

MOSES: The Servant of God

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE GIFT OF MANNA

“When the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground. And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna (What is it?) for they wist not what it was. And Moses said unto them, It is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat” (Exodus 16:14-16).

WE may encamp at Elim, and stay for long happy days in its green bowers, but we may not live there; at least the majority may not. It is so much harder, and needs so much more grace, to remain devoted and earnest, to retain the girt loin and the soldier-like bearing, in its soft, enervating climate, than on the bare and sterile sand of the desert, with its rare and stimulating air.

Few characters are able to reach their highest and noblest excellence amid the genial conditions through which at times each life is permitted to pass. Therefore it is that, though the cloud of the Divine guidance broods at Elim long enough to recruit us, it soon gathers up its folds, and commences its majestic progress over the desert expanse, leaving us no alternative but to strike our tents and follow. So it is said that **“they took their journey from Elim; and all the congregation of the children of Israel came unto the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai”** (ver. 1).

Farewell to the seventy palm-trees and the twelve water-springs! Farewell to the brief, bright hours of respite from the blinding glare of the desert! But He whose nature was mirrored in that exquisite beauty, who was able to reproduce any number of Elims if He chose He could never be left behind, but always must accompany his people. It is immaterial whether He locates us amid verdure or desert. He is responsible to make up from his own resources for that which is lacking in outward circumstance. What if there are no palm-trees? The shadow of the Almighty must be our shelter from the sultry heat.

There are things about God, and his ability to supply all needs of the soul of man, which could not be learnt in any Elim, with all its beauty; and can only be acquired where its bowers are exchanged for those long corridors of rock which lead to the foot of Sinai, as the ancient approaches of obelisks conducted to the pillared halls of Karnak. The eagle-wings on which God bears his people are only spread beneath them when the nest is broken up and left.

The supremacy of God over all natural laws is only learnt when they are seen to stand before Him as the angels who do his bidding, hearkening unto the voice of his word.

The patient tenderness of God, the mother-side of his nature, is only apparent where a whole host breaks out into the sobbings of a querulous child. The punctuality of God is more easily discerned in the spread breakfast-table of the wilderness than in the procession of the seasons or the march of worlds. It is well, then, to leave Elim; beyond it lie Sinai, Pisgah, and Canaan.

I. THE DESERT MURMURINGS

It was a great aggravation of the responsibilities which already lay heavily on the heart of Moses, to have to encounter the perpetual murmurings of the people whom he loved so well. It only drove him continually back on his Almighty Friend and Helper, to pour into his most tender and sympathizing ear the entire tale of sorrow. But the repeated outbreak of these murmurings all along the wilderness route only sets in more conspicuous prominence the beauty of his gentle meekness, and the glory of his faith, which probably was the one channel through which the power of God wrought for the salvation and blessing of his people.

The race of murmurers is, alas! not extinct. Lips which have joined in singing consecration hymns, sometimes give passage to complaints. And we are none of us so careful as we ought to be to restrain the expression of discontent. How often are murmurings mingled with the food we eat, because we are not exactly pleased with its quality or preparation; with the weather, because it does not quite fit in with our plans; with our daily calling, because it is irksome and distasteful; and with the presence or absence of certain persons in our lives!

Murmurers are short of Memory.

It was only one short month since the people had come forth out of Egypt a month crowded with the wonders which the right hand of the Lord had wrought. The chronicler specially notes that it was the fifteenth day of the second month, and adds, **“The whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness; and the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh-pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into the wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger”** (verses 2 and 3).

They could remember very well the sensual delights of Egypt; but they forgot the lash of the taskmaster, and the anguish of heart with which they wrought at the kneading of the clay. They forgot how graciously God had provided for their needs, ever since they had stood around their tables to eat the flesh of the paschal lamb. They forgot the triumph-song, which recorded their undoubting faith that God would bring them in and plant them in the land of their inheritance. None of these things availed to stay the torrent of their murmuring complaint.

Whenever a murmuring fit threatens, let us review the past, and recount the Lord's dealings with us in bygone years.

- Did He deliver in six troubles, and is He likely to forsake us in the seventh?
- Has He ransomed our souls from the power of the grave, and will He not regard the body, which is included in the purchase-money?

When the Psalmist complained, and his spirit was overwhelmed, he tells us that he considered the days of old, the years of ancient times; he called to remembrance his song in the night; he remembered the years of the right hand of the Most High.

“I will remember the works of the Lord; surely I will remember thy wonders of old.” And as at the summons of memory, the sea of the past gives up its dead, each risen record of God’s goodness will condemn the murmur, and rally the wavering faith.

Murmurers are short of Sight.

They fail to see that behind all the appearances of things there lie hid the Presence and Providence of God. Moses called the attention of the people to this fact, which enhanced so gravely the magnitude of their offence. They thought that they were only venting their spleen on a man like themselves.

Annoyed and apprehensive, it was some relief to expend their spleen on the one man to whom they owed everything. Ah! how vain it is to trust the populace, which to-day cries Hosanna; to-morrow, Crucify! But their faithful leader showed them that their insults were directed not against himself, but against Him whose servant he was, and at whose bidding everything was being wrought. **“The Lord heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against HIM; and what are we? Your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord”** (ver. 8).

It becomes us to ponder well those words. Some of God’s children are more willing to admit a general providence than a special particular one. But the former involves the latter. The whole teaching of Jesus compels us to believe in a care which counts the hairs of our heads. The very necessities of our education demand a Divine superintendence of the insignificances and commonplaces of life. God must be in all things, ordaining and permitting them.

It is impossible, therefore, to grumble, without the sword of our words cutting through the gauze-like drapery of what we see, and wounding Him whom circumstances scarcely avail to hide. Grumbings, murmurings, complaints, these are directed against the will and arrangement and plan of God. And their cure is to accept all things from his hand, to acquiesce in his wise appointments, and to believe that He is securing the very best results.

Murmurers are Short of Faith.

The pressure of want had begun to make itself felt but very slightly, if at all, on the host. It was not so much the hardship that they were at that moment experiencing, but that which they thought to be imminent. Provisions were running short; supplies were becoming exhausted; the slender store refused to be eked out beyond a comparatively short period. It was thus that they came to Moses and murmured.

God often delays his help. He tarries ere He comes, long enough to bring us to the end of ourselves, and to show the futility of looking for creature aid. At such times we too often evade the lesson which He would teach, and bemoan our hard lot, though it is only a suggestion of our fearful hearts.

From the marshy swamps of our inner life arises the miasma of unbelief, in the folds of which our imagination affects to descry gaunt and fearful objects; and immediately we think that they have, or will have, a real existence, we fall straightway all along on the earth, and are sore afraid, as Saul before the ghost of Samuel.

Too many of God's children despond because of what they dread, and break out into murmurings that they are going to be killed; when if they were to stop to think for a single moment, they would see that God is pledged by the most solemn obligations to provide for them. Why do you murmur? It is because you doubt. Why do you doubt? It is because you will look out on the future, or consider your circumstances, apart from God.

But when the eye is single in its steadfast gaze towards Him - His love, His wisdom, His resources faith grows strong, reads his love in his eyes, reckons on his faithfulness, and realizes that He who spared not his own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, will with Him also freely give us all things.

How different to this murmuring life was that of our blessed Lord, who also was led into the wilderness, and was without food for forty days! But He did not complain; no word of murmuring passed his lips, although He might have remonstrated with the Father for dealing thus with one who had always yielded Him a prompt and glad obedience.

And even when He hungered, and the devil suggested that hunger was not becoming to the newly-designated Son of God, He meekly said that it was enough for Him to have his Father's will. He was prepared for all that it might involve. He insisted that if God withheld bread, He would sustain the body He had made in some other way.

The Son never for a moment questioned his Father's right to follow any line of procedure He chose, and was apparently perfectly satisfied. He had learnt the secret of how to be full and to be hungry, how to abound and to suffer need. He did not live by bread alone; but by every word that proceeded out of the mouth of God. And in this Divine patience He has shown how murmuring may find no foothold, and how the soul may be braced to endure hardship.

II. THE WILDERNESS FOOD

It is not for us to tell here the whole story of the manna, with its wealth of spiritual reference to the true Bread, which is Christ. It is enough to remember:

To look up for our supplies. "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."

For the believer there are five sources from which help may come; for in addition to the four quarters of the winds he looks up to the heavens. There came from Heaven the sound of the rushing of a mighty wind. Look higher, child of God, to the heart and hand of the Father!

To feed on the heavenly bread daily and early. "They gathered it every morning, and when the sun waxed hot it melted."

There is no time like the early morning hour for feeding on the flesh of Christ by communion with Him, and pondering his words. Once lose that, and the charm is broken by the intrusion of many things, though it may be they are all useful and necessary. You cannot re-make the broken reflections of a lake swept by wind. How different is that day from all others, the early prime of which is surrendered to fellowship with Christ! Nor is it possible to live to-day on the gathered spoils of yesterday. Each man needs all that a new day can yield him of God's grace and comfort. It must be daily bread.

To feed on Christ is the only secret of strength and blessedness.

If only believers in Christ would realize and appropriate the lesson so clearly taught in this narrative, as well as in the wonderful discourse which our Lord founded upon it (John 6:22-58), they would find themselves the subjects of a marvellous change.

It is almost incredible how great a difference is wrought by the prolonged and loving study of what the Scriptures say concerning Him. To sit down to enjoy them; to read two or three chapters, an epistle, or a book, at a sitting; to let the heart and mind steep in it; to do this before other intruders have noisily entered the heart and distracted its attention ah, how this transforms us!

We close this chapter, however, by calling attention to the remarkable expression used by our Lord, when He said, “**Moses gave you not that bread from heaven**” (John 6:32); intimating that though Moses did not give that eternal Bread of which He was speaking, yet he did give some sort of bread, i.e., the manna: so that there was a sense in which the faithful servant procured and gave daily the provision on which his people fed.

We are not unfamiliar, in these days, with instances in which the faith of one man avails to procure the daily food of hundreds of orphans and of others. God gives to them that they may give to those with whom they are charged. But all these are dwarfed before the stupendous miracle of a faith that was capable of covering the desert place with food for forty years!

No one who reads these words need ever hesitate to enter into partnership with God for any enterprise to which the Almighty may summon him.

The only thing that is at all necessary is to be quick to catch the faintest expression of his will, prompt to obey, and strong to persevere. When these conditions are fulfilled, the soul walks with God in blessed companionship; taking pleasure in difficulty, straitness, famine, and peril, because each of these becomes a foil for the display of the Divine resources, who makes even mountains a way. Such an one is perfectly indifferent to murmuring or applause, to censure or praise; since the soul is engrossed with a companionship which is perfect bliss, because perfect satisfaction.

Let us, then, unceasingly make our boast in the Lord, as we step out on to the unknown and untried. And who shall lament the beauty of Elim, or the fleshpots of Egypt, or the frugal meals of Jethro’s tent, when such lessons are to be learnt in the society of our eternal Friend, who can never fail those who dare to trust Him; and who gives to the uttermost capacity of our faith, that we may in turn give as much as they need to those poor friends of ours, who knock us up with entreaties for help and bread (Luke 11:5-9).

~ end of chapter 14 ~

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