

MOSES: The Servant of God

F. B. Meyer, B.A

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT

“To-morrow turn you, and get you into the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea” (Numbers 14:25).

IT was a weary journey from Kibroth-hataavah to Hazeroth, and thence to Kadesh, probably the weariest of the entire route. Moses spoke of it afterwards as **“that great and terrible wilderness”** (Deuteronomy 1:19). But at last the hosts reached Kadesh-barnea, on the very borders of the Land of Promise; within sight of the low hills, the flying-butresses, so to speak, of the verdant table-land, which first arrests the eye of the traveler coming up from the vast limestone plain of the desert.

How welcome that spectacle, after the four hundred miles of journey which had occupied the people for the past fifteen months! Welcome as the land-haze to Columbus, or as his native village nestling in the embrace of the hills to the returning traveler. It must have been specially grateful to the eye of Moses.

I. HIS HOPES

As yet God had graciously veiled from him the weary journeys of the forty years that were to succeed. He had no idea of them. They had never entered into his calculations. From the way in which he spoke to the people, he evidently counted on a comparatively brief struggle, sharp, but short, through which they would pass to their possession.

It never occurred to him that anyone but himself would plan that campaign, even if Joshua led it; or that any other hand would settle the people in the land of their eager longings. These are the words he addressed to the people as they camped in sight of the rolling prairies of Canaan:

“Ye are come unto the mountain of the Amorites, which the Lord our God doth give unto us. Behold the Lord thy God hath set the land before thee: go up and possess it, as the Lord God of thy fathers hath said unto thee; fear not, neither be discouraged” (Deuteronomy 1:20, 21).

As he said these words, must there not have been, deep in his heart, a sigh of relief now his task was almost done, and he might lay down his weighty responsibilities? God’s glory was secured beyond their power to tarnish its luster.

The Egyptians and all the neighboring nations must hear and be convinced. And as for himself, surely there were in store some few happy years in which he should repose after the long toils of his life. "Ah, sweet Land, of which God has spoken to me, surely there is within thy precincts some sequestered nook, where I may sit down and rest, and review an accomplished work!"

Who can doubt that some such hopes and thoughts as these filled his soul, and whispered the one deep sweet word, Rest - Rest?

- No more the daily gathering of manna; because it was a land of wheat and barley, in which they should eat bread without scarceness.
- No more the quenching of thirst at the water that flowed hot over the desert sand; because there would be vines, and fig-trees, and pomegranates: it was a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that sprang out of valleys and hills.
- No more the pitching and striking of tent, the setting of the watch, the perpetual movement; for every man would sit under his own vine and fig-tree.

After a few years spent thus, he might ask to depart in peace, and pass home from the Canaan of earth to the Sabbath-keeping of Heaven.

Is it not thus that we all picture to ourselves some blessed landscape, lying warm and sunny under the smile of Heaven? Life is pretty hard just now: a march over a great and terrible wilderness; a stern fight; a bearing of burdens, for which we have only just got strength enough. But never mind, it cannot last there must be respite; the long lane must have a turning; the wilderness-march must have a Canaan; the lack of sympathy and tenderness must be swallowed up and forgotten in the embrace of a love which shall obliterate the memory of all, so that we shall awake as out of a brief, unpleasant dream. But suppose it be not so!

- What if He who loves us better than we love ourselves has marked out stations in a desert-march, that lead right up to the mount from which we are to ascend to our Father's home!
- What if we are to fight with Moab, and meet Balaam, and see every one of those with whom we commenced life droop around us!
- What if we are to lie down to die alone beneath his kiss, away from the prattle of children, and the warm pressure of loving hands, on some Pisgah height!

All this may be so; but if it is so, how will we do? Yet this is precisely what came to Moses.

II. THE QUARTER FROM WHICH HIS DISAPPOINTMENT CAME

It came entirely from the people.

Their first mistake was in desiring to spy out the land. It is certainly said in these chapters that "**the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Send thou men, that they may search the land of Canaan**" (Numbers 13:1, 2).

But the proposal did not emanate from the Lord. It had another origin, which was disclosed by Moses himself forty years afterwards, in words that followed those quoted above,

“And ye came near unto me, every one of you, and said, We will send men before us, and they shall search us out the land, and bring us word again” (Deuteronomy 1:22).

As in the case of Saul, the King of Israel, God gave them what they would have. Their self-will was a profound mistake. Had not God promised to give them the land, and could they not trust his choice? Were not his eyes ever upon it, from the beginning to the end of the year? Why need they wish to spy it out? What about his promise to give it them; why, then, need they be so anxious to see whether they could cope with its possessors? They had but, as Moses said, to go up and possess that which He had given.

Their second mistake was in receiving the discouraging report of the majority of the spies.

Up to a certain point there was perfect agreement between them. **“We came unto the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this *is* the fruit of it.”** Then the ten said, **“the people be strong that dwell in the land, and the cities are walled, and very great: and moreover we saw the children of Anak there . . . We be not able to go up against the people; for they *are* stronger than we”** (verses 28, 31). But the two, Caleb and Joshua, whose names alone linger on our tongues as household words, replied, **“If the Lord delight in us, then He will bring us into this land, and give it us”** (Numbers 14:8).

The difference between the two lay in this, that the ten looked at God through the difficulties, as when you look at the sun through a reversed telescope, and it seems indefinitely distant and shorn of its glory; while the two looked at difficulties through God.

And the people sided with the ten, and turned aside from the thought of God, to dwell long and sadly on the stupendous obstacles that menaced their occupation of the land.

Here was a fatal mistake.

Unbelief never gets beyond the difficulties the cities, the walls, the giants.

It is always picturing them, dwelling on them, pitting them against its own resources.

Faith, on the other hand, though it never minimizes the difficulties, looks them steadily in the face, turns from them, and looks up into the face of God, and counts on Him.

This is what the people failed to do; and for this they lost Canaan. **“And the LORD said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them?”** (chap. 14:11). **“We see that they could not enter in, because of unbelief”** (Hebrews 3:19).

Note, that they lost Canaan, not because of the graves of lust, but because of their unbelief.

My brother, do not sit down beside that grave of lust, and suppose that that is going to settle your future.

Never! God is not going to tether you forever to a grave. There is a resurrection and a new life before you, even for you; arise in the light of his forgiveness, and walk through the length and breadth of the land to possess it.

Know thou this, that the only thing which can exclude thee thence is that thou wilt not believe in a forgiveness and grace, which are like the blue arch of Heaven above thee, or like the immensity of eternity itself.

Their next mistake was in their murmuring, which proposed to substitute a captain for their tried friend and God-given leader.

“All the congregation lifted up their voice and cried; and the people wept that night. And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron, and said, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt . . . And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt” (chap. 14:1-3).

This was perhaps the bitterest hour in Moses life.

They had proposed to elect a captain before, but it was when he was away; this proposal was made before his face. The people whom he had loved with passionate devotion, whose very existence was due to his intercession on the Mount when they were on the point of being destroyed, had forgotten all he had done; actually proposed to supersede his authority; and if he would not go with them beneath their new-made captain, to leave him to his own devices there.

And he fell on his face before all the assembly of the congregation. What unutterable agony rent his breast! not only that he should be thus set aside, but that the anger of God should be thus provoked by the people he loved!

And as he lay there, did he not also, in those dark, sad moments, see the crumbling of his fairy vision, the falling of a shadow over the fair prospect of his hopes; as when a pelting shower of rain hides a landscape which a moment before had lain radiant in the summer light?

So it has befallen in our own experience, not once, nor twice.

We had been on the point of realizing some long-cherished hope. We were within a day's march of it. Our hands had already reached across the frontier line, and plucked the first fruits and pressed the luscious grapes of Eshcol to our lips. Oh, rapture! oh, fruition of long expectation! oh, Heaven of bliss!

Then suddenly there is some one or more to whom we are tied, and their education is not complete. They cannot yet go over into the good land; and because they cannot, we may not.

And as we stand there, the voice says, **“To-morrow turn you, and get you into the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea”** (chap. 14:25).

III. HIS REFUSAL TO ESCAPE THE DISAPPOINTMENT

The dream of Moses for a speedy entrance into the land might even yet have been realized. If all the people were cut off, and he spared to be a second Abraham, the founder of the nation, it might be possible even yet for him to pass into the good land, and like Abraham settle there. And thus the trial came into his life. Satan tempts us, to reveal the evil in us; God to reveal the good. So God, knowing the hidden nobleness of his faithful servant, and eager that it should be revealed to all the world, suggested to him a proposal, that He should smite the people with pestilence, and disinherit them, and make of him a nation greater and mightier than they.

“Accept it,” said the spirit of the self-life, “thou hast had trouble enough with them; it will only hasten the inevitable issue of their misconduct; besides, think of the rest thou wilt enter and the renown which will accrue to thee in all after-time.”

“No,” said his nobler, truer self. “It may not be; what would become of the Lord’s fame? and how can I endure to see my people cut off?”

There are few grander passages in the whole Bible than that in which Moses puts away the testing suggestion as impossible.

“If Thou shalt kill all this people as one man, then the nations which have heard the fame of Thee will speak, saying: Because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land which He sware unto them, therefore He hath slain them in the wilderness” (verses 15, 16).

Then quoting the words which God had spoken into his heart on that memorable occasion when He passed down the mountain gorge, he pleaded that He would pardon the people according unto the greatness of his mercy, as He had been doing from the first of leaving Egypt until then.

In other words, Moses would not have the rest he longed for at the sacrifice of a ray of God’s glory, or of the people with whom his life was linked, though they had sadly plagued and disowned him. And so he turned away from the open gate into Paradise, and again chose rather to suffer with the people in their afflictions than enjoy the pleasures of Canaan alone.

Let us ponder the lesson; and when next a dear delight is within our reach, and it will be more for the glory of God and the good of others to turn from it, let us ask grace to take the rugged path of the wilderness, though it mean a lonely life for forty years, and a death on Pisgah.

IV. A CONTRAST TO HIS ENDURANCE OF DISAPPOINTMENT

Little is said about the leader’s bearing. He kept silence, and opened not his mouth; he hid his face even from good, because God did it. But the people’s behavior throws his into strong relief. When they heard that they were to wander in the wilderness for forty years, till their carcasses fell in its wastes, to be interred in the sands as winding-sheets, they rose up early in the morning, and gat them up to the top of the mountain, saying **“Lo, we be here, and will go up unto the place which the Lord hath promised . . . Nevertheless the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and Moses, departed not out of the camp”** (verses 40, 44).

By force of will and energy they sought to reverse the sentence just passed on them. Moses meekly bowed his head to it, and accepted the discipline of those long years.

Do not times like this come into our lives? We have come to the brink of some great opportunity, and the prize has seemed within our reach. But by some outburst we have shown ourselves unable or unfit to possess it. God puts us back. He says in effect, You are not yet fit to enjoy the blessing. You must go back to the common round, sit at the daily task, plod around the dull mill-wheel. Exercise yourself in toils and frets and trifles, which are not worthy of a place in history; and after awhile come back and stand before these gates again, and you shall be admitted.

But we will not submit to it. “Nay, **but we will go up.**” We will storm the position; we will not be thwarted. It is a hapless and useless resolve. You cannot force the gate. Better a hundred times wait meekly outside, learning the lesson of patience and faith, and you shall stand there again ere long to find it open to the summons of your ennobled and purified spirit.

V. MOSES SOLACE IN DISAPPOINTMENT

Yet there were springs at which that weary spirit slaked its thirst. The sense that he did the will of God; the blessedness which unselfishness always brings to the elect spirit; the joy of seeing the result of the Divine discipline in the growing earnestness and strength of his people; the reception of daily grace for daily need. All these were his.

But even better than these there was the growing realization that the true rest of which he dreamed was not to be found in any earthly Canaan, however enticing; but in that rest of heart, that Sabbath-keeping of the soul, that repose of the nature in God, which is alone permanent and satisfying, amid the change and transience of all human and earthly conditions. So our God not unseldom breaks up our earthly visions, dear and cherished, in order that our soul, bereaved and solitary, may search for and find those diviner things which the moth of change cannot gnaw into, and the rust of time cannot corrode.

“These things God worketh oftentimes with man.”

~ end of chapter 24 ~

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