

MOSES: The Servant of God

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AT THE FOOT OF SINAI

“And Mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly” (Exodus 19:18).

FROM Rephidim the children of Israel marched slowly and laboriously through the great thoroughfare of the desert now known as the Wady-es-Sheykh, the longest, widest, and most continuous of those vast desert valleys. It must have been an astonishing exchange from the flat alluvial land of Egypt, where the only hills were those raised by the hands of man. On either side of the pilgrim host, lofty and precipitous mountains reared their inaccessible ramparts of red sandstone and variegated granite, without verdure, or gushing rills, or trace of living thing. They must have appeared like the majestic corridors of a vast temple, to the inner shrine of which the pillar of cloud was conducting them by its stately march.

The Red Sea, which must have become like a friend, had been long ago left behind; and there was no chance of retracing their path or returning. There was nothing to allure them or arrest their steps amid the awful desolation and grandeur of those inaccessible precipices. They would be sometimes almost overwhelmed by the bare sterility of the scene, and by the awful silence that was stirred to resent the intrusion of such a multitude upon its ancient reign. But their course was always onwards; and a deepening awe must have grown upon their souls, such as became those who were already treading the precincts of a temple not made with hands, a shrine of incomparable majesty, to which those vast and sublime avenues were the befitting approach.

At last it broke on them. After a march of eighteen miles from the Red Sea, they came out on a perfectly level plain of yellow sand, some two miles long, and half-a-mile wide, nearly flat, and dotted over with tamarisk bushes.

The mountains which gather around this plain have for the most part sloping sides, and form a kind of natural amphitheatre; but towards the south there is one pile of jagged cliffs which rises sheer upwards in wild precipitousness, whilst behind lies the granite mass of Gebel Mousa, deeply cleft with fissures, and torn, as though it had fought a hard battle with earthquake, storm, and fire. This pile of rocks is called Ras Sufsafah, and was probably **“the mountain . . . burned with fire.”** It rises from the plain below as a huge altar; and all that transpired on its summit would have been easily visible to the furthest limits of the camp of two million souls pitched beneath.

Such was the chosen scene for the giving of the Law. There the hosts of Israel remained stationary for long weeks; and there, whilst clouds veiled the heights, and fire played from peak to peak, and mysterious voices, resembling at times a trumpet's notes, awoke unwonted echoes in the heart of the hills, God met with his people and gave them his Law; writing his name, not on tablets of stone merely, but on the entire course of human history.

I. GOD'S OBJECT AT SINAI

We can but briefly touch on this, as we are most of all concerned with the character of the great leader; but in that more exclusive study we may for a moment consider the impressions which the marvellous scenes associated with Sinai were calculated to produce on the people and on himself.

At the time of the Exodus the world was almost wholly given to idolatry. The first objects of idolatrous worship were probably simply the sun and moon and heavenly bodies, or other conspicuous objects of creative wisdom and power. Afterwards the Deity was supposed to reside in men, and even beasts.

Of these, images were made and worshipped at first covered with drapery, but afterwards in a state of nudity, and exerting the most demoralizing effect.

“Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves” (Romans 1:22-24).

In dealing with this deluge of idolatry, God acted as with the deluge of water that drowned the ancient world. He began with a single family, teaching them the sublime lessons concerning Himself; which when they had perfectly acquired, they were to make the common coin of the world.

Let us notice the successive steps.

First Step. *God chose from the masses of heathendom one man, “**called him alone,**” and led him to follow Him into a strange land.*

There, shut away from surrounding peoples, He began to teach him about Himself. As a gardener selects one plant that he may bring it to rare perfection, and make it the means of improving the entire sisterhood, so the Lord spared no time or pains with the first great Hebrew, that being blessed he might be the means of blessing to the race.

Second Step. *God welded the Hebrew people together into one, that they might be able to receive and retain as a part of their national life those great truths with which they were to be entrusted.*

This welding was accomplished by the tie of common parentage, of which they were justly proud; by the bond of a common occupation, which kept them to themselves as shepherds, apart from the busy traffic of cities and marts of commerce; and, lastly, by the pressure of a common trial, which, together with the marvellous deliverance that was granted them, remained fresh and indelible in all after generations, like those colors in the land of their bondage, which in the dry desert air have lasted in unfading vividness for thirty centuries.

So perfectly did God do this work, that while other nations have risen, reigned, and fallen, and their disintegration has been utter and final, the children of Abraham endure, like an imperishable rock, undestroyed by the chafe of the waves or the fret of the ages.

Third Step. God revealed his existence

Into the midst of their bondage tidings came that the god of their fathers was a living God; that He had met one of their number in the desert and had called him by name, and had promised to interfere in their behalf.

The news may have excited but a languid interest.

They were glad that like other nations of the time they had their tutelary deity, but that was all; and they knew little or nothing beside.

Fourth step. God showed by the plagues that He was stronger than the gods of Egypt.

Can you not imagine the children of Israel saying, "Our God is great, He has turned the water into blood; but perhaps He is not so strong as Isis, or Osiris, or Serapis, or the sacred bull"? But the wonders which were wrought on the gods of Egypt settled that question for ever.

Fifth step. God excited their love and gratitude.

You can do anything you like with those you love: but to get, you must give; to excite love, you must declare it. Hence they were touchingly reminded of what He had done: "**Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles wings, and brought you unto Myself**" (Exodus 19:4).

Sixth step. God set Himself to teach them concerning certain of those great qualities, the knowledge of which lay at the foundation of all right dealings between the people and Himself.

And in order to achieve his purpose, He made use of outward significant signs; which did more than the most elaborate discourse to instruct the ignorant and sensual people whom He had taken for his own.

Seventh step. God clearly designated Moses to be the organ and channel of his communications to man. "Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and believe thee for ever" (ver. 9).

It was impossible to forecast the way in which God was fulfilling his purposes at the time; but as we look back on the story we can detect the development of his plan, just as from the summits of the eternal hills we shall see the way by which He has been leading us all the days of our pilgrimage.

II. THE LESSONS OF SINAI

(1) *The Majesty of God.*

The natural scenery was sufficiently majestic; but it became more so as the incidents of the third day were unfolded.

Was there not majesty in the thunders and lightnings;

- In the brooding cloud where clouds were almost unknown;
- In the flashing lightning dispelling the pitchy gloom;
- In the trumpet peal echoing through the hills now soft as a flute rolling through the yielding air, now loud as an organ striking against some outstanding cliff?

Meanwhile the clouds dropped water, and there were showers of tropical rain. And it was amid such scenes that God spake. Could any combination of natural phenomena have given grander conceptions of the Majesty of the Divine Nature?

(2) *The Spirituality of God.*

What was their God like? Would He assume the form of anything that is in the Heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth?

Would it be in any, or in a combination of all, of these forms that they should see Him who had brought them out of Egypt? But on that memorable occasion, “**when Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God,**” they saw no likeness.

He was there, for He spoke. But there was no outward form for the eye to discern. It was very hard. The extreme difficulty of the human heart accustoming itself to the worship of what the eye cannot perceive, or the imagination realize, has been attested by the repeated relapse into idolatry, from the days of the golden calf to the crucifix which the Roman Catholic devotee presses to her lips.

It has not been easy for mankind to learn this lesson so clearly taught on Sinai, that God is a Spirit.

(3) *The Holiness of God.*

This primal lesson was also taught in striking fashion by outward signs which impressed the sense.

Bounds were erected to keep the beasts from grazing on the thin herbage of the lower slopes; whoever touched the Mount must die; all clothes were to be carefully washed against that third day; absolute purity was to be observed in heart and life; Moses alone was called up to the top of the Mount, where smoke and fire and lightning flash commingled, and the thunder peal vied with the trumpet-blast; and when he had climbed thither, he was sent all the way down again for the express purpose of charging the people, and even the priests, not to break through upon the Lord to gaze, lest God should break forth upon them. All these significant acts converged to give outward and sensible manifestation of the Holiness of God.

(4) The Royalty of God.

In their triumphal ode of victory by the shores of the Red Sea, the people had confessed the right of the Lord to reign over them for ever; but they were yet to learn that He was indeed absolute monarch.

The Jewish state was a kingdom, and God was King. And the reality of his government appeared in the way in which Moses himself obeyed his behest. It was a sight never to be forgotten to see how their great leader Moses was absolutely subservient to the command issued from God's pavilion. At the best he was only God's executor, "the passive instrument of the Divine will."

The Decalogue was spoken by God Himself **"out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice"** (Deuteronomy 5:22).

Every ordinance of the Law, every custom and provision for domestic and civil life, every item in the construction of the sanctuary and in the ordering of the priests, was due to the direct will of God, spoken from his mouth.

"God, and not Moses, was the author of each proviso, the real Legislator, the real Law-giver, the real King; Moses was but the mouthpiece, an intermediary to communicate God's decrees to his people."

How clear was the testimony to the supremacy of the Most High! Such were some of the lessons taught at Sinai.

III. MOSES AT SINAI

He seemed at home there. Though as to his physical system he could not but fear and quake from the unwonted accompaniments of the Divine Glory, yet there was no slavish dread such as would make him draw afar off, as the people did.

Mark the successive stages in that familiarity between him and God.

"Moses went up unto God" (Exodus 19:3). Having reported God's words to the people, he returned to tell the people's words to the Lord; for we are told **"he went down from the mount unto the people"** (ver. 14). When The Lord came down in thunder and smoke, for the third time Moses went up to the top of the mount (ver. 20).

When the ten words of the Law had been spoken, Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was (Exodus 20:21). After this, he was bidden to ascend the mountain a fifth time, the elders accompanying him to a certain point, and Joshua still further; but he alone entering the cloud, which was like devouring fire on the top of the mount: and he remained there forty days and forty nights to receive the Divine instructions for the erection of the Tabernacle (Exodus 24:18).

A sixth time he returned unto God, offering to be blotted from his book, if only Israel might be spared, and their sin atoned (Exodus 32:32). And yet a seventh time he was invited to come up early in the morning, carrying with him two tablets of stone; and there, as he stood in an alcove of the rocks, the presence of God passed by, and the name of God was proclaimed, and he remained for a second period of forty days and forty nights, descending to the people with shining face, the living evidence of the reality and closeness of the fellowship. **“And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend”** (Exodus 33:11).

This fellowship had an ennobling effect on his character. Not only did his face shine, but his life shone also. There was henceforth a supernatural grace and beauty about his aspect and demeanor which clearly marked him out as **“the man of God.”** His meekness, his gentleness under provocation, his jealousy for the name and cause of God, burnt with an intenser and more even flame.

The life of fellowship with God cannot be built up in a day. It begins with the habitual reference of all to Him, hour by hour, as Moses did in Egypt. But it moves on to more and longer periods of communion. And it finds its consummation and bliss in days and nights of intercession and waiting and holy intercourse.

- Ah, what patterns are seen on the Mount!
- What cries are uttered there!
- What visions are seen there!
- What revelations are made there!
- What injunctions are received there!

Alas for us that we remove so far away from it! or at the best are admitted to stand only with the elders, and see paved work of sapphire stone beneath God's feet! Oh for the closer access, the nearer view, the more intimate face to face intercourse, such as is open still to the friends of God!

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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