

# MOSES: The Servant of God

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### MARAH AND ELIM

**“All these things happened unto them for ensamples”** (I Corinthians 10:11).

THE peninsula of Sinai, on the shores of which the ransomed people stood, and which for forty years was to be their school-house, is one of the wildest, grandest, barest countries in the world. It has been described as a tangled maze of mountains, piled in inextricable confusion, and gradually rising in height towards the lofty summit of Um-Shomer, to the south of Sinai. Between the Red Sea and the lowest outworks of these mighty citadels of rock there is a plain of gravel; and thence the way climbs slowly upward through long avenues and passes composed of purple granite or brilliant sandstone, which give a richness to the landscape unknown to our bleaker and greyer hills.

We have not now to do with those majestic approaches to the inner sanctuary; but with the sandy plain over which, during the first weeks of wandering, the host was led, skirting the shores of the Red Sea, along which they probably beheld the dead bodies of their foes a ghastly spectacle!

Though not expressly stated, there must have been a division of the Israelite host, from the point where their first encampments were pitched in the strange new land of freedom. The flocks and herds, as is the custom with modern Arabs, were dispersed far and wide over the country, to crop the scanty **“pastures of the wilderness,”** of which the Psalmist speaks.

“Nearly everywhere,” Dean Stanley tells us, “there is a thin, it might almost be said a transparent, coating of vegetation. And in some few places there are more marked spots of verdure, the accompaniments, not of the empty beds of winter torrents, but of the few living, perhaps perennial springs; which by the mere fact of their rarity assume an importance difficult to be understood, in the moist scenery of these northern lands.”

It was there that their flocks and herds were preserved, whilst the main body of the people marched with Moses. How marvellous the change!

- No longer the ceaseless pulse of movement of Egypt, with festival and pageant, song and feast, the court and the army;
- No longer the green valley of the beneficent Nile, where water never failed, and luscious vegetables, melons, leeks, and garlic, charmed away thirst;
- No longer the majestic glory of sphinx, and pyramid, and temple:

Instead, a silence so intense that the Arabs say they can make their voices heard across the Gulf of Akaba, a waste so waterless, that they might count themselves fortunate if they met a spring in a day's march; whilst they were literally enclosed within a temple, whose walls were stupendous rocks, such as human hands had never piled.

But amid all these checkered and strange experiences, the cloud slowly led them forward; and as the successive scenes crowd on our view, we cannot but see in them an allegory or parable of human life, and we acknowledge the truth of the Apostle's statement, "**All these things happened unto them for ensamples**" (I Corinthians 10:11).

## I. THE COURAGEOUS FAITH OF MOSES

He knew that desert well - its wild and desolate character, its dried torrent-beds, its lack of all that would support human life; he knew, too, that if they were to follow the northern route it would not take them very long to reach the land of the Philistines, "**which was near,**" and where they would be easily able to procure all necessary supplies either by force or purchase; but we are told, nevertheless, that he deliberately led them southwards and entered the wilderness. "**So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur.**"

He could not do otherwise, because the cloud went that way; but even with that indication of God's will before his eyes, it must have required an heroic faith to lead two millions of people direct into the wilderness (Exodus 13:17; 15:22).

We all of us need the leading about by the way of the wilderness.

In its majestic scenery, our minds, dwarfed and stunted by too great familiarity with the works of men, are turned to a higher keynote, and learn to wonder at the littleness of the vanities which engross so many. There we learn to deal with God not at second-hand, as is too frequent in human civilization; but directly, as scattering with his own hand the manna for our food, and deriving from "**the flinty rock**" the living streams to quench our thirst.

We lose the luxuries which were sapping and enervating our moral nature, to find ourselves becoming braced and strengthened in every sinew by privation and hardship. Patience, freedom, faith, the pilgrim-spirit all these are children of the wilderness wanderings, that thrive in its rare and peculiar air.

There was good reason, then, why the great leader should follow the lead of the cloud; but it was not the less a sublime evidence of a faith that could trust God to the uttermost, as he turned his back on Philistia, and steadfastly took his course towards the heart of the desert, veiled as yet in those mighty ramparts and walls of rock.

## II. THE TESTING OF HIS FAITH

"**They went three days in the wilderness, and found no water**" (Exodus 15:22).

The first day's journey was, doubtless, very distressing - the blinding sand-storms; the glare of the sun reflected from the white limestone plains; the absence of shade, of tree, of water. And the water which they carried in their water-skins must have become hot and unrefreshing.

The second day was not less trying. The sea was now far in their rear, and there was nothing to break the monotony of the treeless, lifeless, waterless horizon. And surely as they pitched their black tents for the night, it was difficult to repress some discontent, or at least anxiety, as to what the morrow might bring to their blistered feet and fevered lips. Their supplies of water were also getting low, if they were not quite exhausted.

The third day broke. Perhaps Moses, knowing that pools of water were not far away, encouraged them to persevere; and every eye was eagerly strained to catch the first sight of palm trees and living verdure.

Not more eagerly does the mother look for the symptoms of returning life on the cheek of her child, or the beleaguered garrison scan the horizon for the first signal of the relieving squadron, than did those wistful eyes seek for the promised signs.

And when at last, towards the close of the day, they descried them in the far distance, how glad their shouts, how buoyant their hearts, how ready their expressions of confidence in Moses! Their fatigues and complaints and privations were all forgotten, as with quickened pace they made for the margin of the wells. But ah, how great was their disappointment and chagrin when the first long draught filled their mouths with bitterness, and they discovered that the water was too nauseous to drink!

So long as there was none to be got, they had managed to endure; but this sorrow was harder than they could bear, and they turned on Moses and murmured, "**What shall we drink?**" "**They soon forgot His works.**" From minstrels they became mutineers. Do we not all know something of the wilderness march? It may follow on some great deliverance. But how great a contrast there is between the rapturous hallelujahs of the one, and the wearying commonplace of the other!

The start is both interesting and delightful; but it is so hard to plod on day after day, amid the dust of the shop, the glare of temptation, the pressure of grinding poverty, the routine of irksome toil. The wilderness is no child's play; it is meant to be our school, our training-ground, our arena, where we are being sternly and carefully educated for our great future. And then Marahs will come bitter disappointments, heart-rending sorrow, as our ideals are shattered and our cherished plans torn to shreds.

Ah me! it were better to plod on day by day without the vision of coming bliss, than to awake to discover that it has been an unsubstantial mirage. The Marahs are permitted to prove us, or, in other words, to show what is in us. What pilgrim to the New Jerusalem is there that has not visited those springs, and mingled bitter tears with the bitter waters?

### III. MOSES RESOURCE

**"He cried unto the Lord."**

How much better this than to rebuke the people, or to threaten to throw up his appointment, or to sit down in despondency as utterly out of heart! The disciples of John, when they had buried their beloved leader, went and told Jesus. And in all ages the servants of God have been glad to turn from their discouragements and the ingratitude of those for whom they would have gladly laid down their lives, to Him whose heart is open to every moan, and whose love is over all and through all, and in all.

Beside each bitter Marah pool there grows a tree, which, when cast into the waters, makes them palatable and sweet. It is so ever. Poison and antidote, infection and cure, pain and medicine, are always close together. The word which saves is nigh even in the mouth and in the heart. We do not always see the “sufficient grace”; but it is there. Too occupied with our disappointment, we have no heart to seek for it; but when we cry, it is shown to our weary longing eyes.

And of what is that tree the type, if not of the cross of Jesus which is the symbol, not only of our redemption, but of a yielded will? It was there that his obedience to the will of his Father reached its supreme manifestation. He became obedient to death, even the death of the Cross. Nor is there anything that will so take the bitterness out of disappointment, and so make it palatable and even life-giving, as to look up from it to the Cross, and to say, “Not my will, but Thine be done. Thy will is my weal. In Thy will is my bliss.”

What a constant lesson Moses was learning from day to day! God must indeed have become a living reality to him. He learnt God’s ways; we are expressly told “**that they were made known to him.**” And gradually he must have come to feel that the whole responsibility of the pilgrimage was on the great, broad shoulders of his Almighty Friend.

Ah, fellow-workers, let us not carry the burdens of responsibilities arising out of his work! Our one thought should be to be on his track, and to be in living union with Himself. We may leave all the rest with Him.

#### IV. ELIM

There are more Elims in life than Marahs; and we encamp by them. We are not bidden to tarry at the one, but we may spend long blessed days at the other.

- How refreshing the shadow of those seventy palm-trees!
- How sweet the water of those twelve wells!
- How delightful those long restful days!

You say that they will never come to you? Yes, but they will! They come to all tired souls. There is no desert-march without an Elim at last. The Lamb cannot fail to lead you by living fountains of water, and to wipe away all tears from your eyes, before you pass the gateway of pearl.

A lull comes in the storm; an arbor on the Hill Difficulty; a pause in the march. He makes his sheep to lie down in pastures of tender grass, and leads them beside waters of rest.

**“Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!”**

We must tread the desert, or we can never come to Elim. But the desert lends the Elim much of its bliss. The Castle of Doubting makes the vision from the Delectable Mountains so entrancing. The long illness makes the air so exquisite in the first-permitted walk or drive. The long winter snows paint the fairest colours on the spring flowers. Do not stay murmuring at Marah; press on! our Elim is within sight. Hope thou in God, for thou shalt yet praise Him.

At Marah Moses received from God a glad, fresh revelation, that God would be the healer of his people in their wilderness march, securing them from the diseases of Egypt.

Marvellous that such a message should be sent at such a time! But the grace of God is not restrained by human sin from making its glad surprises. And Elim was the vindication of the promise.

What a God is ours!

- He overthrows our foes in the sea, and disciplines his people in the desert.
- He leads us over the burning sand, and rests us in luxuriant glades.
- He permits disappointment at Marah, and surprises us at Elim.
- He leads us by a cloud; but He speaks to us by a human voice.
- He counts the number of the stars; but He feeds his flock like a shepherd, and gently leads those that give suck.
- He chooses a thunder cloud as the canvas on which He paints his promise in rainbow hues.
- He proves by Marah, and at Elim recruits us.

**~ end of chapter 13 ~**

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