

# MOSES: The Servant of God

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## CHAPTER NINE

### HOW THE CHARACTER OF MOSES GREW

**“Moses was faithful in all his house”** (Hebrews 3:2).

IF we were engaged in telling the story of the Exodus, it would become us to study minutely the account of the succeeding plagues. But the story of Israel is, for our present purpose, incidental to the study of that great personage who gave tone and character to the mighty movement which issued in the passage of the Red Sea.

It is on Moses that our attention must be focused; and, indeed, it is marvelous to trace the growth of this man, in perhaps a few months, from the diffidence and hesitancy of Midian to the moral sublimity which made him **“very great in the land of Egypt,”** in the sight of the great officials of the court, no less than of the mass of the common people (Genesis 11:3).

We can trace this development of character through the remaining plagues; and as we do so we shall inevitably discover that the secrets of growth consist in an instant and unquestioning obedience, an utter indifference to human opinion, strength of purpose, unfailing patience, indomitable courage, persevering faith and prayer.

*Murrain.*

In the earlier part of his ministry Moses had repeatedly questioned with God before he set about the performance of the Divine commissions.

- **“Who am I, that I should go in unto Pharaoh?”**
- **“How shall Pharaoh hear me who am of uncircumcised lips?”**
- **“Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips; how shall Pharaoh hearken unto me?”**

And, using the language of men, it needed much persuasion and entreaty before he would fulfil the Lord’s word. But all that had vanished now.

Though he had been at least seven times in the royal presence, and each time the bearer of heavy tidings, increasingly abhorred by Pharaoh and his court, and though so far his appearances there had been unsuccessful in securing the great object which God had set before him, yet there was no hesitancy or questioning, when for the eighth time the Lord bade him present himself in the palace to demand the emancipation of the people on pain of a murrain on the beasts.

It is hardly possible to over-estimate the value of simple, unquestioning obedience in the growth of character.

The rejection of Saul, the first king of Israel, and the selection of David hinged on the fact that the one did not obey the voice of the Lord in performing his commandments, and that the other was a man after God's heart and fulfilled all his will. The stress of our Lord's farewell discourse is on the reiterated word obey. Obedience is:

- The test of love;
- The condition of divine revelation;
- The precursor of the most sacred intimacy into which God can enter with the human spirit.

In proportion as we obey, we become possessed of noble elements of character; which exist in our hearts as vapour until they are condensed in some act of obedience, and become henceforth a permanent property. Unbelief and disobedience are interchangeable terms (Hebrews 4:11) from which we may infer that as our obedience is, so will our faith become.

Live up to what you know to be your duty: fill in the outlines of God's commands; never stay to count consequences or to question results; if God says, **"Go unto Pharaoh and tell him,"** and you obey, you will not only be set to greater tasks, but you will acquire a character which no amount of meditation or prayer could afford. The murrain came at the fixed time, **"and the cattle of Egypt died."**

- The cattle that fed on the green meadows of the Nile;
- The horses of the wealthy, for which Egypt was famous;
- The asses of the poor;
- The camels that bore the merchandise of Egypt afar, in exchange for spices and balm and myrrh (Genesis 37:25);
- The oxen that ploughed the fields; the sheep which constituted so large a proportion of their wealth on all of these the murrain fell.

The land was filled with death; the rich land owners were greatly impoverished; the poor suffered severely; thousands of shepherds and teamsters were thrown out of work; the routine of business communication was seriously interrupted; and evidence was given of the increasing severity of the plague: whilst God's care for his own was clearly shown in the cordon of protection that He placed around Goshen, concerning which it is said, **"Of the cattle of the children of Israel died not one."**

#### *Boils and Blains.*

In estimating a man's work we must always consider the character of the man himself. Certain kinds of work, congenial to some dispositions, are most distasteful to others; and you might as well look for apples on vines as expect to find the two in conjunction. It is much more startling to find certain attributes in some characters than in others - it is like finding a layer of gneiss in chalk.

And, surely, it must have been a much greater effort for Moses to be the medium of such judgments, and the object of so much bitter hatred, than for many. He was naturally gentle, tender, and very meek always ready to pray for the cessation of a plague, and never for its advent; yearning sympathetically over sister and brother, though they had grievously injured him; willing to be accursed if the people might be spared.

A man who had kept sheep for forty years would be likely to acquire a tender shepherd-heart. And it must have been no small effort to be the instrument for inflicting pain. Yet this fell plentifully to his lot in his terrible vindication of the supremacy and sovereignty of God. But he flinched not. It was not for him to aspire to be more pitiful than God; and, therefore, when Aaron and he were bidden to take ashes from some expiring furnace, and fling them broadcast on the air, to become a boil breaking forth with blains upon man and upon beast, he did not hesitate.

Taking in his hands handfuls of ashes, he accosted Pharaoh on some public occasion, when he and his court of magicians were assembled in the open air, and sprinkled the light grey dust up towards Heaven; with such immediate effect that **“the magicians could not stand before him because of the boils, for the boil was upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians”** (ver. 11), and, perhaps, penetrated also to the sacred precincts of the temples, breaking out in the beasts which were there zealously kept free from taint, as gods of the nation (Numbers 33:4).

### *The Hail.*

As the plagues advance, Aaron is increasingly dropped out of sight.

- In the first three plagues the Lord said distinctly unto Moses, **“Say unto Aaron”** (7:19; 8:5, 16).
- In the fourth (8:20) and fifth (9:1), the word was to Moses only.
- In the sixth the command is to them both (ix. 8).
- But in this, the seventh, the command is given exclusively to Moses.

**“The Lord said unto Moses, Stretch forth thine hand toward Heaven, that there may be hail”** (ver. 22). And so with the plagues of locusts (9:12), and of the darkness that might be felt (10:21). Why this was we are not told. It does not appear that Aaron had in any way forfeited his position by misconduct; but he may have lacked that simplicity and directness and purity of motive which were so characteristic of his brother: and the faith of Moses grew with every trial of the faithfulness and reliableness of God, till it alone was able to act as the vehicle of the Divine Will. In any case, Moses came increasingly to the front as the wielder of the miracle-working rod, and as the emancipator of Israel.

In the present instance, also, he seems to have acquired to a surprising extent the power of speech. Those stammering lips became the channels of unwonted eloquence, and were kindled by unexpected fire. It was as if he had suddenly felt able to lay aside the mediation of Aaron, and to claim those words which the Almighty had promised to put into his mouth. And is it not full of comfort to find that the Lord did not keep him to the mistaken bargain he had made, that Aaron should be his spokesman (Exodus 4:15-17).

We may have said rash things in the past, which we now deeply and seriously regret; but if we show ourselves worthy of a greater destiny than our weak faith imagined possible, God may not tie us to our words, but will open before us possibilities of which we had not dreamt. Aaron shall not be our mouth-piece; we will stand and speak for ourselves.

The warning given to Pharaoh in that early morning was a very solemn one; but it was in vain. He had deliberately hardened himself so often that now both warning and appeal fell on him like rain and sun on granite slabs, and even tended to harden his heart still more. There is no ice so hard as that which melts by day and freezes by night.

And so the storm broke.

As the rod was uplifted, vast thunderclouds drifted up from the sea, and covered the land, and poured out their contents in thunder, hail, and fire. Storms of any kind are very rare in Egypt; and this was **“very grievous, such as there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.”**

There are several references in the Psalms to this fearful visitation. We can almost hear the peal of the thunder, and detect the devastation caused by the hail, in the vibrating chords of Hebrew minstrelsy. In the intervals of the thunder-peals, in which the Almighty uttered his voice, we can hear the pelt of the hailstone chorus and the explosion of the balls of fire (Psalm 18:12, 13).

- The vines torn from their trellises and beaten into the soil;
- the sycamore trees blighted as by frost;
- the forest-trees broken down;
- the crops of flax and barley utterly spoilt;
- beasts and herdsmen unsheltered in the open fields in defiance of the warning given, smitten to death by hailstones, which fell as thick as rain, and may have weighed (as in exceptional instances hailstones have been known to weigh) from six to eight ounces such are some of the indications given of the terror of the scene (Psalm 78:47,48; 105:32). But from all these the land of Goshen was free.

Through the pelting storm, Moses and Aaron were summoned into the royal presence to hear for the first time from those proud lips the confession of sin (Exodus 9:27); with an urgent entreaty that the mighty thunderings and hail which were then shaking palace and city might cease.

Moses had no doubt as to the answer which would come to his prayer; but he had grave doubts of the reliableness of the royal word. However, he did as Pharaoh required.

Passing uninjured through the storm, he went beyond the city gates into the open country. It was as if he consciously lived in the secret place of the Most High, and abode under the shadow of the Almighty. With outspread hands he interceded for the land of the oppressors of his people; and God hearkened to his request: so that the thunders and hail ceased, and the rain was no more poured out upon the earth (ver. 33).

### *The Locusts.*

The tone of Moses rose with every plague. Hitherto he had been content with repeating his demand; but now the failure of the king to keep his royal word had altered the relations between them. Pharaoh had forfeited all claim to his respect. He had made repeated promises and broken them. His confessions of sin had been followed by no efforts at amendment. He was no longer ignorant of the Lord, but willfully obstinate and defiant. Weak, vacillating, cringing in trial, imperious and truculent in prosperity, he had become unspeakably despicable. And Moses altered his tone; not now treating him as a sovereign, but as a sinner, and dealing directly with his proud and obstinate heart: **“Thus saith the Lord God of the Hebrews, How long wilt thou refuse to humble thyself before Me?”**

The penalty of further delay was to be an infliction of locusts.

The Egyptians well knew what a plague of locusts might mean; and therefore the servants of Pharaoh pleaded with the king to acquiesce in the demand of the Hebrew leaders. Better lose a nation of slaves, said they, than imperil the land. So that from that moment it became a trial of strength between the king of Egypt and God, in whom for the first time in his history he had found more than his match.

Pharaoh, at his servants suggestion, proposed a compromise. He was willing to let the men go, and threatened them with evil if they did not accept this proposition. But there was no hesitation in its instant refusal by the brothers. It could not be. The young and old must go, sons and daughters, flocks and herds all. None was to be absent in that great convocation, which was to assemble somewhere in the desert to hold a feast to the Lord. The court had never heard the great Pharaoh so addressed; nor could he endure that dauntless speech; so, at a signal from him, they were driven from his presence.

But the locusts came with an east wind, which, blowing straight from the desert, had set in on the land for a whole day and night.

**“When it was morning, the east wind brought the locusts.”**

Their numbers filled the air, and literally covered the earth. Its green surface was darkened by their brown forms; and every trace of green in the fields, on the fruit trees, and among the plentiful herbs, of which the Egyptians were so fond, instantly disappeared.

There was no bud, nor blossom, nor shoot, nor leaf, left anywhere **“through all the land of Egypt”** (x. 15). The animals had perished, and now the produce of the earth.

Surely the next visitation must sweep away all human life. Panic-stricken, the king sent for the men whom a little before he had driven from his presence; confessed that he had not only sinned against the Lord, who had now become an evident Personality to his conscience, but against them; and entreated that this death might be removed.

How gracious and longsuffering is God!

In answer to Moses intercession, **“the Lord turned a mighty strong west wind, which took away the locusts, and cast them into the Red Sea; there remained not one locust in all the coasts of Egypt”** (ver. 19). But again Pharaoh went back from his word.

### *The Darkness.*

Unannounced, the darkness fell like a pall upon the land, **“even darkness that could be felt.”**

Travelers tell us of darkness caused by sand-storm, so thick that it was impossible to see the hand when placed close against the face. From whatever cause, the darkness of this plague must have been of the same description.

**“They saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days.”**

All the activities of the land were paralyzed. The stoutest hearts were dismayed. It seemed as if their greatest deity had suddenly deserted them, abandoning their case. Perhaps the light would never visit them again. In that land of radiant sunlight it was an awful experience. The very temples were so draped in gloom that the priests could not see the sacred beasts, nor were they able to perform their usual rites.

For the first time in perhaps centuries great Memnon’s statue failed to greet the beams of the morning sun with music.

When the plague passed away, for the last time the monarch summoned the brothers, and made a final desperate effort at compromise.

The nation might go, said he; but the flocks and herds must remain.

But Moses penetrated the craft of the proposal, and tore it to shreds. **“Our cattle shall go with us, there shall not an hoof be left behind.”**

Clearly they would be required for sacrifice (ver. 25). Then, again, the proud spirit of the king, uncowed by repeated misfortune, untaught by the stern discipline of pain, broke vehemently forth; and he said, as if exasperated beyond endurance, **“Get thee from me, take heed to thyself, see my face no more; for in that day thou seest my face thou shalt die”** (ver. 28).

The spirit of Moses, also, was swept with that anger which at rare intervals asserted itself in him, as a storm on a tranquil lake (Exodus 11:8); but he made answer with calm dignity, as became the ambassador of God.

**“And Moses said, Thou hast spoken well; I will see thy face again no more”** (ver. 29).

But as he turned to leave the royal presence, he raised himself to his full height, and poured one overwhelming torrent of denunciation and warning on the willful spirit that had deliberately chosen evil for its god, and destruction for its doom.

**“And Moses said, Thus saith the Lord, About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt; and all the firstborn of Egypt shall die. And all these thy servants shall come down unto me, and bow down themselves unto me, saying, Get thee out, and all the people that follow thee; and after that I will go out” (9:4-8).**

Thus did the bowing reed of Midian become as a rock on which the tempest expends its force in vain; the man who had left that palace in fear, strode its courts as a king; and the faith which fled before the serpent-rod became strong enough to wield the thunderbolts of Heaven, and to bring the land of Egypt to the very brink of destruction.

**~ end of chapter 9 ~**

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