

MOSES: The Servant of God

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CHAPTER TWENTY

GOD'S PRESENCE OUR REST

“My presence shall go with thee, and I will give you rest” (Exodus 33:14).

THIS assurance of rest is as applicable to the present age as to that of the Exodus. Nay, perhaps there is a special message in it to these feverish days, so filled with discord, confusion, and strife. Its very utterance shows a deep acquaintance with the heart of man. For there is a settled conviction with us all that we are not to live ever thus, the victims of merciless disquiet.

Every revolution the Anarchist's plot and the Socialist's dream, the well-meant effort to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven by social reconstruction is a plea on the part of men for rest. But that rest must be sought deeper down than in circumstances. It must begin at the center of our being, and in its accord with the being of God. His presence must be welcome to us, and accompany us, or rest is a vain dream.

I. THE CIRCUMSTANCES BY WHICH THIS ASSURANCE WAS CALLED FORTH

(1) *Moses was a very lonely man.*

Perhaps more lonely in the midst of the two millions of people whom he was leading as a flock, than he had been amid the solitudes of the desert, tending the flock of Jethro. The very contrast between his lofty enjoyment of Divine communion, and the people, always set on sensual pleasure, must have lent intensity to the isolation of his spirit, which reared itself amid their sensual longings, as the peak of Sufsafeh above the lower ranges of Sinai.

“And Moses said unto the Lord, See, Thou sayest unto me, bring up this people; and Thou hast not let me know whom Thou wilt send with me.”

What a sigh there is here for companionship! It is certain that these words will be read by many whose lives are outwardly solitary. Some are left during long hours to bear the burden of the home, or of suffering, or of foreign service, like a sentry on night-duty at a lone post. Others amid crowds are not less solitary; many soldiers, but no brother-officer; many voices, but the one voice missing; many companions, but no friend. In the physical world we are told that in the most solid bodies the atoms do not touch; and how often though the crowd throngs us we are not conscious that any one has touched us. It is to that state of mind that the assurance of the text was given.

(2) In addition to this, the hosts were soon to leave the mountain region of Sinai, with which Moses had been familiar during his shepherd life, in order to take the onward road through unknown deserts, infested by daring and experienced foes.

What though the pillar and cloud led them slowly along those solemn desert pathways, and at night shed a broad flood of light on the clustered tents of the desert encampment; yet the prospect of that journey through the great and terrible wilderness was sufficient to appall the stoutest heart.

Such a summons to arise and depart is often sounding with its bugle-call in our ears.

We are not like those who travel by the metal track of the railroad, on which they have been to and fro every day for years, and are able to tell exactly the names and order of the stations; but like an exploring expedition in an absolutely unknown district, when even the leader, as he leaves his hammock in the morning, does not know where it will be slung at night.

What seems a monotonous life, always the same, does not revolve around a beaten circle, as the horse or ass winding up buckets from a well; but is ever striking out over new tracts of territory, which we have not traversed before.

(3) Still further difficulties had lately arisen in connection with the people's transgression.

From a careful study of the passage it would seem that a change was proposed by their Almighty Friend. Hitherto He had gone in the midst of them.

Now He avowed his intention of substituting an angel for Himself, lest He should suddenly consume the people because of their stiff-neckedness (ver. 3). Already the people had been bidden to strip themselves of their ornaments; and the tent, which was recognized as the temporary pavilion for God, must be pitched without the camp, afar off from the camp, so that those who sought the Lord were compelled to take a considerable journey to reach his visible shrine.

But now it seemed likely that some sensible diminution of the evidence of the Divine presence and favour was about to take place; and the fear of this stirred the soul of the great leader to its depths. Like Jacob at the fords of the Jabbok, he felt that he could not let God go, and he told Him so: **"If thy presence go not with us, carry us not up hence."**

Better abandon thy mighty scheme, slay us at once, and wrap us in a winding sheet of sand, than allow us to take another step without thy presence.

Are there not times with many of us when we have reason to fear that, in consequence of some sad failure or sin on our part, the Lord may be obliged to withdraw the conscious enjoyment of his love? A chill fear lays its icy hand upon the strings of our heart, and almost petrifies it into silence.

“Supposing He should be compelled to leave me to myself, to withdraw his tender mercies, to shut up his compassions. Supposing that I should be like a sledge abandoned in Arctic snows, or a ship abandoned by its crew in mid-ocean. Supposing that the fate of Saul should be mine, and that of me God should say, It repenteth me that I have made him king.”

Such thoughts quicken the pace of the soul as it goes to his footstool.

II. THE PLACE WHERE THIS ASSURANCE WAS GIVEN

The earlier intercourse between the servant, **“faithful in all his house,”** and Him who had appointed him, seems to have been on the mountain summit. But after the outburst of the people’s sin, a change was made which did not necessitate such prolonged or distant absences from the camp. Indeed, he was absent for only one other period of forty days (chap. 34:28) till the time of his death, some thirty-eight years afterwards.

During the prolonged interview which he had been permitted to enjoy, God had spoken to him much of the Tabernacle which was shortly to be reared. He at once saw the blessedness of this proximity of the shrine for worship and fellowship, and his ardent soul seems to have been unable to brook delay.

A tent was therefore selected; it may have been his own, or one specially prepared, and was pitched **“without the camp, afar off from the camp, and called it the Tabernacle of the congregation. And it came to pass, that every one which sought the LORD went out unto the tabernacle of the congregation, which was without the camp”** (Exodus 33:7).

But its special benefit was obvious in the case of Moses himself. It was no longer necessary for him to climb to the mountain summit, entrusted with errands on behalf of the people, or eager for advice in difficult problems. He was able to transact all necessary business by going out to the tent.

And when it was rumored through the camp that he was about to do so, **“all the people rose up”** to see the marvellous spectacle, **“and stood, every man at his tent door,”** looking after him; because, so soon as he entered into the tent, the pillar of cloud descended from its position in mid-Heaven, and stood at the door of the tent, the vehicle and emblem of the Divine presence.

Thus **“the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend”**; and Moses spake to his Father, who is in secret, with the freedom of a child. And as the people beheld that wondrous sight of God stooping to commune with man, they **“rose up and worshipped, every man in his tent door”** (ver. 10).

It was there that this amazing colloquy took place.

Moses spoke of his loneliness, and asked who was to be associated with him in his great task; and contrasted this silence on the part of God in a particular which so closely concerned his comfort and efficiency with all his other dealings with him. **“Yet Thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found grace in my sight”** (ver. 12).

Then it seemed as if that faithful heart suddenly caught sight of a blessing more transcendent in glory than any he had yet dared to ask. His petition was couched in great humility, sandwiched between a double reference to the grace to which he owed everything; but he ventured to suggest that God should Himself show him his ways, that he might know Him.

It was as if he said, Wilt Thou Thyself be my comrade and companion my referee in difficulty; my adviser in perplexity; my friend in solitude? Thine angels are strong and fair and good; but none of them will suffice me, nothing short of Thyself. Without Thee, it were better for me to relinquish my task and die; but with Thee, no difficulty can baffle, no fear alarm, no obstacle deter.

And God's answer came back on his spirit with music and balm, **"My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest"** (ver. 14). Nothing was said as to the people. The promise of the Divine presence was made apparently to Moses alone.

But faith gets bolder as it mounts.

Each answer to its claims makes it claim more. We may seriously question whether our faith is of the right quality if it is unable to compass more in its hand to-day than it did a year ago. And, therefore, Moses not only took the assurance of the Divine presence for himself, but asked that it should be extended to include the people.

"Wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? Is it not in that Thou goest with us? so shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth" (ver. 16).

In this request also he was successful.

"And the Lord said unto Moses, I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken; for thou hast found grace in my sight" (ver. 17).

There are moments of holy intercourse with God, rapturous, golden moments, in the lives of all his servants; when next they visit us, and we would make the most of their brief, bright, rapturous glow, let us plead, not only for ourselves, but for others, asking for them an equal blessedness.

III. THE BLESSEDNESS WHICH THIS ASSURANCE GUARANTEED

- There was, first, *the Divine presence*; and
- There was, secondly, *the promised Rest* not the rest of Canaan, for this Moses never saw; but a deeper and more blessed inheritance, which may be the portion of all faithful souls.

But at their heart these two are one. The Divine presence is Rest.

Of course, the conscious presence of God with us is only possible on three conditions.

Firstly, *we must walk in the light*, as He is in the light; for He will have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, or turn aside to go with us on any crooked path of our own choosing.

Secondly, *we must recognize that the blood of JESUS CHRIST his Son constantly cleanseth us from all sin*; not only that which we judge and confess, but that also which is only seen by his pure and holy eyes.

Thirdly, *we must claim the gracious aid of the Holy Spirit*, to make real that presence, which is too subtle for the eye of man, unless it be specially enlightened.

And above all, we must remember that for us, at least, *that presence is localized in the man CHRIST JESUS*.

For us there is no attenuated mist of presence, though a mist of light; but a Person in whom that presence is made real and touches us. But when these conditions are fulfilled, the blessed soul enters upon an experience of the presence of God which can find no better words to express its bliss than the psalmist's, as he turned from the prosperity of the wicked to consider his own estate: **"Nevertheless, I am continually with Thee; Thou hast holden me by my right hand . . . Whom have I in Heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee"** (Psalm 63:23, 25).

And the sense of that presence is Rest.

I have a vision of a woodland glade. A group of tired, frightened children are cowering around the bole of an old tree, dropping the fragile, withered flowers from their hands and pinafores, as the first great drops of the thunder shower, which had been darkening the sky, begin to fall. They have lost their way; they sob bitterly, and crowd together. Suddenly through the wood there comes a quick step, beneath which the twigs crackle and break - Father has come, and as he carries some in his strong arms through the storm on the nearest track for home, and the others run at his side, they have learnt that there is a presence which is Rest.

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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