

MOSES: The Servant of God

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

REPHIDIM

“And there was no water for the people to drink . . . And the Lord said, Thou shall smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it . . . And Moses did so.

“Then came Amalek and fought with Israel in Rephidim . . . And his (Moses) hands were steady until the going down of the sun . . . And Moses built an altar and called the name of it JEHOVAH-NISSI (The Lord my banner).” (Exodus 17:1-15).

IF you essay to lead men, you will sooner or later come to a Rephidim.

We are distinctly told that it was according to the commandment of the Lord that the children of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, and pitched in Rephidim. The character of the worker is as dear to God as the work he is doing; and no pains must be spared by the Divine Artificer to complete the design to which He has set his hand. Do not be surprised then, Christian worker, if you find yourself landed in Rephidim.

There are lessons to be learnt there of incalculable worth.

Geographers and historians have found it difficult to fix on its precise locality; but the site is immaterial. It lay, no doubt, somewhere along that coast in one of the wadys that lead up into the heart of the mountains of the central table-land. But the experiences of which that place was the scene are common to all lives, ages, and lands.

I. THERE WE LEARN THE LIMIT OF OUR ABILITY

Few of us can stand great or long-continued success. It is comparatively easy to walk in the Valley of Humiliation, when our path is hidden and the faces of men are averted; but to stand on the height, with none to rival, with nothing left to scale, the wonder and the envy of a host - ah! this is a task in which the brain reels, the step falters, and the heart gets proud.

It is easier to know how to be abased than how to abound, how to be empty than how to be full.

We are so apt to repeat the folly of Hezekiah in showing his treasures to the ambassadors of Babylon; and to utter the mad vaunt of Nebuchadnezzar, **“Is not this great Babylon which I have built, by the might of my power, and for the glory of my majesty!”**

But whenever this happens, directly the heart of man is inflated with pride, and lifts itself up in self-confidence, there is an end to its usefulness. God will not give his glory to another. He will not permit his power to be employed for the inflation of human pride, or to minister to the exaltation of the flesh. It is his solemn decree that no flesh shall glory in his presence. **“Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up”** (Isaiah 10:15).

This is why so many of God’s servants, who once did yeoman service, are laid aside. They were marvelously helped till they were strong; but when they were strong, their hearts were lifted up to their destruction. They still preach the old sermons that once pealed like the archangel’s trumpet, or thrilled with the wail of Calvary’s broken heart; but there is no stir or shaking among the dry bones that strew the valley of vision. They utter the old exorcisms; but the demons laugh at them from behind their ramparts, and refuse to go forth. They know that the Lord has departed from them, and that it is not with them as in the days that are past. If such would only consider and search their hearts, they would find that they had commenced to trust in the momentum of past success; and to think that somehow the draught of fishes was due to their own fisher-experience, instead of being the direct gift of One who often traverses all the rules of art by a Divine knowledge and power.

We can easily suppose that Moses was in danger of a similar fall. For the last few months his career had been an uninterrupted line of success. He had brought the proudest monarch of his time to his knees with the cry of a suppliant. He had become very great in the eyes of priesthood and court. He had led the greatest Exodus the world had seen or would see. The parted ocean, the submerged host, the song of victory, the fall of the manna, the evidence of his statesmanship and sagacity as a born leader of men all combined to place him in an unparalleled position of authority and glory. As the triumphal ode puts it, **“He was king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people were gathered”** (Deuteronomy 33:5).

Was there no temptation in all this? Men warn others against temptations on which they have been at the point of sliding to their fall; and may it not have been from his own experience that Moses derived the caution given to the people, **“Beware that thou forget not the Lord thy God . . . lest when all that thou hast is multiplied, thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the Lord thy God . . . and thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth”** (Deuteronomy 8:11-17).

Great and good men are not proof against these attacks of pride and vainglory. We are none of us free from the tendency to sacrifice to our net, and burn incense to our drag, because by them our portion is fat, and our meat plenteous. It was for this reason that Paul gloried in his infirmities; finding in them perpetual reminders of his weakness, which kept him low enough for God to choose him as the platform for the putting forth of his might.

It was probable, therefore, that God brought Moses to Rephidim to counteract and check all uprisings of self-sufficiency; to bring him down to the dust of abject helplessness; to teach him the narrow limits of his resources and ability. Lo, all these things doth God work, **“That He may withdraw man from his purpose, and hide pride from man”** (Job 33:17).

Whatever Moses may have begun to think, all self-confidence must have vanished like a wreath of mist among the hills when he found himself face to face with that infuriated mob; who broke through every barrier erected by gratitude, or patriotism, or self-respect, or memory of past deliverances, and with violence demanded water. **“The people did chide with Moses, and said, Give us water that we may drink . . . And the people murmured against Moses, and said, Wherefore hast thou brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?”** (Exodus 17:2, 3). And such was their irritation that they seemed ready to stone him.

Was this the way that they repaid his unstinted service for them? Did they not care for him more than this? Ah, he was not king of their hearts, as he had thought and hoped! And as for water, whence could he procure it? No wisdom or power of his could help in such a strait. Nothing that he could suggest would meet the case. He was absolutely at the end of himself; and **“ he cried unto the Lord, saying, What shall I do?”**

It is a blessed position to which the providence of God reduces us when we find ourselves face to face with an over-mastering necessity.

- Were it a brook, we might ford it; but here is a river!
- Were it the thirst of a little child, we might quench it; but here are two millions of thirsty souls!
- Were it for the water of earth's wells, we might begin to build aqueducts from the lakes that lie in the bosom of the hills;
- but here is thirst for the living water, which issues from the throne of God and the Lamb!

Then we learn the limit of our sufficiency. We cry, Who is sufficient for these things? And we confess that we are not sufficient of ourselves, to account anything as from ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God.

We cannot make a revival; or save a soul; or convince a heart of sin, or break it down in contrition; we cannot comfort, or counsel, or satisfy the parching thirst. And when we have reached the end of self, we have got to the beginning of God. It is from the low threshold of the door that the life-giving stream gushes on its Heaven-sent way.

II. THERE WE LEARN MUCH ABOUT GOD

This always follows the other lesson. We are brought to know ourselves that we may be prepared to know God. The Master always says, “Whence are we to buy bread, that these may eat? how many loaves have ye?” not because He needs the information; but because He desires to bring his workers face to face with the utter inadequacy of their supply, and to prepare them better to appreciate the greatness of his power. But that question, eliciting the fewness of the loaves, is invariably followed by the demand, **“Bring them hither to Me”**; and by the heaps of broken victuals, evidence of the abundance of the supply.

So at Rephidim the need which abases us and drives us to God, reveals God.

We learn his patience.

Not a word of reproach or remonstrance breaks upon the still desert air. If the people had been exemplary in their humble trust, they could not have met with more tender willingness to supply their need.

The people, and perhaps Levi especially, proved Him at Massah, and strove with Him at the waters of Meribah, asking whether the Lord were among them or not, though the cloud brooded overhead, and the manna lay each morning around the camp: yet there was no word of rebuke, only directions for the immediate supply of their need. It is only at Rephidim that we learn his patience towards ourselves and towards others; because He will ever be mindful of his covenant. **“His mercy endureth forever.”**

We learn the reality of his spiritual presence. **“I will stand before thee upon the rock in Horeb”** (ver. 6).

The people had just threatened to stone Moses; but God, in effect, bade him not to fear. It was as if He said, “Fear not, I am with thee; be not dismayed, I am thy God: none shall set on thee to hurt thee, for I am with thee to deliver thee. Pass on before them, thou shalt take no harm; and this shall be a sign that I am actually there upon the rock, it shall gush with watersprings.” Never before had God been more real to his servant than he was that day, when He rose up as a rampart to protect him from the infuriated crowd with their threatening stones. It is when men turn against us most, that the Lord stands beside, as He did to Paul, and says, Fear not!

We learn God’s secret storehouses. **“Thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it.”**

This is strange! A rock would seem the last place to choose for the storage of water. But God’s cupboards are in very unlikely places.

- Ravens bring food.
- The Prime Minister of Egypt gives corn.
- Cyrus lets go the people of Israel from Babylon.
- The Jordan heals the leper.
- Meal makes poisoned pottage wholesome.
- Wood makes iron swim.
- A Samaritan binds up the wounds and saves the life of the pillaged traveler.
- Joseph of Arimathea buries the sacred body in his own new tomb.

It is worthwhile to go to Rephidim to get an insight into the fertility and inventiveness of God’s providence. There can be no lack to them that fear Him, and no fear of lack to those who have become acquainted with his secret storehouses. **“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard . . . the things which God hath prepared for them that love him; but God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit”** (I Corinthians 2:9, 10).

That smitten rock was a type of Christ.

A Rock, indeed! stable amid upheaval, permanent amid change. A smitten Rock! Reproach broke his heart, and the soldier's spear set abroad the blood and water, which have issued to heal the nations and quench their thirst. **"They drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ."** There is no water that will so satisfy thirst as this crystal Rock-water.

"Rock of Ages,
cleft for me."

III. THERE WE LEARN THE POWER OF PRAYER

The tribe of Amalek was probably descended from Esau; and, like him, was wild and fierce and warlike. Were they likely tamely to submit to the intrusion of a new people into their pasture-lands and fastnesses, which they had succeeded in holding against Egypt? It was impossible; and so, according to Josephus, this powerful tribe gathered to this spot all the forces of the desert, from Petra to the Mediterranean; and **"they smote the hind most of the Israelites, even all that were feeble among them, when they were faint and weary."**

If Egypt represents the power of darkness, Amalek is a type of the flesh; which, though thoroughly defeated and broken, is always apt to crop up in moments of weakness and unwatchfulness.

Far down the history of Israel, Haman, the Amalekite, had nearly compassed the annihilation of the whole people. It is in keeping with this typology that Saul was commissioned utterly to destroy the Amalekites; and that the Lord solemnly pledged Himself to have war with Amalek from generation to generation.

Moses, now eighty-one years old, shrank from the brunt of the battle. He entrusted the troops to Joshua, here first brought into prominence, whilst he climbed the hill, with the sacred rod in his hand. Thence he surveyed the battle, and stretched out his hands in prayer fought with unseen combatants the livelong day, and won the victory by intercessions, of which those steady arms were the symbol.

It is a most beautiful picture. Three old men in prayer. Two staying up the third!

In Rephidim we learn the lesson that prayer will do what else were impossible. In earlier days Moses would never have thought of winning a battle save by fighting. He now learns that he can win it by praying. Probably Paul, too, learnt that lesson in his long and wearisome imprisonments. How they must at first have chafed his eager spirit; accustomed as he was to gird himself, and go whither he would. He may have even been tempted to feel that all his power to affect the destiny of the Church was at an end; when he suddenly discovered a leverage by which he was able to secure greater results than ever; and henceforth each epistle contains a reference to his prayers.

Remember his recurring phrase, **"I never cease to make mention of you in my prayers."**

We cannot compare ourselves with either of these, save as Lilliputians might with a Gulliver; and yet we may, at least, emulate them in their intercessions.

According to the prayers of a church are the successes of a church.

- Are they maintained, the banner floats on to victory:
- Are they languid and depressed, the foe achieves a transient success.

Let us, then, learn to pray, filling our Rephidims with strong crying and tears, obtaining by faith for ourselves and others victories which no prowess of our own could win. These shall encourage us like nothing beside, filling our heart with joy, our lips with songs, and our hands with the spoil of the foe.

What deliverances might we win for our dear ones, and all others who are strongly molested by the flesh, if only we were more often found on the top of the hill with the uplifted rod of prayer in our steadied hands! Let then the Christ who is in thee, plead through thee for his Peters, that their faith may not fail; but that they may be saved as birds from the snare of the fowler.

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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