

MOSES: The Servant of God

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LOVE OF GOD IN THE FIRST FOUR PLAGUES

“Though he [the Lord] cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies.” (Lamentations 3:32).

IN despair Moses had thrown himself on God, pouring out the story of his failure and shame. **“Wherefore hast Thou so evil entreated this people? why is it that Thou hast sent me?”** But there was no chiding, no rebuke, on the part, of his strong and faithful Friend, who knew his frame, and remembered that he was but dust. **“Then the Lord said unto Moses, Now shalt thou see what I will do to Pharaoh.”**

The emphasis lies on the words, *Then, -Now, - I.*

- *Then*, - when he had reached the, lowest point of self-confidence.
- *Now*, since all human effort has been put forth in vain.
- *I*, the self-existent, ever-glorious Lord.

He will not give his glory to another. He is for our sakes jealous of his honour. Therefore it is that He brings us down to the dust of self-humiliation, empties us of human pride, divides with his sharp two-edged sword between the energy of our soul-life and the divine energy of His.

Only when this is complete, and we have drunk to the dregs the bitter cup of despair of self, does He step in, saying in effect, “Child of my love, stand aside; quiet thyself as a weaned babe, and thou shalt see what I will do. I need thee not, save as the vehicle and expression of the purpose which I have formed in my heart, and which I am prepared to execute by my strong right arm.”

The time of depression with the discouraged servant of God is always a time of promise.

- Then God takes to Himself a new name (Exodus 6:3); then
- He gives a glimpse of the meaning of his dealings in the past (4); then
- He reveals the sympathy of his heart, which can detect inarticulate groans (5); then,
- Since He can swear by no other, He pledges Himself with a sevenfold guarantee (6-8).

Does any soul cursed with the tyranny of a bondage beneath which all its energies are pressed to the dust peruse these lines? Let such an one lay to heart the repeated **“I will”** of this marvellous necklace of promises, which are Yea and Amen in Christ Jesus, applicable to all circumstances,

parallel with all ages, unchangeable and eternal as the nature of the Lord who gave them.

- **“I will bring you out . . . “**,
- **“I will rid you . . . “**,
- **“I will redeem you . . .”**,
- **“I will take you to Me . . . “**,
- **“I will be to you a God . . . “**,
- **“I will bring you into the land . . . “**,
- **“I will give it you . . . “**;

and notice that this cluster of I wills is contained within two brackets, that pledge the very nature of God itself to their accomplishment, **“I am the Lord (6) . . . I am the Lord” (8)**.

God always links obedience and promise.

The doing his will must follow close upon the hearing his voice. Promise is intended as spur to action. We hear, that we may pass on to others the words that have stirred our spirits; and, therefore, it befell that Moses was recommissioned to speak, first to the children of Israel, and then to Pharaoh, king of Egypt. It must have been a very memorable day in which the summons came to him in the land of Egypt, as it had come before in the wilderness of Sinai (Exodus 6:28).

Had it ever occurred to him that that vision and voice were inseparable from the solitude of those unfrequented wastes, and the silences of those everlasting hills; and that what was possible there, could have no counterpart amid the stir of Egyptian life, and the presence of the hoary monuments of idolatry? If so, the suggestion was at once answered by that voice finding him in Egypt itself. Ah! souls of men, God speaks not only in the stillness of the hermit’s life; but amid the stir of active engagement, and the press of crowds.

It needed more than usual courage for the two brothers to undertake this further ministry; their people were too broken with anguish of spirit and disappointed hope to care very much what was said, especially when it was said by men who had been the cause of the increase of their burdens: and as for Pharaoh, it was idle to suppose that he would be touched by lips which had no power to charm the ears of Hebrews.

“And Moses spake before the Lord, saying, Behold, the children of Israel have not hearkened unto me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips?”
(chap. 6:12).

But it was not the time for parley.

There was no doubt as to his duty, there should be no hesitation in his obedience.

At the outset of the interview, Pharaoh, as was expected, asked for their credentials, which they gave as God had instructed them. But the evidence was neutralized by the magicians counterfeiting them, either by the dexterity of their sleight-of-hand, or by collusion with that evil spirit, who has ever sought to mimic divine work. It was significant, however, that Aaron’s rod

swallowed up their rods. But the great question would have to be settled on a wider arena, and by a series of more remarkable signs.

It is necessary that we should for a moment consider the underlying principle of God's dealings with Pharaoh, especially in the earlier plagues. And it will not be difficult to discern the operation of the eternal principles of Divine justice and love in the staggering blows which the Divine Power dealt to Pharaoh and his land.

I. THE LOVE OF GOD

Always and everywhere, God is Love. Whoso is wise with heavenly wisdom, and has eyes purged from the scales of prejudice and passion, will see as much of the tender mercy of God in the Old Testament as in the New; in the storm as in the zephyr; in the earthquake as in the still small voice; in the plagues as in the cross. The very term Lord, so constantly employed on these pages, indicates, first the unchangeableness, and then the redemptive side, of God's nature. And surely we must believe that Pharaoh was included in the love that gave Jesus Christ to the world; was embraced within the compass of his propitiation; and might have shone as a star in the firmament of Blood-bought saints.

It must be possible, therefore, to find a clue which will reconcile the love of God, which brooded over Pharaoh and his land, with the apparent harshness that inflicted the successive plagues. And it will help us if we remember that there is a marked difference between the first four plagues and the rest.

In the commencement of God's dealings with the tyrant it would almost appear as if He set Himself to answer the question, "**Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice?**" and to remove the ignorance of which he complained when he said, "**I know not the Lord.**"

The case was this. Here was a man who from his earliest childhood had been accustomed to think that the deities of his nation were supreme in Heaven and on earth; such as the bountiful goddess, who, from her secret urn, was ever pouring forth the waters of the sacred Nile, inundating the land with fertility and beauty; the prolific source of life, whose favorite emblem was the frog, which in unlimited numbers swarmed on the banks of the Nile!

Whilst he would attach reverential importance to the purity of the priesthood, and the supremacy of the sun-god, of whom the beetle was the sacred sign. It would have been impossible to expect that in a single week he should turn away from these, to accept the commands of One whose name was, for the first time, uttered in his presence by the representatives of a nation of slaves.

When in Athens the Apostle Paul discovered an altar to **THE UNKNOWN GOD.**

He did not rebuke the people for not having given Him suitable worship; but set himself to declare His nature and attributes.

And he went on to show that nature, with all her marvellous processes, was due, not to the deities

of the heathen Pantheon though their effigies, sculptured by the art of Phidias, stood out before the gaze of his audience, irradiate with the pure light and unstained in the pure air but was the creation of Him who had spoken to mankind in Jesus, and whose representative he was. And so God set Himself to show that the gods of the heathen were no gods; that the whole system of Egyptian worship must be subordinate to the empire of a greater God than any known to their magicians or priests; and that though He had winked at (to use the old expressive term) the days of past ignorance, the time had come when He commanded all men everywhere - Pharaoh on his throne, the priest in his temple, the ryot in his hut - to repent.

“Who is the Lord?” He is the God of Nature:

- At whose bidding the Nile no longer blesses, but curses, her devotees; at whose command the objects of Egyptian worship become a loathing and an abomination, and make the land stink;
- At the expression of whose will the bodies of the priests are covered with the lice that deride all that razor or water can do for their extermination, and
- At whose summons the sacred beetle corrupts the land.

“Not know Him?” He is:

- The God who speaks through human voices;
- The God of the aged brethren;
- The God of those groaning serfs;
- The God who could not run back from a covenant into which He had entered with that long-suffering people;
- The God of Redemption and of Eternity.

II. THE FAITH OF MOSES

Though it is quite true that the love of God was at work, seeking to reveal itself to Pharaoh by the ordering of the plagues; yet we must always remember that the faith of Moses played no inconspicuous part in respect to them.

This is very apparent in connection with the last of the series, concerning which we are told **“by faith he forsook Egypt”**; and that **“he endured, as seeing Him who is invisible.”**

What was true, therefore, concerning the last, was probably true of the rest; and it becomes us to read into the story of Exodus the spiritual qualities unveiled to us in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the Spirit of God draws aside the vail of the workings of his inner life and manifests him as he was.

In all probability, therefore, throughout the conflict which issued in the emancipation of Israel, Moses was closely dealing with God. God was vividly present to the eye of his soul. He thought much more of the presence and power of the Lord than he did of the majesty and might of the greatest king of the time; and as God disclosed to him each successive stage of his providential dealings with Pharaoh, his faith claimed that He should do even as He had said.

It was therefore through his faith, as the medium and instrument, that God wrought with his mighty hand and outstretched arm.

Are there any marvels recorded in Scripture which took place apart from the operation of the faith of some believing soul or souls?

- If Enoch was translated as a warning to the antediluvian world, it was because he had faith for it.
- If Samuel was born to a mother who had renounced all hope of child-bearing, it was because her faith received strength.
- If the Red Sea yielded a path to the ransomed hosts, it was because their leader's faith rolled back the glassy billows.
- If the walls of Jericho fell down, it was because Joshua had faith to believe they would.

Just as electricity must have a wire to conduct it, so the almighty power of God demands the organ of our faith.

That faith may be very slender; the believer may be very deficient in what the world accounts most precious: but if only there be a genuine connection between the eternal God and the case that has to be met, it is enough. All the Godhead may pass through the slender faith of a very unworthy man; just as the ocean may pass through a very narrow channel. It is with such thoughts in our mind that we consider the first four plagues, and how God showed his love in them.

III. THE PLAGUES

The River.

One morning, shortly after the events already described, as the sky would be covered with the roseate hue of dawn's first faint blush, Pharaoh, accompanied by high officials, court functionaries, and priests, came down either to perform his customary ablutions or to worship. Upon the river's brink he found Moses awaiting him, with the rod, with which he was already familiar, in his hand.

There was no hesitation now in the peremptory summons, "**The Lord God of the Hebrews hath sent me unto thee, saying, Let my people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness.**"

Then follow words which bear out what has been already said of God's purpose in the plagues, "**In this shalt thou know that I am the Lord.**"

The first revelation of God was to be made in the smitten water flowing blood; in the death of its fish, that formed not only objects of worship, but provided a large part of the food staple; and in the stench that filled the land with loathing.

The summons was met by the curled lip of scorn or imperturbable silence; and as there was no alternative, Aaron smote the water with the rod in the presence of the court. Most certainly, as he

did so, the two brothers exercised faith that God would do as He had said; and according to their faith it befell.

An instantaneous change passed over the appearance and the nature of the water. It became blood. From bank to brae, the tide of crimson gore swept on, hour after hour, day after day, till a week was fulfilled. The fish died, and floated on the surface. The air reeked with corruption. And the effects of the visitation extended throughout all the pools, and reservoirs, and cisterns, in places of public resort, as well as in the homes of the people. There was no water in all the land, save the scanty supplies obtained by digging shallow wells, and collecting the brackish surface water.

The magicians, in some way, counterfeited the marvel; and Pharaoh probably thought that on the part of Moses and Aaron there was only a superior sort of legerdemain. Therefore he did not set his heart to it, though he must have realized that he was at issue with a power greater than that of the goddess of the Nile.

Frogs.

It has been supposed that the plagues followed in rapid succession, so that the impression of one had not passed away before another succeeded it. And thus the whole conflict was probably comprehended within nine or ten months. It may have therefore been but a few days after, that Moses and Aaron renewed their demand for emancipation, and told the king the penalty of refusal. But there was no response, no proposal, and the inevitable blow fell.

The land suddenly swarmed with frogs. They came up from the river in myriads, till the very ground seemed alive with them, and it was impossible to walk far without crushing scores.

- **Frogs** in the houses,
- **Frogs** in the beds,
- **Frogs** baked with the food in the ovens,
- **Frogs** in the kneading-troughs worked up with the flour;
- **Frogs** with their monotonous croak,
- **Frogs** with their cold, slimy skins, everywhere from morning to night, from night to morning frogs.

And the aggravation of the plague consisted in the fact of the frog being the emblem of the goddess of fecundity; so that it was sacrilege to destroy it.

This plague elicited from Pharaoh the first symptom of surrender.

He sent for the brethren, and implored their prayers that the scourge might be removed, promising that compliance with his request would secure deliverance, "**I will let the people go.**" To make the supremacy and power of God more manifest, Moses bade the monarch fix his own time for the staying of the plague, and then went to cry to the Lord: "**Moses cried unto the Lord; and the Lord did according to the word of Moses.**"

It is remarkable that though the magicians counterfeited the coming of the frogs, they were evidently unable to remove them; and, indeed, the king does not appear to have appealed to them for help in this direction. Alleviation of human suffering is no part of the program of the devil or his agents. That can only come from the Lord, through the believing cry of his servants. But what a lesson was taught to Pharaoh that the Lord was above all gods, and that He alone could do according to his will!

Lice.

The Egyptians were scrupulously cleanly in their personal habits, anticipating the habits of our own time. And the priests were specially so. They bathed themselves repeatedly, and constantly shaved their persons, that no uncleanness might unfit them for their sacred duties. What horror, then, must have taken hold of them when the very dust of Egypt seemed breeding lice; and they found that they were not exempted from the plague, which was as painful as it was abhorrent to their delicate sensibility.

Perhaps there is something more than appears at first sight in the words, “**there was lice in man and in beast**”

Not only on the bodies of the priests, but on those of the sacred beasts, was there this odious pest. Each revered shrine boasted its sacred bull or goat, whose glossy skin was cleansed with reverent care; and it was an unheard of calamity that it should become infested with this most disgusting parasite.

Thus upon the gods of Egypt did God execute judgment, in order that Pharaoh might know that He was God of gods, deserving of the allegiance which He claimed. The magicians themselves seem to have felt that this plague was a symptom of the working of a higher Power than they knew; and even they urged Pharaoh to consider that it was the finger of God. How often do unexpected voices read for us the lessons that God designs to teach!

The Beetle.

It is not perfectly certain what is meant by the word translated “**flies.**” And though it is likely that it is rightly rendered “**flies,**” yet it is quite as likely that it stands for a peculiar kind of beetle, which was the emblem of the sun-god. Their most powerful deity seemed now to have turned against them, and to have become their scourge at the behest of the God of these shepherd-slaves. The beetles covered the ground, swarmed into the houses, and spoilt the produce of their land.

That it was no mere natural visitation was made clear by a division being made in this plague between the land of Egypt and that of Goshen, where the Israelites were found.

This God, who could turn the very deities of Egypt against their votaries, could as evidently protect his own. And perhaps this wrought on Pharaoh’s heart, as nothing else had done; for he was prepared to allow the Israelites to sacrifice in the land.

It was a concession which Moses could not accept; alleging that the Israelites would be obliged to sacrifice as victims animals which the Egyptians considered sacred, and irritated feeling might provoke some terrible outbreak of violence. Pharaoh yielded to this reason; and promised to let them go, if they did not go very far, on the condition, that Moses should secure the removal of the plague. **“And the Lord did according to the word of Moses.”**

In all this Moses was but the medium, the ambassador, the instrument through whom God wrought.

The suggestion of the plagues lay with the Almighty; their execution was effected through the strong faith of the faithful servant, who did as he was told, and spoke as he was bidden. And it was in answer to his believing prayer that the plagues ceased. Through faith like that God will pass out to do his work of might and love and salvation amongst men.

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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