

MOSES: The Servant of God

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE DEATH OF MOSES

“So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And He buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Beth-peor”
(Deuteronomy 34:5, 6).

THE Bible is the book of life. Its pages teem with biography; they contain but scant memorials of death. The only death they describe at length is that of Him who in dying slew death. The very minuteness of the description there shows how unique and all-important it was. Men make more of death than of life as a gauge of character. A few pious sentences spoken then will go far to efface the memory of years of inconsistency. God makes most of life.

The records of Scripture find little room for dying testimonies, words, or experiences; whilst they abound in stories of the exploits and words of those who have stormed and suffered and wrought in life's arena. This may explain why, contrary to human custom and expectation, the death of the great Lawgiver is described with such brief simplicity.

But this simplicity is only equaled by the sublimity of the conception. After such a life it was meet that Moses should have a death and burial unparalleled in the story of mankind; and we do not wonder that poet, painter, and preacher, have found in that lonely death on Pisgah's summit a theme worthy of their noblest powers. We can but cull a few wild flowers as they caress that mountain brow; more we must leave to others. Moses death casts a light on sin, and death, and dispensational truth.

I. ITS BEARING ON SIN

We cannot suppose that the sudden outburst of impetuous temper at Meribah when his spirit was agitated by a fierce whirlwind of wrath, as a storm sweeping down some mountain rent on an inland lake could remain long unforgiven. As far as the east is from the west, so far had that transgression been removed. But though the remission was complete, yet the result lingered in his life, and shut him out from an experience which should have been the crown of his career.

“The Lord hath put away thy sin,” said Nathan to the royal transgressor; but **“thy child shall die, and the sword shall not depart out of thy house.”** The dying thief was pardoned; but he suffered in his body the extreme penalty of his sin.

The mistrust which hinders a man from accepting all the benefits of Christ's Ascension is put away; but nothing can compensate him for his loss. Never a word may be spoken about the evil courses that have wrecked the health and fortunes of the Prodigal; but though he sits at his father's board, he can never be in health or vigor or overflowing joy, as he might have been if he had never wandered forth. Nor does sin only entail loss and sorrow on the transgressor; it robs mankind of much of the benefit which otherwise had accrued from his life. If it had not been for his want of faith and his passionate behavior, Moses had led his people across the Jordan, and served them for many an after year.

Let not the ease of pardon ever tempt thee to think lightly of sin, or to imagine that it leaves no traces on soul or life, because it is secure, through penitence and faith, of God's for giving mercy. If one act of mistrustful anger laid Moses, the friend and servant of God, in a desert grave on the frontiers of the Land, what may it not do for thee?

II. ITS BEARING ON DEATH

Its Loneliness.

That majestic spirit had ever lifted itself, like some unsealed peak, amid other men. Into its secrets no foot had intruded, no human eye had peered. Alone it wrought and suffered, and met God, and legislated for the people. But its loneliness was never more apparent than when, unattended even by Joshua, he passed up to die amid the solitudes of Nebo. Alone he trod the craggy steep; alone he gazed on the fair landscape; alone he laid down to die. But in that loneliness there is a foreshadowing of the loneliness through which each of us must pass unless caught up to meet the Lord in the air. In that solemn hour human voices will fade away, beloved forms retire, familiar scenes dim to the sight. Silent and lonely, the spirit migrates to learn for itself the great secret. Happy the man who, anticipating the moment, can say:

“Alone, yet not alone,
my Saviour is with me.
He who went this way by Himself
is now re-treading at my side.”

Its Method.

We die, as Moses did, “**by the word of the Lord.**” It is said in the Hebrew legend that one angel after another sought to take his life in vain. First, there came the one who had been his special instructor; but his courage failed him when he essayed to destroy the fabric on which he had spent so much pains. Then the angel of death was summoned to undertake the task. He eagerly approached him; but when he saw the wondrous luster of his face shining like the sun, and heard him recite the prodigies of his career, he, too, shrank back abashed. And when these great angels had given up the work as surpassing their loftiest powers, Moses turned to the Almighty (so the legend runs) and said, “Thou, Lord of the Universe, who wast revealed unto me in the burning bush, remember that Thou didst carry me up into thy Heaven, where I abode forty days and forty nights; have mercy upon me, and hand me not over into the power of the angel of death.”

This, of course, is the picturesque form in which the love and reverence of after generations elaborated these wonderful words, which tell us that Moses died “**by the word of the Lord.**” Some still further substituted “kiss” for “word”; so that it seemed as if the Almighty had kissed away the soul of his faithful servant, drawing it back to himself in a long, sweet, tender embrace.

Is not this the manner in which all saints die? Their deaths are precious to the Lord, and after the troubled day of life agitated in its early morning by the trumpet calling to battle; fretted through an overcast noon by the pressure of its responsibilities and cares; lit in the evening by the rays of a stormy sunset, piercing through the cloud-drift, the tired spirit sinks down upon the couch, which the hands of God had spread, and He bends over it to give it its good-night kiss, as in earliest days the mother had done to the wearied child. That embrace, however, is the threshold, not of a long night of insensibility, but of an awakening in the supernal light of the everlasting morning.

Its Sepulchre.

We are told that “**the Lord buried him in valley in the land of Moab,**” in spite of the opposition of the Evil One, who contended with the archangel sent to secure that noble deserted shrine. What had the archfiend to do with it? Did he desire to make it vie with the temple of the living God, filching honors which the people would be only too glad to give? We know not; but his purpose was ignominiously frustrated.

God cared for the dead body of his child. Not even the king of terrors could make it distasteful to the Father’s love. Though in ruins, the temple was precious. And so even a band of angels was not permitted to perform the sacred work of interment. We are told that He buried him; as if the Almighty would not delegate the sacred office to an inferior hand. And is it not attributable to the love of that through the love of friendly hearts the last rite rendered to the bodies which CHRIST has purchased?

As we trust God to supply the needs of the body in life; let us trust Him for its burial in death. He marks where the dust of each of his children mingles with its mother earth. When a grave is opened, his eye rests on it; and though foot may ever tread its soil, no hand keep it decked with flowers, He never forgets it; and none will be overlooked when the archangel blows his trumpet over land and sea.

Its Purpose.

We are told that “**the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days;**” and if we connect this statement with the fact of the unknown grave, we shall be able to discern the Divine purpose in its concealment. We often underrate living, and have to wait until they are removed from us that estimate them truly.

Few men have had greater claims on their fellows than Moses.

- He had sacrificed his high position in Pharaoh’s court to bear his people as a nurse through the ailments at their childhood.
- He had enjoyed unparalleled opportunities of fellowship with God.
- He had wielded uncommon power:

- At the bidding of his faith winds had brought meat;
- At the bidding of his faith rocks had gushed with water-springs;
- At the bidding of his faith the sea had parted and met;
- At the bidding of his faith the desert-floor had been strewn with food.

Is it not more than likely that, if the Lord had not concealed his grave, the valley of Beth-peor would have become a second Mecca, trodden by the feet of pilgrims from all the world? It was best to make such idolatry impossible. The hidden grave forced the people to turn from earth to Heaven.

Is not this God's policy with us?

- When Lazarus is dead, the sisters send for JESUS.
- When the gourd is blasted, the pilgrim in the weary land turns to the shadow of the great Rock.
- When no place is found for the sole of her foot, the dove makes for the window of the ark.
- When the supply fails from the rock-cisterns, we are driven to the stream which flows from the throne of God.

This is why your home is desolate, and your heart bereaved. It is for this that he who was to you what Moses was to the people has been removed.

For e'en the cloud
That spreads above, and veiled love,
Itself is love.

It's Vision.

From the spot on which he stood, without any extraordinary gift of vision, his eye could range over an almost unequalled panorama. At his feet, the far-away tents of Israel; to the North, the rich pasture-lands of Gilead and Bashan, bordered by the desert haze on the one hand, and on the other by the Jordan valley, from the blue waters of the Lake Galilee to the dark gorge of the Dead Sea.

And beyond the river he could sweep over the fair Land of Promise, from the snow-capped summits of Hermon and Lebanon to the uplands of Ephraim and Manasseh; with the infinite variety of cities perched on their pinnacles of rock, of cornfields and pasture lands, of oil, olives, figs, vines, and pomegranates. immediately before him.

Looking West, was Jericho, in its green setting of palm-trees, connected by the steep defile with Jerusalem; not far from which Bethlehem, on the ridge of the hills, gleamed as a jewel.

So to dying men still comes the vision of the goodly land beyond the Jordan.

It is not far away only just across the river. On fair days of vision, when some strong wind parts the veils of mist and smoke that too often dominate our spiritual atmosphere, it is clearly visible. But the vision is most often reserved for those who are waiting on the confines of the Land, ready for the signal to enter.

They tell us that on that border-land they hear voices, and discern visions of beauty and splendor, of which heart had not conceived.

Dr. Payson said, shortly before he died, "The Celestial City is full in my view. Its glories have been upon me; its breezes fan me; its odors are wafted to me; its sounds strike upon my ears; and its spirit is breathed into my heart."

May God grant us the blessedness of dying on the hill-top with that vision in our gaze.

III. THE BEARING ON DISPENSATIONAL TRUTH

The Law came by Moses; and Moses stands on the plains of history as the embodiment, as he was also the vehicle, of the moral law, whether given from Sinai or written on the fleshy tablets of the human heart.

It was in perfect keeping with this conception that there was no decay in his natural vigor. His eye was as a falcon's, his step lithe and elastic, his bearing erect. He did not die of disease, or amid the decrepitude of old age; **"he was not, because God took him."**

Time had only made him venerable, but not weak. And thus he represents God's holy law, which cannot grow outworn or weak, but always abides in its pristine and perfect strength, though it cannot bring us into God's rest.

Of that rest it is not possible to speak here. Canaan does not primarily represent the rest which awaits us on the other side of death, where the fret and chafe of life are over; but the rest which may be entered here and now, in which the soul is set free from the tyranny of self and corruption, and abides in the peace of God which passes all understanding. Then life becomes one blessed succession of trustful obedience to the will of God; then, too, we are satisfied with the abundant wealth stored up for us in God, and He makes us drink of the river of his pleasure. This is the goodly Land of promise, which can only be seen from afar by those who know nothing except what Moses can teach them; but may be entered by those who follow the Ark through the river of death to the self-life and forward to resurrection ground.

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