

MOSES: The Servant of God

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE PASSAGE OF THE RED SEA

“The waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left. Thus the Lord saved Israel out of the hand of the Egyptians” (Exodus 14:29, 30).

IT was not long after the hour of midnight before the entire Israelite host was on the move; and as the morning light suffused the cloudlets with its flush, it beheld them marching, the men five abreast, whilst wives and children and baggage and cattle followed. From different points the vast host which, judging by the fact that the number of the men amounted to six hundred thousand, could not have been less than two and a half millions converged towards the central meeting-place at Succoth.

Moses probably led the largest of several detachments; and we can almost imagine the flush of honest pride upon his face, mingling with a sense of profound humility, that he had been honoured, in the hand of God, to become the instrument of so great a deliverance.

Succoth would be about fifteen miles from their starting-place, and there they made their first prolonged halt; baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they had brought with them; rested the weary women and children in leafy tabernacles hastily improvised from the foliage of that region: so that the whole host, heartened and refreshed, was able to undertake its second stage, which was Etham, on the edge of the wilderness, where the green vegetation of Egypt fades into wastes of sand.

There is one episode in this setting forth that we must not forget to mention, and which shows how largely the whole Exodus was wrought in faith, at least in the case of Moses, and perhaps of more. **“And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him”** (13:19).

This great ancestor of their race had been dead some four hundred years; but on his death-bed he had made his brethren swear that when God visited them, as He most surely would, and brought them out of Egypt, they should bear his bones with them in their march. In his death, and through that weary waiting time, he had been the prophet of the Exodus; and how often must those unburied bones have been the theme of conversation in Hebrew homes!

And now that they were accompanying their march, all the people realized that the anticipations of generations were being fulfilled. **“God had surely visited them.”**

I. THE GUIDING PILLAR

In the campaigns of Alexander the Great, we are told that a brazier riled with combustibles and elevated on a high pole indicated his pavilion, and directed the march of his victorious armies. But a still greater spectacle came into view as that Hebrew host broke away from the land of bondage.

Who has not seen in a summer sky some majestic cumulus cloud sailing slowly through the heavens, as if it had taken the impression of some mighty Alp, whose cliffs, recesses and snows were being reduplicated in its shape and color? Something of this sort must have gathered in the pure morning atmosphere at the head of the vanguard, never again to desert that pilgrim band till the Jordan was crossed and it had settled down to brood over the house of God. But all through the years, when night fell, it burnt with fire at its heart; fire, which was always the symbol and sign of the presence of God. This served many purposes.

It was the guide of their march; it was a shadow from the burning heat of a vertical sun, spreading its folds in fleecy beauty to shelter them in a “**weary land**”; and at night it provided them with a light as it watched over them like the Eye of God. On one occasion, at least, as we shall see presently, it rendered the utmost service by concealing the movements of Israel, lying between them and the pursuit of their foes.

There is no pillar of cloud and fire now long since it has faded from the sky; but it was in probable allusion to its blessed help that JESUS said, “**I am the Light of the World,**” indicating by his use of a well-known phrase, that what the cloud had been to Israel, He was prepared to be to every soul of man.

He is our Guide; by his Spirit within us, by the example of his life, by the words of his Gospel, and by the manifold indications of his providence, He conducts us over the wastes of our earthly pilgrimage to the land where we would fain be. Do not anticipate Him by rash haste, or by acting on your own hurriedly-formed conclusions. Do not lag behind Him indolently. Dare to wait for months, or even years, if He give no indication that the time has come to strike your tents and follow.

He is our Shield; beneath his canopy we may shelter from the arrows of the sun of temptation or of prosperity, and from the glare of worldly success.

He is our Light; those who follow Him do not walk in the darkness of ignorance, impurity, or sorrow, but have the light of life. Draw the curtain of your tent, Christian pilgrim! look out into the night already glowing with the myriad stars of promise; amid them all behold the sign that He is with you, who slumbers not, nor sleeps, and to whom the night shineth as the day.

In the thought of Moses, that cloud by day and night must have been full of re-assurance, because it was the very chariot of God, in which He went before his people. And it is very touching to learn that “**He took it not away,**” as if neither sin, nor murmuring, nor disobedience, could ever drive away Him who loves us, not because we are good, but to make us so; and who cannot leave or forsake those whom He has taught to lisp, “**Abba, Father.**”

II. THE ROUTE

The easiest route to Canaan lay through the Isthmus of Suez and the land of the Philistines.

A journey of a little over one hundred miles would have conducted them direct to their destination. But God did not permit them to go that way, lest the sight of embattled hosts should unnerve them. In after years, when the education and revelations of the desert were finished, they might behold those scenes undismayed. But as yet they must not know war till they had been more deeply taught in the might and care of God. So is our journey ever adapted to our strength. God is always considering what we are able to bear; never leading us into dangers before which heart and flesh would succumb. **“God led them about.”**

The leading about tries our patience; but it is the best route for timid hearts and inexperienced feet.

It must have been a great disappointment when the cloud altered its course, and led them due south. But there was no alternative; and so they finally found themselves encamped in the last place in all the land that human judgment would have selected.

It would appear as if Moses himself would have hesitated encamping there, had he not been distinctly commanded to bid the children of Israel take up that position. On one side of them was Migdol (the modern Muktala) and impassable wastes of sand; on the other was the Red Sea. East of them, or, as it might be, in front, was the impassable range of Baal-Zephon.

It was a perfect cul-de-sac. There was no egress from it except the way by which they had entered. The most inexperienced eyes in the whole multitude must have seen the apparent absurdity of the movement; and loud and deep must have been the murmurs and protestations of the people. “Is this the way to Canaan? We know better! How dare you presume to lead us, when your very first tactics prove you to be wholly untrustworthy? Well for you and us that Pharaoh has his son to bury; or if he came after us we should be like a penned flock of sheep, the prey of the first wolf that can leap the hurdles!”

Such reflections and reproaches are not easy to bear. They can only be borne by a man who has learnt utterly to trust his God. But they made no impression on Moses. He knew Him whom he believed. He had learnt to obey Him implicitly, and to see himself always completely vindicated.

“Though a host should encamp against him, his heart should not fear; though war should rise against him, in this would he be confident.”

Oh for more of this simple trust in God, which rests so distinctly in his guidance and help! that the believer will dare to do what to the eye of others are marks of insanity and wild fanaticism, but which are vindicated by the result. Often God seems to place his children in positions of profound difficulty leading them into a wedge from which there is no escape; contriving a situation which no human judgment would have permitted had it been previously consulted. The very cloud conducts them thither.

You, reader, may be thus involved at this very hour. It does seem perplexing and mysterious to the last degree. But it is perfectly right. The issue will more than justify Him who has brought you hither. It is a platform for the display of his almighty grace and power. He will not only deliver you, but in doing so He will give you a lesson that you will never forget; and to which, in many a psalm and song in after days, you will revert. You will never be able to thank God enough for having done just as He has. Had you brought yourself into this position by your caprice, you had perished miserably; but since He has brought you here, you have only to stand still and see his salvation, which is prepared as the morning.

III. THE PURSUIT

No sooner had Israel gone than Pharaoh was sorry. The public works stood still for lack of labour. Vast territories were suddenly unoccupied. The labour of this enslaved people was missed on every side, in city and field. There was a sudden loss of revenue and service which he could ill dispense with. And his pride forbade that he should quietly acquiesce in their unhindered Exodus. Besides, in their mad haste to be rid of this people, the Egyptians had laden them with jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment; so much so that it is distinctly said, **“they spoiled the Egyptians.”**

It is clear from the contributions afterwards made to the building of the Tabernacle, that Israel was carrying off a large amount of treasure and valuables.

“And the heart of Pharaoh, and of his servants, was turned against the people; and they said, Why have we done this, that we have let Israel go from serving us?” (14:5, 6).

At this juncture, the king heard of the extraordinary movement southwards, which seemed to have thrown them again into his power. Surely his gods were recovering their olden power, and were rallying to his aid! And he said, **“I will pursue; I will overtake; I will divide the spoil; my lust shall be satisfied upon them!”**

Then there was great haste, and the marshalling of the chivalry and the pride of Egypt, six hundred of the chosen chariots, with cavalry and infantry, horsemen and foot-soldiers.

“And the Egyptians pursued after them, all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh . . . and overtook them” (14:9).

And so as the afternoon closed in, of perhaps the fifth day of the Exodus, the outposts of the fugitive host beheld the dreaded forms of the Egyptian warriors coming over the ridges of the desert hills; and as the night fell they were aware that the whole Egyptian host was encamped in their near vicinity, only waiting for the morning light to swoop down on them, involving them either in a general massacre, or in what was, perhaps, more dreadful, a return to slavery.

It was an awful plight. Terrible, indeed, was the breaking of that news on those craven hearts. They immediately turned on Moses, and spent their fear and anguish on his heart.

“Wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us? Were there no graves in Egypt? Better to have perished there than here! Why did you not leave us alone? Where is your God? “

And then that noble spirit rose up in the might of its faith, and in the words he spake we read his own inner attitude. He was not fearful nor dismayed, his cheeks were unblanched, his heart untroubled; he was standing still to see God’s salvation, he was perfectly sure that it would be forthcoming that day; and he knew that the Lord would fight for them, and redeem them, and vindicate his word. So we shall see in our next chapter.

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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