, that we will never be content with anything short of sound and thorough heart conversion.

Let us learn, in the second place, from these verses, *that the love of money is one of the greatest snares to a man’s soul.* We cannot conceive a clearer proof of this, than the case of Judas. That wretched question, “What will ye give me?” reveals the secret sin which was his ruin. He had given up much for Christ’s sake, but he had not given up his covetousness.

The words of the apostle Paul should often ring in our ears: “the love of money is the root of all evil. ” (2 Tim. vi. 10.) The history of the Church abounds in illustrations of this truth. For money Joseph was sold by his brethren; for money Samson was betrayed to the Philistines; for money Gehazi deceived Naaman, and lied to Elisha; for money Ananias and Sapphira tried to deceive Peter; for money the Son of God was delivered into the hands of wicked men. Wonderful indeed does it seem that the cause of so much evil should be loved so well.

Let us all be on our guard against the love of money. The world is full of it in our days: the plague is abroad. Thousands who would abhor the idea of worshipping Juggernaut, are not ashamed to make an idol of gold. We are all liable to the infection, from the least to the greatest. We may love money without having it, just as we may have money without loving it. It is an evil that works very deceitfully. It carries us captives before we are aware of our chains. Once let it get the mastery, and it will harden, palsy, sear, freeze, blight, and wither our souls. It overthrew an apostle of Christ: let us take heed that it does not overthrow us. One leak may sink a ship: one unmortified sin may ruin a soul.

We ought frequently to call to mind the solemn words, “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” “We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.” Our daily prayer should be, “Give me neither poverty nor riches: feed me with food convenient for me.” (Prov. xxx. 8. ) Our constant aim should be to be rich in grace. They that “*will* be rich” in worldly possessions often find at last that they have made the worst of bargains. (1 Tim. vi. 9. ) Like Esau, they have bartered an eternal portion for a little temporary gratification: like Judas Iscariot, they have sold themselves to everlasting perdition.

Let us learn, in the last place, from these verses, *the hopeless condition of all who die unconverted.* The words of our Lord on this subject are peculiarly solemn: He says of Judas, “It had been good for that man if he had not been born.”

This saying admits of only one interpretation. It teaches plainly that it is better never to live at all, than to live without faith, and to die without grace. To die in this state is to be ruined for evermore. It is a fall from which there is no rising; it is a loss which is utterly irretrievable. There is no change in hell. The gulf between hell and heaven is one that no man can pass.

This saying could never have been used if there was any truth in the doctrine of universal salvation. If it really was true that all would sooner or later reach heaven, and hell sooner or later be emptied of inhabitants, it never could be said that it would have been “good for a man not to have been born.” Hell itself would lose its terrors, if it had an end. Hell itself would be endurable, if after millions of ages there was a hope of freedom and of heaven. But universal salvation will find no foot-hold in Scripture. The teaching of the Word of God is plain and express on the subject. There is a worm that never dies, and a fire that is not quenched. (Mark ix. 44. ) “Except a man be born again,” he will wish one day he had never been born at all. “Better, ” says Burkett, “have no being, than not have a being in Christ.”

Let us grasp this truth firmly, and not let it go. There are always persons who deny the reality and eternity of hell. We live in a day when a morbid charity induces many to exaggerate God’s mercy, at the expense of His justice, and when false teachers are daring to talk of a “love of God lower even than hell.”

Let us resist such teaching with a holy jealousy, and abide by the doctrine of Holy Scripture: let us not be ashamed to walk in the old paths, and to believe that there is an eternal God, an eternal heaven, and an eternal hell. Once depart from this belief, and we admit the thin edge of the wedge of scepticism, and may at last deny any doctrine of the Gospel. We may rest assured that there is no firm standing ground between a belief in the eternity of hell, and downright infidelity.

MATTHEW XXVI. 26–35.

26 And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake *it,* and gave *it* to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body.

27 And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave *it* to them, saying, Drink ye all of it;

28 For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.

29 But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.

30 And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives.

31 Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad.

32 But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee.

33 Peter answered and said unto him, Though all *men* shall be offended because of thee, *yet* will I never be offended.

34 Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.

35 Peter said unto him, Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples.

THESEverses describe the appointment of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Our Lord knew well the things that were before Him, and graciously chose the last quiet evening that He could have before His crucifixion, as an occasion for bestowing a parting gift on His Church. How precious must this ordinance have afterwards appeared to His disciples, when they remembered the events of that night! How mournful is the thought that no ordinance has led to such fierce controversy, and been so grievously misunderstood, as the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper! It ought to have united the Church, but our sins have made it a cause of division. The thing which should have been for our welfare, has been too often made an occasion of falling.

The first thing that demands our notice in these verses, *is the right meaning of our Lord’s words*,“*This is my body*,*this is my blood*. ”

It is needless to say, that this question has divided the visible Church of Christ. It has caused volumes of controversial theology to be written: but we must not shrink from having decided opinions upon it, because theologians have disputed and differed. Unsoundness on this point has given rise to many deplorable superstitions.

The plain meaning of our Lord’s words appears to be this: “This bread *represents*my body. This wine *represents* my blood.” He did not mean that the bread He gave to His disciples *was*really and literally His body; He did not mean that the wine He gave to His disciples *was*really and literally His blood. Let us lay firm hold on this interpretation: it may be supported by several grave reasons.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The conduct of the disciples at the Lord’s Supper forbids us to believe that the bread they received was Christ’s body, and the wine they received was Christ’s blood. They were all Jews, taught from their infancy to believe that it was sinful to eat flesh with the blood (Deut. xii. 23-25); yet there is nothing in the narrative to show that they were startled by our Lord’s words. They evidently perceived no change in the bread and wine.

Our own senses at the present day forbid us to believe that there is any change in the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper: our own taste tells us that they are really and literally what they appear to be. Things above our reason the Bible requires us to believe; but we are never bid to believe that which contradicts our senses.

The true doctrine about our Lord’s human nature forbids us to believe that the bread in the Lord’s Supper can be His body, or the wine His blood: the natural body of Christ cannot be at one time in more places than one. If our Lord’s body could sit at table, and at the same time be eaten by the disciples, it is perfectly clear that it was not a human body like our own. But this we must never allow for one moment. It is the glory of Christianity that our Redeemer is perfect man as well as perfect God.

Finally, the genius of the language in which our Lord spoke at the Lord’s Supper, makes it entirely unneces­sary to interpret His words literally. The Bible is full of expressions of a similar kind, to which no one thinks of giving any but a figurative meaning. Our Lord speaks of Himself as the “door” and the “vine,” and we know that He is using emblems and figures when He so speaks: there is therefore no inconsistency in supposing that He used *figurative* language when He appointed the Lord’s Supper; and we have the more right to say so when we remember the grave objections which stand in the way of a literal view of His words.

Let us lay up these things in our minds, and not forget them. In a day of abounding heresy, it is good to be well armed. Ignorant and confused views of the meaning of Scripture language are one great cause of religious error.

The second thing which demands our notice in these verses, is *the purpose and object for which the Lord’s Supper was appointed*.

This is a subject again on which great darkness pre­vails. The ordinance of the Lord’s Supper has been regarded as something mysterious and past understand­ing: immense harm has been done to Christianity by the vague and highflown language in which many writers have indulged in treating of the sacrament. There is certainly nothing to warrant such language in the account of its original institution. The more simple our views of its purpose, the more Scriptural they are likely to be.

The Lord’s Supper is not a sacrifice. There is no oblation in it,—no offering up of anything but our prayers, praises, and thanksgivings. From the day that Jesus died there needed no more offering for sin: by one offering He perfected for ever them that are sanctified. (Heb. x. 14. ) Priests, altars, and sacrifices, all ceased to be necessary, when the Lamb of God offered up Himself. Their office came to an end: their work was done.

The Lord’s Supper has no power to confer benefit on those who come to it, if they do not come to it with faith. The mere formal act of eating the bread and drinking the wine is utterly unprofitable, unless it is done with a right heart. It is eminently an ordinance for the living soul, not for the dead; for the converted, not for the unconverted.

The Lord’s Supper was ordained for a continual remembrance of the sacrifice of Christ’s death, until He comes again. The benefits it confers are spiritual, not physical: its effects must be looked for in our inward man. It was intended to remind us, by the visible, tangible emblems of bread and wine, that the offering of Christ’s body and blood for us on the cross is the only atonement for sin, and the life of a believer’s soul. It was meant to help our poor weak faith to closer fellowship with our crucified Saviour, and to assist us in spiritually feeding on Christ’s body and blood. It is an ordinance for redeemed sinners, and not for unfallen angels. By receiving it we publicly declare our sense of guilt, and our need of a Saviour,—our trust in Jesus, and our love to Him,—our desire to live upon Him, and our hope to live with Him. Using it in this spirit, we shall find our repentance deepened, our faith increased, our hope brightened, and our love enlarged,—our besetting sins weakened, and our graces strengthened. It will draw us nearer to Christ.

Let us bear these things in mind: they need to be remembered in these latter days. There is nothing in our religion which we are so ready to pervert and misunderstand as those parts which approach our senses. Whatever we can touch with our hand, and see with our eyes, we are apt to exalt into an idol, or to expect good from it as a mere charm. Let us specially beware of this tendency in the matter of the Lord’s Supper. Above all, “let us take heed,” in the words of the Church of England Homily, “lest of the memory it be made a sacrifice.”

The last thing which deserves a brief notice in this passage, is *the character of the first communicants.* It is a point full of comfort and instruction.

The little company to which the bread and wine were first administered by our Lord was composed of the Apostles whom He had chosen to accompany Him during His earthly ministry. They were poor and unlearned men, who loved Christ, but were weak alike in faith and knowledge. They knew but little of the full meaning of their Master’s sayings and doings. They knew but little of the frailty of their own hearts. They thought they were ready to die with Jesus, and yet that very night they all forsook Him and fled. All this our Lord knew perfectly well. The state of their hearts was not hid from Him, and yet He did not keep back from them the Lord’s Supper!

There is something very teaching in this circumstance. It shows us plainly that we must not make great knowledge, and great strength of grace, an indispensable qualification for communicants. A man may know but little, and be no better than a child in spiritual strength, but he is not on that account to be excluded from the Lord’s table.—Does he really feel his sins? Does he really love Christ? Does he really desire to serve Him? If this be so, we ought to encourage and receive him. Doubtless we must do all we can to exclude unworthy communicants. No graceless person ought to come to the Lord’s Supper, but we must take heed that we do not reject those whom Christ has not rejected. There is no wisdom in being more strict than our Lord and His disciples.

Let us leave the passage with serious self-inquiry as to our own conduct with respect to the Lord’s Supper. Do we turn away from it, when it is administered? If so, how can we justify our conduct?—It will not do to say it is not a necessary ordinance: to say so is to pour contempt on Christ himself, and declare that we do not obey Him. It will not do to say that we feel unworthy to come to the Lord’s table: to say so is to declare that we are unfit to die, and unprepared to meet God. These are solemn considerations: all non-communicants should ponder them well.

Are we in the habit of coming to the Lord’s table? If so, in what frame of mind do we come? Do we draw near intelligently, humbly, and with faith? Do we understand what we are about? Do we really feel our sinfulness, and need of Christ? Do we really desire to live a Christian life, as well as profess the Christian faith? Happy is that soul who can give a satisfactory answer to these questions! Let him go forward, and persevere.

MATTHEW XXVI. 36–46.

36 Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder.

37 And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy.

38 Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here and watch with me.

39 And he went a little further, and fell on his face and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou *wilt.*

40 And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour?

41 Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak.

42 He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.

43 And he came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy.

44 And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words.

45 Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take *your* rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

46 Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me.

THEverses we have now read describe what is commonly called Christ’s agony at Gethsemane. It is a passage which undoubtedly contains deep and mysterious things. We ought to read it with reverence and wonder, for there is much in it which we cannot fully comprehend.

Why do we find our Lord so “sorrowful and very heavy,” as He is here described? What are we to make of His words, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death”? Why do we see Him going apart from His disciples, and falling on His face, and crying to His Father with strong cries, and thrice-repeated prayer? Why is the Almighty Son of God, who had worked so many miracles, so heavy and disquieted? Why is Jesus, who came into the world to die, so like one ready to faint at the approach of death? Why is all this?

There is but one reasonable answer to these questions: the weight that pressed down our Lord’s soul, was not the fear of death, and its pains. Thousands have endured the most agonizing sufferings of body, and died without a groan, and so, no doubt, might our Lord. But the real weight that bowed down the heart of Jesus was the weight of the sin of the world, which seems to have now pressed down upon Him with peculiar force. It was the burden of our guilt imputed to Him, which was now laid on Him, as on the head of the scapegoat. How great that burden must have been, no heart of man can conceive! it is known only to God. Well may the Greek Litany speak of the “unknown sufferings of Christ.” The words of Scott on this subject are probably correct: “Christ at this time endured as much misery of the same kind with that of condemned spirits, as could possibly consist with a pure conscience, perfect love of God and man, and an assured confidence of a glorious event.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

But however mysterious this part of our Lord’s history may seem to us, we must not fail to observe the precious lessons of practical instruction which it contains. Let us now see what those lessons are.

Let us learn, in the first place, that *prayer is the best practical remedy that we can use in time of trouble.* We see that Christ Himself prayed, when His soul was sorrowful: all true Christians ought to do the same.

Trouble is a cup that all must drink in this world of sin: we are “born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward” (Job v. 7); we cannot avoid it. Of all creatures, none is so vulnerable as man: our bodies, our minds, our families, our business, our friends, are all so many doors through which trial will come in. The holiest saints can claim no exemption from it: like their Master, they are often “men of sorrow. ”

But what is the first thing to be done in time of trouble? We must pray. —Like Job, we must fall down and worship (Job i. 20); like Hezekiah, we must spread our matters before the Lord. (2 Kings xix. 14. ) The first person we must turn to for help must be our God. We must tell our Father in heaven all our sorrow. We must believe confidently that nothing is too trivial or minute to be laid before Him, so long as we do it with entire submission to His will. It is the mark of faith to keep nothing back from our best Friend: so doing, we may be sure we shall have an answer. “If it be possible, ” and the thing we ask is for God’s glory, it shall be done. The thorn in the flesh will either be removed, or grace to endure it will be given to us, as it was to St. Paul. (2 Cor. xii. 9. ) May we all store up this lesson against the day of need. It is a true saying, that “prayers are the leeches of care.”

Let us learn, in the second place, that *entire submission of will to the will of God should be one of our chief aims in this world.* The words of our Lord are a beautiful example of the spirit that we should follow after in this matter: He says, “Not as I will, but as Thou wilt.” He says again, “Thy will be done.”

A will unsanctified and uncontrolled, is one great cause of unhappiness in life. It may be seen in little infants; it is born with us: we all like our own way. We wish and want many things, and forget that we are entirely ignorant what is for our good, and unfit to choose for ourselves. Happy is he who has learned to have no “wishes,” and in every state to be content! It is a lesson which we are slow to learn, and, like St. Paul, we must learn it not in the school of mortal man, but of Christ. (Philip. iv. 11. )

Would we know whether we are born again, and growing in grace? Let us see how it is with us in the matter of our wills. Can we bear disappointment? Can we put up patiently with unexpected trials and vexations? Can we see our favourite plans, and darling schemes crossed, without murmuring and complaint? Can we sit still, and suffer calmly, as well as go up and down and work actively? These are the things that prove whether we have the mind of Christ. It ought never to be forgotten, that warm feelings and joyful frames are not the truest evidences of grace. A mortified will is a far more valuable possession. Even our Lord Himself did not always rejoice; but He could always say, “Thy will be done. ”

Let us learn, in the last place, that there is *great weakness*, *even in true disciples of Christ*, *and that they have need to watch and pray against it.* We see Peter, James, and John, those three chosen apostles, sleeping when they ought to have been watching and praying; and we find our Lord addressing them in these solemn words, “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” There is a double nature in all believers. Converted, renewed, sanctified as they are, they still carry about with them a mass of indwelling corruption, a body of sin. St. Paul speaks of this, when he says, “I find a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind. ” (Rom. vii. 21-23.) The experience of all true Christians in every age confirms this. They find within two contrary principles, and a continual strife between the two; to these two principles our Lord alludes when He addresses His half-awakened disciples. He calls the one “flesh,” and the other “spirit.” He says “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” But does our Lord excuse this weakness of his disciples? Be it far from us to think so: those who draw this conclusion mistake His meaning. He uses that very weakness as an argument for watchfulness and prayer. He teaches us that the very fact that we are encompassed with infirmity, should stir us up continually to “watch and pray.”

If we know anything of true religion, let us never forget this lesson. If we desire to walk with God comfortably, and not to fall, like David or Peter, let us never forget to watch and pray. Let us live like men on enemy’s ground, and be always on our guard. We cannot walk too carefully. We cannot be too jealous over our souls. The world is very ensnaring, the devil is very busy. Let our Lord’s words ring in our ears daily, like a trumpet. Our spirits may sometimes be very willing, but our flesh is also very weak. Then let us always watch and always pray.

MATTHEW XXVI. 47–56.

47 And while he yet spake, lo, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people.

48 Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast.

49 And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, Master; and kissed him.

50 And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him.

51 And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out *his* hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest’s, and smote off his ear.

52 Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.

53 Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?

54 But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?

55 In that same hour said Jesus to the multitudes, Are ye come out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take me? I sat daily with you teaching in the temple, and ye laid no hold on me.

56 But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled.

WE see, in these verses, the cup of our Lord Jesus Christ’s sufferings beginning to be filled. We see Him betrayed by one of His disciples, forsaken by the rest, and taken prisoner by His deadly enemies. Never surely was there sorrow like His sorrow. Never may we forget, as we read this part of the Bible, that our sins were the cause of these sorrows! Jesus was “delivered for our offences. ’’ (Rom. iv. 25. )

Let us notice, for one thing, in these verses, *what gracious condescension marked our Lord’s intercourse with His disciples.*

We have this point proved by a deeply touching circumstance at the moment of our Lord’s betrayal. When Judas Iscariot undertook to guide the multitude to the place where his Master was, he gave them a sign by which they might distinguish Jesus in the dim moonlight from His disciples: he said, “Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is He. ” And so, when he came to Jesus, he said, “Hail, Master; and kissed Him.” That simple fact reveals the affectionate terms on which the disciples associated with our Lord. It is an universal custom, in Eastern countries, when friend meets friend, to salute one another with a kiss (Exod. xviii. 7; 1 Sam. xx. 41); it would seem therefore, that when Judas kissed our Lord, he only did that which all the apostles were accustomed to do, when they met their Master after an absence.

Let us draw comfort from this little circumstance for our own souls. Our Lord Jesus Christ is a most gracious and condescending Saviour. He is not an “austere man,” repelling sinners, and keeping them at a distance. He is not a being so different from us in nature, that we must regard Him with awe rather than affection. He would have us rather regard Him as an elder Brother, and a beloved Friend. His heart in heaven is still the same that it was upon earth. He is ever meek, merciful, and condescending to men of low estate. Let us trust Him, and not be afraid.

Let us notice, for another thing, *how our Lord condemns those who think to use carnal weapons in defence of Him and His cause.* He reproves one of His disciples for striking a servant of the high priest. He bids him “put up his sword into its place;” and He adds a solemn declaration of perpetual significance: “All they that take the sword shall perish by the sword.”

The sword has a lawful office of its own. It may be used righteously, in the defence of nations against oppression. It may become positively necessary to use it, to prevent confusion, plunder, and rapine upon earth: but the sword is not to be used in the propagation and maintenance of the Gospel. Christianity is not to be enforced by bloodshed, and belief in it extorted by force. Happy would it have been for the Church if this sentence had been more frequently remembered! There are few countries in Christendom where the mistake has not been made of attempting to change men’s religious opinions by compulsion, penalties, imprisonment, and death. And with what effect? The pages of history supply an answer. No wars have been so bloody as those which have arisen out of the collision of religious opinions. Often, mournfully often, the very men who have been most forward to promote those wars, have themselves been slain. May we never forget this! The weapons of the Christian warfare are not carnal, but spiritual. (2 Cor. x. 4. )

Let us notice, for another thing, *how our Lord submitted to be made a prisoner of His own free will.* He was not taken captive because He could not escape. It would have been easy for Him to scatter His enemies to the winds, if He had thought fit. “Thinkest thou,” He says to a disciple, “that I cannot pray to my Father, and He shall presently give Me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?”

We see in those words the secret of His voluntary submission to His foes. He came on purpose to fulfil the types and promises of Old Testament Scriptures, and by fulfilling them to provide salvation for the world. He came intentionally to be the true Lamb of God, the Passover Lamb. He came voluntarily to be the Scapegoat on whom the iniquities of the people were to be laid. His heart was set on accomplishing this great work. It could not be done without the “hiding of His power,” for a time: to do it He became a willing sufferer. He was taken, tried, condemned, and crucified entirely of His own free will.

Let us observe this: there is much encouragement in it. The willing sufferer will surely be a willing Saviour. The Almighty Son of God, who allowed men to bind Him and lead Him away captive, when He might have prevented them with a word, must surely be full of readiness to save the souls that flee to Him. Once more then let us learn to trust Him, and not be afraid.

Let us notice, in the last place, *how little Christians know the weakness of their own hearts*, *until they are tried.* We have a mournful illustration of this in the conduct of our Lord’s Apostles. The verses we have read conclude with the words, “Then all the disciples forsook Him, and fled.” They forgot their confident assertions, made a few hours before. They forgot that they had declared their willingness to die with their Master; they forgot everything but the danger that stared them in the face. The fear of death overcame them: they “forsook Him, and fled.”

How many professing Christians have done the same! How many, under the influence of excited feelings, have promised that they would never be ashamed of Christ! They have come away from the communion table, or the striking sermon, or the Christian meeting, full of zeal and love, and ready to say to all who caution them against backsliding, “Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this thing? ” And yet in a few days these feelings have cooled down and passed away: a trial has come and they have fallen before it. They have forsaken Christ!

Let us learn, from this passage, lessons of humiliation and self-abasement. Let us resolve, by God’s grace, to cultivate a spirit of lowliness, and self-distrust. Let us settle it in our minds, that there is nothing too bad for the very best of us to do, unless he watches, prays, and is held up by the grace of God; and let it be one of our daily prayers, “Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe. ” (Psalm cxix. 117. )

MATTHEW XXVI. 57–68.

57 And they that had laid hold on Jesus led *him* away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the Scribes and the elders were assembled.

58 But Peter followed him afar off unto the high priest’s palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end.

59 Now the chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death;

60 But found none: yea, though many false witnesses came, *yet* found they none. At the last came two false witnesses,

61 And said, This *fellow* said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days.

62 And the high priest arose, and said unto him, Answerest thou nothing? what *is it which* these witness against thee?

63 But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.

64 Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.

65 Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy.

66 What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death.

67 Then did they spit in his face, and buffeted him; and others smote *him* with the palms of their hands,

68 Saying, Prophecy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that smote thee?

WE read, in these verses, how our Lord Jesus Christ was brought before Caiaphas the high priest, and solemnly pronounced guilty. It was fitting that it should be so. The great day of atonement was come: the wondrous type of the scapegoat was about to be completely fulfilled. It was only suitable that the Jewish high priest should do his part, and declare sin to be upon the head of the victim, before He was led forth to be crucified. (Levit. xvi. 21. ) May we ponder these things and understand them. There was a deep meaning in every step of our Lord’s passion.

Let us observe, in these verses, that *the chief priests were the principal agents in bringing about our Lord’*s *death.* It was not so much the Jewish people, we must remember, who pushed forward this wicked deed, as Caiaphas and his companions, the chief priests.

This is an instructive fact, and deserves notice. It is a clear proof that high ecclesiastical office exempts no man from gross errors in doctrine, and tremendous sins in practice. The Jewish priests could trace up their pedigree to Aaron, and were his lineal successors. Their office was one of peculiar sanctity, and entailed peculiar responsibilities: and yet these very men were the murderers of Christ.

Let us beware of regarding any minister of religion as infallible. His orders, however regularly conferred, are no guarantee that he may not lead us astray, and even ruin our souls. The teaching and conduct of all ministers must be tried by the Word of God. They are to be followed so long as they follow the Bible, but no longer. The maxim laid down in Isaiah must be our guide: “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” (Isaiah viii. 20. )

Let us observe, in the second place, *how fully our Lord declared to the Jewish council His own Messiahship, and His future coming in glory.*

The unconverted Jew can never tell us at the present day that his forefathers were left in ignorance that Jesus was the Messiah. Our Lord’s answer to the solemn adjuration of the high priest is a sufficient reply. He tells the council plainly that He is “the Christ, the Son of God.” He goes on to warn them that though He had not yet appeared in glory, as they expected Messias would have done, a day would come when He would do so. “Hereafter ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” They would yet see that very Jesus of Nazareth, whom they had arraigned at their bar, appear in all majesty as King of kings. (Rev. i. 7. )

It is a striking fact which we should not fail to notice, that almost the last word spoken by our Lord to the Jews, was a warning prediction about His own second advent. He tells them plainly that they would yet see Him in glory. No doubt He referred to the seventh chapter of Daniel, in the language that He used. (Dan. vii. 13. ) But He spoke to deaf ears. Unbelief, prejudice, self-righteousness covered them like a thick cloud: never was there such an instance of spiritual blindness. Well may the Church of England litany contain the prayer, “From all blindness,—and from hardness of heart, Good Lord deliver us.”

Let us observe, in the last place, *how much our Lord endured before the council*, *from false witness and mockery*.

Falsehood and ridicule are old and favourite weapons of the devil. “He is a liar, and the father of it.” (John viii. 44. ) All through our Lord’s earthly ministry we see these weapons continually employed against Him. He was called “a glutton, a winebibber,” and “a friend of publicans and sinners;” He was held up to contempt as “a Samaritan.” The closing scene of His life was only in keeping with all the past tenor of it. Satan stirred up His enemies to add insult to injury. No sooner was He pronounced guilty, than every sort of mean indignity was heaped upon Him; “they spit in His face, and buffeted Him;” “they smote Him with the palms of their hands;” they said mockingly, “Prophesy unto us, Thou Christ, who is he that smote Thee?”

How wonderful and strange it all sounds! How wonderful that the Holy Son of God should have voluntarily submitted to such indignities, to redeem such miserable sinners as we are! How wonderful, not least, that every tittle of these insults was foretold seven hundred years before they were inflicted! Seven hundred years before Isaiah had written down the words, “I hid not my face from shame and spitting” (Isai. l. 6. )

Let us draw from this passage one practical conclusion. Let it never surprise us, if we have to endure mockery, and ridicule, and false reports, because we belong to Christ. “The disciple is not above his Master, nor the servant above his lord.” (Matt. x. 24. ) If lies and insults were heaped upon our Saviour, we need not wonder if the same weapons are constantly used against His people. It is one of Satan’s great devices to blacken the characters of godly men, and bring them into contempt. The lives of Luther, Cranmer, Calvin, and Wesley supply abundant examples of this. If we are ever called upon to suffer in this way, let us bear it patiently. We drink the same cup that was drunk by our beloved Lord. But there is one great difference: at the worst, we only drink a few bitter drops; He drank the cup to the very dregs.

MATTHEW XXVI. 69–75.

69    Now Peter sat without in the palace: and a damsel came unto him, saying, Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee.

70    But he denied before *them*all, saying, I know not what thou sayest.

71    And when he was gone out into the porch, another *maid* saw him, and said unto them that were there, This *fellow* was also with Jesus of Nazareth.

72    And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man.

73    And after a while came unto *him* they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art *one* of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee.

74    Then began he to curse and to swear, *saying,* I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew.

75    And Peter remembered the word of Jesus which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly.

THESEverses relate a remarkable and deeply instructive event: the apostle Peter’s denial of Christ. It is one of those events, which indirectly prove the truth of the Bible.

If the Gospel had been a mere invention of man, we should never have been told that one of its principal preachers was once so weak and erring, as to deny His Master.

The first thing that demands our notice is *the full nature of the sin of which Peter was guilty.*

It was a great sin. We see a man, who had followed Christ for three years, and been forward in professing faith and love towards Him, —a man who had received boundless mercies, and loving-kindness, and been treated by Christ as a familiar friend, —we see this man denying three times that he knows Jesus! This was bad.—It was a sin committed under circumstances of great aggravation: Peter had been warned plainly of his danger, and had heard the warning; he had just been receiving the bread and wine at our Lord’s hands, and declaring loudly that though he died with Him, he would not deny Him! This also was bad. —It was a sin committed under apparently small provocation: two weak women make the remark that he was with Jesus; they that stood by say, “Surely thou art one of them.” No threat seems to have been used; no violence seems to have been done; but it was enough to overthrow Peter’s faith: he denies before all. He denies with an oath: he curses and swears. —Truly it is a humbling picture!

Let us mark this history, and store it up in our minds: it teaches us plainly that the best of saints are only men, and men encompassed with many infirmities. A man may be converted to God, have faith, and hope, and love towards Christ, and yet be overtaken in a fault, and have awful falls. It shows us the necessity of humility: so long as we are in the body, we are in danger. The flesh is weak, and the devil is active: we must never think “I cannot fall. ” It points out to us the duty of charity towards erring saints: we must not set down men as graceless reprobates, because they occasionally stumble and err; we must remember Peter, and “restore them in the spirit of meekness” (Gal. vi. 1. )

The second thing that demands our notice is *the series of steps by which Peter was led to deny his Lord.*

These steps are mercifully recorded for our learning. The Spirit of God has taken care to have them written down for the perpetual benefit of the Church of Christ. Let us trace them out one by one.

The first step to Peter’s fall was self-confidence: he said, “Though all men should be offended, yet will I never be offended. ” The second step was indolence: his Master told him to watch and pray; instead of doing so he slept. The third step was cowardly compromising: instead of keeping close to his Master, he first forsook Him and then “followed Him afar off. ” The last step was needless venturing into evil company: he went into the priest’s palace, and “sat with the servants,” like one of themselves. And then came the final fall: the cursing, the swearing, and the three-fold denial. Startling as it appears, his heart had been preparing it: it was the fruit of seeds which he himself had sown. “He ate the fruit of his own ways.”

Let us remember this part of Peter’s history: it is deeply instructive to all who profess and call themselves Christians. Great illnesses seldom attack the body, without a previous train of premonitory symptoms; great falls seldom happen to a saint, without a previous course of secret backsliding. The church and the world are sometimes shocked by the sudden misconduct of some great professor of religion; believers are discouraged and stumbled by it; the enemies of God rejoice and blaspheme: but if the truth could be known, the explanation of such cases would generally be found to have been private departure from God. Men fall in private, long before they fall in public. The tree falls with a great crash, but the secret decay which accounts for it, is often not discovered till it is down on the ground.

The last thing which demands our notice is *the sorrow which Peters sin brought upon him.* We read at the end of the chapter, “He went out, and wept bitterly.”

These words deserve more attention than they generally receive. Thousands have read the history of Peter’s sin, who have thought little of Peter’s tears, and Peter’s repentance. May we have an eye to see, and a heart to understand!

We see in Peter’s tears, the close connection between unhappiness and departure from God. It is a merciful arrangement of God, that in one sense holiness shall always bring its own reward. A heavy heart and an uneasy conscience, a clouded hope, and an abundant crop of doubts, will always be the consequence of backsliding and inconsistency. The words of Solomon describe the experience of many an inconsistent child of God: “The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways.” (Prov. xiv. 14. ) Let it be a settled principle in our religion that if we love inward peace we must walk closely with God.

We see in Peter’s bitter tears the grand mark of difference between the hypocrite and the true believer. When the hypocrite is overtaken by sin, he generally falls to rise no more: he has no principle of life within him to raise him up.—When the child of God is overtaken, he rises again by true repentance, and by the grace of God amends his life. Let no man flatter himself that he may sin with impunity, because David committed adultery, and because Peter denied his Lord. No doubt these holy men sinned greatly: but they did not continue in their sins. They repented greatly; they mourned over their falls; they loathed and abhorred their own wickedness. Well would it be for many, if they would imitate them in their repentance, as well as in their sins! Too many are acquainted with their fall, but not with their recovery. Like David and Peter, they have sinned, but they have not, like David and Peter, repented.

The whole passage is full of lessons that ought never to be forgotten. Do we profess to have a hope in Christ? Let us mark the weakness of a believer, and the steps that lead to a fall.—Have we unhappily backslidden, and left our first love? Let us remember that the Saviour of Peter still lives. There is mercy for us as well as for him: but we must repent, and seek that mercy, if we would find it. Let us turn unto God, and He will turn to us: His compassions fail not. (Lam. iii. 22. )

1. “Bishop Law has remarked that there is no term in the Hebrew language, which expresses to *signify* or *denote;* and that the Greek here naturally takes the impress of the Hebrew or Syriac idiom, *it is* being used for *it signifies.* Hence the similar use of the verb in various passages. ‘The three branches *are* three days (Gen. xl. 12); ‘the seven kine *are* seven years’ (Gen. xli. 26); ‘the ten horns *are* ten kings’ (Dan. vii. 24); ‘the field *is* the world’ (Matt. xiii. 38); ‘the seven stars *are* the angels of the seven Churches, and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest *are* the seven Churches.’ (Rev. i. 20*. )*”*—Watson on Matthew,* p. 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I believe that the view maintained in this exposition is the only reasonable solution that can be given of our Lord’s agony. How any Socinian, or any divine who denies the imputation of man’s sin to Christ, and the vicarious nature of Christ’s sufferings, can account satisfactorily for the agony in the garden, I am totally at a loss to conceive.—Upon the principle of the Socinian, who utterly denies the doctrine of atonement, and says that our Lord was only a man, and not God, He was one who showed less firmness in suffering than many men have shown! —Upon the principle of some modern divines, who say that our Lord’s death was not a propitiation and expiation for sin, but only a great example of self-sacrifice, the intense agony of body and mind here described is equally unaccountable.—Both views appear to me alike dishonouring to our Lord Jesus Christ, and utterly unscriptural and unsatisfactory. I believe the agony in the garden to be a knot that nothing can untie but the old doctrine of our sin being really *imputed* to Christ, and Christ being made sin and a curse for us.

   There are deep things in this passage of Scripture, containing the account of the agony, which I purposely leave untouched. They are too deep for man’s line to fathom. The extent to which Satan was allowed to tempt our Lord in this hour,—the degree of suffering, both mental and bodily, which an entirely sinless person, like our Lord, would endure in bearing the sin of all mankind,—the manner in which the human and divine wills both operated in our Lord’s experience, since He was at all times as really man as God, —all these are points which I prefer to leave alone. It is easy on such questions to “darken counsel by words without knowledge.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)