

MOSES: The Servant of God

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE BROKEN SENTENCE

“Yet now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written.” (Exodus 32:32).

THIS is one of the most pathetic verses of the Bible, which bears on its face the evidence of its genuineness. It could not have emanated from the mind or pen of some later scribe; because so entirely unexpected, so strange, and yet so likely. It reminds us of the shaft of a graceful column broken off in the middle; or of a strain of plaintive music hushed to sudden silence by the snapping of a string. It is the fragment of a sentence of which we would have given much to hear the conclusion; but who can presume to finish that which in this supreme hour was choked by a paroxysm of grief, a sob of irrepressible emotion?

I. THE PROBLEM WITH WHICH HE HAD TO DEAL

(1) *Their idolatry.*

After the utterance of the ten great words of Sinai, the people, frightened by the thunderings and lightnings, and the voice of the trumpet, and the smoke of the mountain, entreated Moses to act as their daysman and mediator. **“They said unto him: Speak thou with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die”** (Exodus 20:19).

The great law giver and leader, acting on their request, thereupon withdrew himself into the divine pavilion, and was absent for about six weeks.

After the return of the seventy elders who had accompanied Moses to some lower ledge of the mountain but had returned without him, the people were doubtless well content. Better to be temporarily deprived of their leader, than be exposed to those terrible thunderings. But, after awhile, they became uneasy and restless. From one to another the word passed, “Where is he? He did not take food enough with him to sustain him for so long. Has he met with some mishap on those lonely steeps? or perchance he has been destroyed by that burning fire, or absorbed into the unseen.”

“As for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him” (Exodus 32:1).

And then turning to Aaron, the man of words, sure that neither he nor twenty like him could fill the gap which the loss of Moses had caused, they cried, “**Up, make us gods, which shall go before us.**”

We may notice, as we pass, the essential nature of idolatry. For in this marvellous chapter we have its entire history, from the first cry of the soul, which betrays so marvellous a yearning for an idol, to the draining of the last bitter dregs, with which, when ground to powder, the idolater has to drink its very dust.

Men sometimes speak of idolaters bowing down before material forms, whether of gold, stone, or wood, as if they supposed that these were Divine, and possessed Divine attributes and such may be the case with the more degraded and debased; but in the beginning it was not so. And if we carefully study the question in all its bearings, we shall discover that the idolater does not in the first instance, at least look upon his image as God, but as a representation or manifestation of God. It is an attempt on the part of the human spirit, which shrinks from the effort of communion with the unseen and spiritual, to associate God with what it can own and handle; so as to have a constant and evident token of the presence and favour of God.

This was the case of Israel. It was only three months since they had stood by the Red Sea, and seen its waters roll in pride over the hosts of Pharaoh. Every day since then God's love had followed them. For them the Heaven had given bread, and the rocks had flowed with water; and his cloud had sailed majestically through the sky, shielding them in the daylight, and burning like a watch-fire through the night. And even at the time with which we are dealing the whole summit of the mount was crowned by the pavilion of cloud, which was the emblem of his presence in their midst. But notwithstanding all, they were carried away before that imperious craving of the human heart, which cries out for a sensible image for its worship.

Their idolatry, then, was a violation, not of the first, but of the second commandment.

They did not propose to renounce the Lord that was left for the days of Ahab; but they desired to worship the Lord under the form of a calf, and in distinct violation of the emphatic prohibition, which said, “**Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in Heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath; thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.**” This was the sin also of Jeroboam.

(2) Their Degradation.

There can be no doubt that the worship of the calf was accompanied with the licentious orgies which were a recognized part of Egyptian idolatry. As much as this is implied in the narrative. “**The people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.**” And from this we may infer that the bonds of continence, that had restrained them since the Exodus, had been suddenly slackened; with the result of their breaking from all restraint, and giving themselves up to their unholy riot.

(3) The Claims of God.

There was every reason to believe that God would exact the full amount of penalty; not because He was vindictive, but because the maintenance of his authority seemed to demand it. The righteousness of his character, the inviolability of his oath, the authority of the Ten Commandments, so recently given, combined to make it necessary that He should do as He had said.

And yet, on the other hand, there was the fear lest, if, to use the language of men, God's anger waxed hot and He consumed them, the Egyptians might say, "For evil did He bring them forth to slay them on the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth." And thus the Lord's character might be misunderstood and maligned amongst the nations around.

How could God maintain his character with his own people without imperiling it with the Egyptians? If he spared the people, they would begin to think that neither his threats nor his promises were worth their heed. And if He destroyed them, his glory would be dimmed; and He might seem to have become unmindful of the oath which He swore by Himself to his servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, that He would multiply their seed, and give the land of Canaan to them as an heritage forever. So greatly did these considerations weigh with Moses, that he refused the Divine offer to make him the only survivor of the host, and the progenitor of a great nation.

It would almost seem as if this proposal resembled the suggestion made to Abraham, that he should offer up his only son, Isaac.

In each case God tried or tested his servant. But there is this great difference between the temptations of the devil and of God. The former seeks to bring out all the evil, and to make it permanent, as the streams of lava poured from the heart of a volcano: the latter seeks to bring out all the good, and to make it ours; for moral qualities never become ours till we have put them into practice.

II. THE EMOTIONS WITH WHICH HIS SOUL WAS STIRRED

In the mount he acted as intercessor. When God told him all that was transpiring in the plain below, and showed the glittering sword of justice suspended over the guilty nation by a thread, he pleaded for the people whom he loved.

"And Moses besought the Lord his God . . . Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people." "And the Lord repented of the evil which He thought to do unto his people."

On his way down from the mount, when he came near enough to see the calf and the dancing, peering over some over-hanging ledge of rock, the old impetuous vehemence which had characterized him in earlier life, and had slept for so many years, broke out with all its early intensity. It was not against the people, but against their sin, that his anger flamed out.

"Moses anger waxed hot; and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount."

Those splintered bits leaping from crag to crag are an apt symbol of the inability of man, even the holiest, to keep intact the holy Law of God.

When he reached the camp, he seems to have strode into the astonished throng, broken up their revelry, and overturned their calf, ordering it to be destroyed, and the fragments mingled with the water they drank. But as this did not avail to stay the inveterate evil, he was compelled to use more drastic measures, and by the sword of Levi to extinguish it with the life-blood of three thousand men.

Then when the next day came, when the camp was filled with mourning over those newly-made graves, when the awful reaction had set in on the people and himself, the tide seems to have turned. His indignation was succeeded by bitter sorrow and pity. The thunderstorm was broken into floods of tears. The pitiable state to which their sin had reduced them aroused his deepest compassion; and he said unto the people, **“Ye have sinned a great sin: and now I will go up unto the Lord, peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin”** (ver. 30); but he did not tell them the purpose which was in his heart, nor the price which he was purposing to pay.

III. THE OFFER THAT HE MADE

He went quietly and thoughtfully back to the presence-chamber of God, as the people stood beholding. **“Peradventure,”** he had said he was not sure. He felt that the sin was very great. He could not see how God could go back from his solemn threatenings. He was convinced that if the merited judgments were averted, it must be in consequence of an atonement. Yet, what atonement could there be? Animals could not avail, though they were offered in hecatombs. There was only one thing he could suggest - he could offer himself.

He was, of course, by no means clear that even this would be accepted or avail; but he could at least make the offer. This was the secret which he locked in his breast as he climbed the mountain. And it was this which made him say, **“Peradventure.”** He could not be sure that the ransom price would be large enough.

It may be asked how he came to think of atonement - but we must remember that probably there had already been much talk between God and himself about the sacrifices which the people were to offer. Again and again had the word atonement been employed: he had learned that one by suffering could redeem others; he had seen the deep possibilities in the law of substitution; and it seemed a natural thing, therefore, to propose that he, the chosen servant, the prince and leader of the people, should be weighed in the scale against the nation, and God should accept his blood as a ransom for their life.

And Moses confessed his people’s sin to God, and added:

“Yet now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin”.

He would not finish that sentence. He could not trust himself to depict the blessed consequences that would ensue, if only God would forgive.

If Thou wilt forgive, freely, and without a ransom price, then thy noblest attributes will appear; then my tongue shall sing aloud of thy goodness; then I will bind myself to thy service with new enthusiasm; then the people surely will become touched with the passion of gratitude and love.

But the dark fear oppressed him that free pardon was too much to expect.

Ah, how little did he realize the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord! And he therefore added: **“And if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of thy book which Thou hast written.”**

That book may be the Book of Life; or it may be the registry of God’s people, whether in this life or in the next. So that the proposal was either that he should there and then die, and not see the good land beyond Jordan; or that he should cease to be numbered with God’s people, and miss forever the beautiful vision, finding his portion among the reprobate.

This proposal was made deliberately and thoughtfully. He had had ample time to think it over during the long and tedious climb from the mountain foot. He was quite prepared for God to accept it. He would have counted himself highly honoured to have been allowed to be a sin-offering on those heights.

Oh, how the heart of God must have moved towards the faithful servant, whose proposal recalled another scene in the far-away ages of eternity, when the Son of God undertook to redeem man by making an atonement through the shedding of his own Blood!

Of course, the offer was not accepted. No one can atone for his own sin, much less for the sins of others. Yet the people were spared. The passing by of their transgression was rendered possible by the propitiation which was to be offered in the course of the ages on the Cross (Romans 3:25).

And though they were threatened with the loss of the Divine presence in its richer manifestations, yet the Angel of God was sent before them to lead them into the land of promise.

~ end of chapter 19 ~

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