

MOSES: The Servant of God

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

HOW IT WENT ILL WITH HIM

“And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice” (Numbers 20:11).

IT was but one act, one little act; but it blighted the fair flower of a noble life, and shut the one soul, whose faith had sustained the responsibilities of the Exodus with unflinching fortitude, from the reward which seemed so nearly within its grasp.

The wanderings of the forty years were almost over. The congregation which had been scattered over the peninsula had converged towards the given meeting-place in Kadesh. There the encampment remained for some months; and there Miriam died one of the few with whom that lonely spirit could still hold converse of that life which lay beyond the desert sands, the valleys of Sinai, and the waters of the Red Sea, in the distant mighty land of the Pharaohs and the Pyramids.

Aaron, Caleb, Joshua (and perhaps the Levites), were the only relics and survivors of that vast triumphant host, whose voices had rung out their challenge on the morning of emancipation; and each of the four thought himself sure, and his comrades also, of going over to **“see the good land that is beyond Jordan, that goodly mountain, and Lebanon.”** But this was not to be.

I. HOW IT BEFELL

The demand of the people on the water supply at Kadesh was so great, that the streams were drained; whereupon there broke out again that spirit of murmuring and complaint which had cursed the former generation, and was now reproduced in their children. Oblivious to the unwavering care of all the preceding years, the people assembled themselves together against Moses, and against Aaron, though it was against Moses that they principally directed their reproach.

- They professed to wish that they had died in the plague that Aaron's censer had stayed.
- They accused the brothers of malicious designs to effect the destruction of the whole assembly by thirst.
- Although the cloud of God brooded overhead, and the manna fell day by day, they cursed their abiding-place as evil.
- They taunted Moses with the absence of figs, vines, and pomegranates.
- They demanded water.

And this was the new generation of which he had cherished such high hopes, the new growth on the old stock! It could hardly have been otherwise than that he should feel strongly provoked.

However, he resumed his old position, prostrating himself at the door of the tent of meeting until the growing light that welled forth from the secret place indicated that the Divine answer was near. Unlike the injunction on a similar occasion, which now lay back in the haze of years, Moses was bidden, though he took the rod, not to use it; but to speak to the rock with a certainty that the accents of his voice, smiting on its flinty face, would have as much effect as ever the rod had had previously, and would be followed by a rush of crystal water.

Yes, when God is with you, words are equivalent to rods; the gentlest whisper spoken in his name will unlock the secrets of rocky chambers, and roll away great stones, and splinter sepulchers where entombed life awaits a summons.

Rods are well enough to use at the commencement of faith's nurture, and when its strength is small; but they may be laid aside without hesitance in the later stages of the education of the soul. For as faith grows, the mere machinery and apparatus it employs becomes ever less; and its miracles are wrought with the slightest possible introduction of the material. Years ago you were bidden to use the rod because your faith was untried; but by this time the greater faith should work through a slighter and more fragile means.

Moses might have entered into these thoughts of God in quieter and more tranquil moments; but just now he was irritated, indignant, and hot with disappointment and anger. When, therefore, the assembly was gathered together in their thronging multitudes around him, he accosted them as rebels. He spoke as if the gift of water depended on himself and Aaron. He betrayed his sense of the irksomeness of their demand, and then vehemently smote the rock with his rod twice. And as those blows re-echoed through the still air, they shivered for ever the fabric woven by his dreams and hopes.

The vision that had allured him through those long years faded as light off Alpine snows at sunset; and angels were sent to choose the site beneath the cliffs of Pisgah, where his body should keep guard at the gate of the Land, in which he had hoped to lie. What a warning is here, admonishing us that we sometimes fail in our strongest point; and that a noble career may be blasted by one small but significant and forever lamentable failure!

“And the LORD spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them” (Numbers 20:12)

The people did not suffer through their leader's sin.

The waters gushed from out the rock as plentifully as they would have done if the Divine injunctions had been precisely complied with. **“The water came forth abundantly; and the congregation drank, and their cattle.”**

Man's unbelief does not make the power of God of none effect: though we believe not, yet He remaineth faithful; He cannot deny Himself, or desert the people of his choice.

II. THE PRINCIPLE THAT UNDERLAY THE DIVINE DECISION

(1) *There was distinct Disobedience.*

No doubt was possible as to the Divine command; and it had been distinctly infringed. He was not to strike, but to speak; and he had twice smitten the rock. In this way he had failed to sanctify God in the eyes of the people. He who ought to have set the example of implicit obedience to every jot and tittle, had inserted his own will and way as a substitute for God's. This could not be tolerated in one who was set to lead and teach the people.

God is sanctified whenever we put an inviolable fence around Himself and his words;

- Treating them as unquestionable and decisive;
- Obeying them with instant and utter loyalty;
- Daring to place them high above all dispute as the supreme rule and guide of conduct.

Therefore, when Moses set them aside to follow the behest of his own whim, it was equivalent to a desecration of the holy name of God. **"Ye did not sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel."**

It is a solemn question for us all whether we are sufficiently accurate in our obedience. It is a repeated burden of those sad chapters of Hebrews, which tell the story of the wilderness wanderings - the cemetery chapters of the New Testament that **"they could not enter in because of unbelief."**

But throughout the verses the margin suggests disobedience; because disobedience and unbelief are the two sides of the same coin a coin of the devil's mintage. They who disobey do not believe; and they who do not believe disobey.

May the great High Priest, with his sharp, two-edged sword, pierce to our innermost heart, to cut away the least symptom of disobedience; then shall faith be strong, and through its gates we shall pass into the land of rest.

(2) *There was Unbelief.*

It was as if he had felt that a word was not enough. As if there must be something more of human might and instrumentality.

There was a too evident reliance upon his own share in the transaction, or on the mysterious power of the rod which had so often wrought great wonders. He thought too much of these, to the exclusion or dwarfing of God's eternal power. He did not realize how small an act on his part was sufficient to open the sluice-gates of Omnipotence. A touch is enough to set Omnipotence in action.

It is very wonderful to hear God say to Moses, **“Ye believed not in Me.”**

Was not this the man by whose faith the plagues of Egypt had fallen on that unhappy land; and the Red Sea had cleft its waters; and the daily manna had spread the desert floor with food; and the people had marched for thirty-eight years unhurt by hostile arm? What had happened? Had the wanderings impaired that mighty soul, and robbed it of its olden strength, and shorn the locks of its might, and left it like any other? Surely, something of this sort must have happened! One act could only have wrought such havoc by being the symptom of unsuspected wrong beneath. Oaks do not fall beneath a single storm, unless they have become rotten at their heart.

Let us watch and pray, lest there be in any of us an evil heart of unbelief; lest we depart in our most secret thought from simple faith in the living God; lest beneath a fair exterior we yield our jewel of faith to the solicitation of some unholy passion. Let us especially set a watch at our strongest point. Just because we are so confident of being strong there, we are liable to leave it unguarded and unwatched, and therefore open to the foe. So shall we be saved from a fall that shall shut the gates of Canaan against us, and consign us to an unknown and untimely grave. But how much there is of this reliance on the rod in all Christian endeavor!

Some special method has been owned of God in times past, in the conversion of the unsaved, or in the edification of God's people, and we instantly regard it as a kind of fetish. We try to meet new conditions by bringing out the rod and using it as of yore. It is a profound mistake. God never repeats Himself. He suits novel instrumentalities to new emergencies. He puts new wine into new bottles. Where a rod was needful once, He sees that a word is better now. It is for us to consult Him, and to abide by his decision; doing precisely as He tells us, and when, and where.

(3) There was the spoiling of the type.

“That Rock was Christ”; from whose heart, smitten in death on Calvary, the river of water of life has flowed to make glad the city of God, and to transform deserts into Edens. But death came to Him, and can come to Him but once.

- **“Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many.”**

- **“The death that He died, He died unto sin once; but the life that He liveth, He liveth unto God.”**

- **“I am He that was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore.”**

These texts prove how important it was to keep clear and defined the fact of the death of CHRIST being a finished act, once for all. It is evident that for the completeness of the likeness between substance and shadow, the rock should have been stricken but once.

Instead of that, it was smitten at the beginning and at the close of the desert march. But this was a misrepresentation of an eternal fact; and the perpetrator of the heedless act of iconoclasm must suffer the extreme penalty, even as Uzzah died for trying to steady the swaying ark.

But there was something even deeper than these things.

There was an eternal fitness in the nature of the case in Moses not being permitted to lead the people into the land of rest. Moses represented the law. It came by him; and he therefore fitly stands before the gaze of the ages as the embodiment of that supreme law, whose eye does not wax dim or its force abate, under the wear and tear of time. But the law can never lead us into rest. It can conduct us to the very margin and threshold, but no further. Another must take us in, the true Joshua - JESUS, the Saviour and Lover of men.

III. THE IRREVOCABLENESS OF THE DIVINE DECISIONS

Moses drank very deeply of the bitter cup of disappointment.

And it seems to have been his constant prayer that God would reverse or mitigate his sentence. **“Let me go over, I pray Thee, and see the good land that is beyond Jordan, that goodly mountain, and Lebanon”** (Deuteronomy 3:25).

No poet could have painted that land with more glowing colours. He dipped his brush in rainbow tints as he spoke of that good land that land of brooks and fountains and depths; that land of wheat and barley, of vines and pomegranates and figs; that land of oil, olives, and honey. And no patriot ever yearned for fatherland as Moses to tread that blessed soil. With all the earnestness that he had used to plead for the people, he now pleaded for himself. But it was not to be. **“The Lord was wroth, and said unto me, Let it suffice thee; speak no more unto Me of this matter.”** The sin was forgiven; but its consequences were allowed to work out to their sorrowful issue. There are experiences with us all in which God forgives our sin, but takes vengeance on our inventions. We reap as we have sown. We suffer where we have sinned.

At such times our prayer is not literally answered. By the voice of his Spirit, by a spiritual instinct, we become conscious that it is useless to pray further. Though we pray, not thrice, but three hundred times, the thorn is not taken away. But there is a sense in which the prayer is answered. Our suffering is a lesson warning men in all after-time. We are permitted from Pisgah's height to scan the fair land we long for, and are then removed to a better. We have the answer given to us in the after-time, as Moses, who had his prayer gloriously fulfilled when he stood with CHRIST on the Transfiguration Mount. And in the meanwhile we hear his voice saying, **“My grace is sufficient for thee; my strength is made perfect in weakness.”**

But oh that God would undertake the keeping of our souls! else, when we least expect it, we may be overtaken by some sudden temptation; which befalling us in the middle, or towards the close of our career, may blight our hopes, tarnish our fair name, bring dishonour to Him, and rob our life of the worthy capstone of its edifice.

~ end of chapter 26 ~

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