

'And They Led Jesus Away. . . .' Mar 14:53

by G. Campbell Morgan

G. Campbell Morgan's sermon explores the events of Jesus' trial, highlighting the contrast between truth and falsehood, and the profound implications of Peter's denial.

Scripture: Mark 14:53

Topics: "Betrayal", "Truth and Denial"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan reflects on the events of Jesus' trial, emphasizing the illegal assembly of the Sanhedrin and the intense emotions surrounding the betrayal. He contrasts the dignified silence of Jesus, who affirms His identity as the Messiah, with the chaotic and false testimonies of the witnesses. The sermon highlights Peter's denial of Jesus, showcasing the internal conflict between his love for Christ and his fear of association. Ultimately, Morgan illustrates the triumph of truth over falsehood, revealing the deep love and grace of Jesus, even in the face of betrayal, as seen in Peter's tears of repentance.

Transcript

Mar 14:53-72.

IN our previous meditation we heard the last cadences of the Hallel sung by the Lord and His disciples; and then passed out with them to the silence of Olivet. We heard His prediction of their imminent scattering; and listened to their vehement protests. Reverently we followed Him into the garden of Gethsemane, leaving eight disciples at the entrance; and three further on, but still far removed from the place of His loneliness. We saw Him in communion and cooperation with His Father, in an experience of unfathomable mystery. We watched as Judas came, and the Son of man was arrested. We saw the flight of the eleven, and of the unnamed young man. Throughout that consideration we were impressed with the grace and glory of the Shepherd.

We are now to consider the last events of that dark betrayal night. The paragraph pulsates with pain, and throbs with fever and unrest.

We see first, the swift gathering together of an illegal assembly. The high priest, the chief priests, the elders, the rulers, and, as a subsequent verse says, the whole council assembled. In other words, the Sanhedrim came together. This was an illegal assembly. The law declared that the Sanhedrim must not meet at night under any circumstances.

The law, moreover, provided that whenever the Sanhedrim met for the purpose of trying a prisoner, they should never pass sentence on the day of trial, but defer it. In spite of this they at once came to a decision that He was worthy of death.

They were evidently ready, waiting, and expecting His coming. They had entered into unholy compact with one of His own disciples to betray Him unto them. They knew full well that Judas had gone with an armed mob to arrest Him. Therefore when He was arrested, they swiftly gathered together in the darkness of the night, in the house of the high priest.

We hear the indistinct, and yet noisy clamour of the witnesses. We do not know whether these witnesses were heard singly, or whether they were all present at the same time. If singly, then the story told by one was contradicted by the next. The picture is more likely one of an irregular session of the court, in which witnesses listened to each other, contradicted each other, and quarrelled.

There was a solemn interval of tense silence in which the high priest addressed himself immediately to the Prisoner, and, according to Matthew's record, put Him on oath. Mark simply says that he asked Him: "Art Thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Matthew gives us the form of his asking: "I adjure Thee by the living God, that Thou tell us whether Thou art the Christ, the Son of God." This was the legal form of administering the oath. Jesus answered; affirming solemnly on oath, that He was the Messiah, and the Son of the Blessed.

Then immediately followed a scene of confusion. The high priest in his wrath again committed an illegal act, in the rending of his garments. A reference to the Levitical law will show that the high priest was explicitly charged under no circumstances of emotion to adopt the heathen practice of the rending of clothes. This act of the High Priest was followed by an outbreak of brutal passion on the part of the members of the Sanhedrim. They spit upon Him, and flung a garment over His face, the symbol of the death penalty; they struck Him, through the garment, and said, "Prophecy . . . who is, he that struck Thee?" "And the officers received Him with blows of their hands."

In the meantime, in the court beneath, perchance in the outer court, some few steps down from where these events were transpiring, there was taking place the busy gossip of the officers; the soldiers, and the serving maids; and there, in the midst of them, was Peter, warming himself by the fire. There follows the account of his perturbation, of his profanity, and of his denial.

Through all the story, so full of restlessness, fever, and pain, there is one element of strength. It is centralized and glorious in the Prisoner, Jesus. Strength was manifested first in His august and dignified silence; and then in His profound and pregnant speech.

Thus, as we consider the whole paragraph, we feel how full it is of the essential things of human life. Emotion is here, acute and intense; volition is here, fixed and determined. The supreme note, however, is neither emotional, nor volitional; it is intellectual. The question suggested by the paragraph is a question that concerns the inspirations of conduct; the story unveils the reasons of those conceptions of the mind, which express themselves in actual deeds. The matter of vital interest here is that of viewpoint, conception, and outlook. As we look into the inner life of the personalities that pass rapidly before us, while we are conscious of the intensity of emotion, and of the fixity of volition, the most arresting element is that of the revelation of the secret motives and conceptions which produced these effects.

As from that standpoint we look at the paragraph, and at the things that it records, we are inclined at first to say in very deed: "Truth is fallen in the street." Here the intellect of the age is seen utterly at fault. To quote the words of Paul A written long afterwards to the Corinthian Christians, here the rulers of this world lacked wisdom: "Which none of the rulers of this world hath known: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." Here also we see light and love, overshadowed and eclipsed, in the person of the cursing disciple.

The first impression that the paragraph makes is that of truth wounded, beaten down, trampled under foot, violated. Yet we look again, and discover that Truth was never more erect. Behold It first; silent, declining speech, refusing a word, and most eloquent in Its silence. Then hear It, speaking at last; in terms so simple and so definite that there can be no misunderstanding of Its meaning; so, speaking that every lie falls back into shadow, and men are compelled at last to do in the clear daylight, the nefarious deeds they had been trying to perform in the darkness.

From that standpoint of intellect or wisdom, looking at these scenes, we have a revelation first, of debased intelligence in the case of the rulers; secondly, of insulted and wounded intelligence in the case of Peter; thirdly, of victorious and triumphant intelligence, in the case of the Lord Himself.

The fundamental wrong, so far as the rulers were concerned was that the whole case was prejudged. That is perfectly patent. "The chief priests and the whole council sought witness against Jesus,"-by no means to discover the truth concerning Him-but "to put Him to death." The revelation of some intellectual obscurity or wickedness is obvious. They were gathered together ostensibly for the purpose of investigation; but really they were mastered by one determination; the death of the Man Who was arraigned before them. The inevitable issue of such a gathering would be that of ignorance. Light could not penetrate their minds. They were predetermined to encompass, at all costs, the destruction of the Prisoner at the bar. Ignorance must be the result of that attitude of mind. There was no room for light. What was said by one and another was contorted, twisted, to the one purpose of putting Him to death.

Let us watch the proceedings, for they reveal some striking facts. These men, mastered by this unholy passion, set upon realizing and encompassing the death of this Prisoner at the bar, were nevertheless compelled to recognition of the rights of truth. Else why should they look for witnesses at all? Why not dispense with a trial, and at once lay violent hands upon Him? No, that even they dare not do. They must seek some accusation which will appear to be true. They must find witnesses; they must have some reason for the thing they do. This was the unconscious compliment which devilish falsehood paid to the ascendancy of truth.

True, there was a ghastly readiness to compromise, to accept as true the basest falsehood, if only it might be made to serve their purpose of having an appearance of truth. Oh! it was an unholy business; it is a terrible picture. Yet it is a wonderful illustration of that marvellous and inherent consciousness of right and wrong, from which humanity never has, and never can escape. Whenever humanity forgets to make its bow to truth, then humanity is entirely and absolutely hopeless.

Only one witness borne against Him has been preserved for us. We do not know what the other witness said. Doubtless the one witness preserved for us is an illustration of their whole attitude of mind. "And there stood up certain, and bare false witness against Him, saying, We heard Him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands." This is the most diabolical form of untruth, because it is an untruth in which there is an element of truth. We

remember Tennyson's words:

"A lie that is all a lie, may be met with and fought out right;

But a lie that is partly the truth, is a harder matter to fight."

There is a sense in which there was not a word of truth in this statement. There is a sense however, in which it was based upon something actually true. Notice in passing, how His words were treasured, not only by those who loved Him, but by those who hated Him. He had in the early days of His ministry, when first He cleansed the temple, said to the men who asked Him by what authority He proceeded: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." It was a mysterious saying, not understood by those who heard Him; not understood until after His resurrection even by His own disciples. It was so little understood by the men who heard Him, that they laughed at Him, and said: "Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt Thou raise it up in three days?" Now even if, as they supposed, He had referred to the temple in Jerusalem, notice what He said: "Destroy this temple." There was no Suggestion in His word, that He would destroy it. He was speaking of what they would do, not of what He would do. Over against their destructive capacities, He placed His constructive ability, "In three days I will raise it up." The reference, as we now know, was to the temple of His body. They did not know that. But on the ground of their own understanding, mark their remembrance of His words after three years have passed; and observe their distortion of them. Mark twice records the fact that these witnesses failed, and for one reason. Their witness did not agree. There is no harmony in falsehood. A lie must always be covered by a lie.

"Ah! what a tangled web we weave,

When first we practise to deceive."

The men who had been observant of Jesus during the days of His public ministry-not His disciples, but His watchers-had heard His words, and seen His works, and perfectly understood His claim. That is made evident by the form of the high priest's question: "Art Thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Why ask that question if they did not understand His claim? Nevertheless, in spite of every word spoken, and every work wrought, they were set upon His murder. Whatever intellectual conviction they might have had concerning the beauty of His words, or the beneficence of His works, such conviction must be debased and refused. Yet, in that ghastly attitude of mind, they made a false appeal to truth; and then with a lie sought to slay the Lord of truth.

Let us take next that which is last in the story, the picture of Peter. We see in Peter a man whose intelligence had been singularly illuminated, and a man who had wonderfully responded to the illumination of his intelligence. What brought Peter to that outer Court? It was the light in his own soul that took him there; and that light was shining with a great brightness. He knew his Master. He knew the insight of his Lord. That had been his first revelation of Jesus when at the first his brother Andrew had brought him face to face with Christ, and Christ had said, "Thou art Simon, the son of John: Thou shalt be called Rock." In that moment Peter had discovered in Jesus One Who knew his deepest nature; and ever after He had been patient with him, and had realized the latent capacities of his soul. Peter had not forgotten these things. He knew how for three years the Master had with infinite tenderness borne with him, led him, instructed him, and brought him nearer and yet ever nearer to Himself in love and adoration. Love and adoration in Peter, were the outcome of clear understanding.

We must not forget, nor undervalue the fact, that six months before, Peter at Caesarea Philippi had said exactly what the high priest now asked Him. "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Blessed." That light was still shining in the soul of Peter; and he loved his Lord with a love that was the outcome thereof. It was his love for his Lord that took him into the courts of the high priest.

Peter had followed Him afar off, yet he had followed Him! No other disciple had done this, except John; but John went at no risk, because he was related to the high priest. Peter took great risk when he went.

Neither let us forget that Peter had drawn the sword, and smitten Malchus. The impulse was a right one. Wrong things are done from a right impulse sometimes. Moses was shut out of the promised land because he did a wrong thing with a right impulse. The more clearly we see all this, the more shall we understand the sorrowful thing that took place that day. When Peter denied his Lord, he was insulting his own intelligence. Yet descending to profanity, he took his oath that he did not know Jesus at all.

Let us try to put the doings of these two places side by side. Probably the court, where Jesus stood in the midst of the priests and elders was somewhat elevated, by a few steps perhaps, from "the court beneath," as Mark says, where the officers and the maid-servants were, and Peter also. In the first false witness after false witness arose; the high priest put Jesus on oath; Jesus took the oath that the confession that Peter made several months ago was true. In the second, there was the clamour of the gossip of the officers, the saucy laugh of a servant maid, as she said to Peter, You belong to them. The great soul of Peter stumbled and fell at the laugh of that serving-maid, and presently he took an oath that he did not know Jesus; Jesus on oath, within; Peter on oath, without. Peter outside, taking his oath that he did not know Him; Jesus inside, taking His oath that what Peter had said in the better hour of his life, was true. The contrast is vivid.

Peter was lying about his faith. He did know Him; more, he wonderfully understood Him. He was also violating his own love. Here was an instance of the contradiction of sinners against themselves. He was wounding his own soul. This must be borne in mind. Peter's love for Jesus never failed; his faith in Jesus never failed. Christ had said to him, "I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not,

Yet look again; and mark how that light which was the inspiration of his going to the court, though insulted when he lied, persisted; and at last mastered him. The final thing is not the denial, but the tears. The last phase of the picture is not that of a cursing, profane man; a man made into a coward by the taunt of a servant maid. The last picture is that of a man gathering his garment about him, and hurrying from the first into the darkness of the night; a strong man in tears. Another evangelist tells us that Jesus looked at him. Probably between these two courts, the higher where were the priests, and the lower where were the servants, there was only a curtain which may have been drawn aside, and from within, Jesus looked at Peter. In the course of a sermon I once heard Father Stanton say something about this very scene, which was very suggestive. Said he: "Never forget that the look of Jesus would have been wasted on Peter, if it had not been that Peter was looking at Jesus." The look of Peter toward the Lord is a revelation in itself, as surely as is the look of the Lord toward Peter.

I will not attempt to interpret that look of Jesus; but I am quite sure that it did not mean: "I told you so!" Another thing is also certain, though perhaps not quite so patent; Jesus did not by that look say to Peter, What are you doing to Me? Why are you wounding Me? Christ was too selfless to have meant that. I think said to Peter, in His look: Peter, why are you wounding yourself? Then Peter went out and wept. Poets sometimes talk of "blinding tears." I suppose there are such, but I do not know them. I also have wept. I

did not find that tears of this kind were blinding tears; they are sight-giving tears! Charles Mackay's lines are full of beauty:

O ye tears, O ye tears! I am thankful that ye run;

Though ye trickle in the darkness, ye shall glitter in the
sun;

The rainbow cannot shine if the rain refuse to fall,

And the eyes that cannot weep, are the saddest eyes of
all."

Peter wept; and his tears were evidences of the answer of his soul to the truth of his faith; and to the love which he had so cruelly insulted and desecrated as he denied his Lord.

Reverently in conclusion, let us look at the central picture. Here is One Who in His intelligence is victorious, though it is a dark, dark hour of apparent defeat. No debasement of intelligence is here; no insulting of intelligence. Truth declines to argue with a lie. The silence of our Lord here, and at other points during this trial, was wonderfully eloquent. The witnesses were lying. The witnesses were distorting His words. What hast Thou to say? said the high priest; and He answered him never a word. Truth is silent in the presence of a lie, because even the truth cannot contradict a lie so as to end it; and also because a lie cannot harm truth in the final issue.

But when He was challenged on oath He answered; and His answer was remarkable in the effect it produced in that court of justice. Said the high priest, "Art Thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" and He said, "I am." As He said so, He swept away the refuge of lies which they were attempting to make for themselves. Listen to the high priest, "What further need have we of witnesses?" His answer had swept that need away. The answer of Jesus compelled wickedness to act in the light. If they would slay Him, they must do so on the basis of that claim, and not for a false reason. By that one word on His part, His affirmation on oath that He was the Messiah, and the Son of the Blessed; He removed all the false witnesses, and swept away the refuge of lies. For evermore therefore, the murder of the Son of God is seen in all its ghastliness, for they rejected Him for claiming to be that which the centuries have proclaimed Him to be.

Then he added to His claim that further word: "Ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." This was a poetic declaration, borrowed from the prophet Daniel, in which prophecy the Son of man is seen coming, not to earth, but to heaven; coming to sit at the right hand of the Ancient of Days, to be the Ruler of the universe. That is what Christ told these men they should see; not His second advent, but His coming into, and sitting in the place of power.

The last note is that most of help to us. The chief glory of the light in the midst of the darkness, is that of its revelation of the deep-seated love and devotion of a disciple; and the action and grace of the Lord in giving that love and devotion their chance of recovery in spite of deflection. The very last thing in the dark betrayal night is the vision of the tears of Peter! Upon those tears the light of God's face rises; and they become radiant with rainbow glory, suggesting for evermore to hearts that believe and love, that even though in unutterable folly they deny Him, He .makes a way by which His banished one may return.

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