

The Companion of the Way

by

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CHAPTER THREE

THE DWELLER IN THE THORNBUSH (Exodus 3) - Moses

I. THE SETTING -- THE TRIAL OF FAITH

A new phase in the history of the people of Israel began with their deliverance from Egypt. They entered it a family, they came out from it a nation. The long years of bondage were overruled of GOD to evidence the faithfulness of His care and the indestructibility of the people with whom He had made His covenant.

That the experience in Egypt would be one of servitude and yet of ultimate emancipation had been declared in the vision given to Abraham, as recorded in Genesis 15. While in a deep sleep he was told by GOD that his seed would be afflicted in a strange land, but they would emerge from it with great substance. Then he was shown a smoking furnace and a lamp of fire which passed between the pieces of the sacrifice which he had divided that day. Here was prefigured the twofold character of the sojourn in Egypt. On the one hand, the severity of their suffering would be as the heat of a furnace; on the other, there would be with them One whose glory was set forth as a lamp of fire. In the bitterest bondage He would be with them, and in all their affliction He would be afflicted:

"In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old" (Isaiah 63:9),

so that their being preserved in Egypt would be a witness to His perpetual presence.

At length a redeemed people stood on the shore of the Red Sea and rejoiced in complete deliverance from the power of the enemy. Before them lay the desert and the years of wandering hidden from their gaze, but not from GOD's. As that which was to befall them in Egypt had been prefigured in the vision of Abraham, so their experience in the desert was shown in a revelation of GOD to Moses their deliverer. This revelation sent him back from Horeb to lead Israel forth from Pharaoh's sway.

In the desert of Midian a man who had been mighty in all the wisdom and learning of Egypt was humbly keeping sheep. Forty years of exile had reached their climax, and Moses approached Him in those long, lonely decades when he endured as

Seeing Him Who Is Invisible.

He had not forgotten -- and could not forget -- the people of GOD with whom he had chosen to suffer affliction rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. The nature of his exercise of heart at this solemn crisis in Midian is surely seen in Psalm 90, "**A prayer of Moses the man of GOD.**"

"Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.

Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men. For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night. Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth. For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled. Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance. For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told.

The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away. Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath. So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Return, O Lord, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants. O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil. Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children. And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it" (Psalm 90).

Though keenly aware of the brevity of human life, he rejoiced in One who was from everlasting to everlasting, One upon whom the changing years took no toil, One in whom His saints found the true home of the soul. "**Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.**" The generations of strangership in the promised land had been followed by those of acceptance and favor in Egypt during Joseph's rule. These in their turn had been followed by those of sorrow and suffering, but throughout the years GOD had been their refuge, their hiding place.

In the tenth verse of the Psalm there is indicated the position of Moses at that very time. "**The days of our years are threescore and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore**

years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away."

He himself had reached eighty years of age. Having been maintained by GOD in full vigor, he sought to enter into

The Purpose of His Preservation.

The pent-up longing for his people in Egypt burst forth in eager prayer. **"Return, O Lord, how long?"** How long should the grief and bondage continue? **"And let it repent thee concerning thy servants. O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil."** He spread before GOD the tale of sorrow, dealing not with "second causes," but looking beyond them to His permissive will. **"Thou hast afflicted us."** Finally, he prayed that GOD would display His work and His glory to them and let His beauty be upon them.

To these petitions GOD gave full answer in His mighty deeds wrought in delivering Israel and in the many revealings of His majesty during their wilderness years. The first answer was granted to Moses himself in the appearing of the divine glory in the burning bush. It met all his yearning for his people and summed up that which GOD purposed to do for Israel in the years in which Moses would be their leader. In his prayer in Psalm 90 he had said, **"Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance."** At the bush he was to learn how GOD would deal with a sinful people, acting in holiness and yet in grace, in judgment and yet in mercy, and in all manifesting among them His unchanging love.

And Moses **"led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb"** (Exodus 3:1). Whether the expression **"mount of God"** used both in Exodus and in I Kings 19:8 is a Hebrew idiom for the height of the mountain, or whether it refers to the mountain as the place where GOD gave His law to the nation, it was at Horeb, and particularly at Sinai (Horeb being a wider term than Sinai) that Moses beheld the glory of GOD. It was also at Sinai on a later occasion that Moses came forth from the divine presence with its brightness upon his face, so that **"the skin of his face shone"** (Exodus 34:29). There it was that the people were to serve GOD after their deliverance: **"And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain"** (Exodus 3:12), and it was there that GOD showed them His greatness, and they heard His voice: **"And ye said, Behold, the Lord our God hath shewed us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire: we have seen this day that God doth talk with man, and he liveth"** (Deuteronomy 5:24).

II. THE REVELATION -- THE GLORY THAT TRANSFIGURED

A. In the Bush at Sinai

"And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt"

(Exodus 3:2-3).

He experienced, as did other men of GOD whose lives are narrated in the Scriptures, that the essential characteristics of his lifework were set forth in vision early in that work (see Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1; and Ezekiel 1).

In the case of Moses we note four features of the Lord's appearing to him, for around these four the lessons of the scene may be grouped.

1. It took place in the DESERT.
2. It chose for its sphere a THORNBUSH (the thorny acacia of the Arabian peninsula).
3. It lit the bush with a FLAME that needed no fuel.
4. It culminated in the declaration of the NAME of GOD.

The bush with its thorns reminds of the Eden sentence: "**Cursed is the ground for thy sake . . . thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee**" (Genesis 3:17-18). A desert growth, it had little to attract the eye, but that which arrested the attention of Moses was its endurance in the fire that burned in it. He would expect the thorns to blaze fiercely and to disappear, but to his amazement no harm came to the bush. The fire enwrapped its branches but did not char them. It imparted its radiance to the bush but took nothing from it. Each twig glowed in the fire but was unimpaired, being beautified but not consumed.

The thornbush was a vivid picture of the nation that GOD was taking for His own. "**He found them in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness**" (Deuteronomy 32:10).

As The Thorns of the Bush

so were the waywardnesses of the people, and as the thorns witnessed to the curse, so the national behavior witnessed to the ravages of sin in the hearts and lives of men. When but three days from the song on the shore of the Red Sea, the children of Israel began to murmur, and throughout the forty years they provoked GOD by their complaining and their disobedience. When but a few months from Jordan, with the long years in the desert behind them, they still murmured: "**Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.**"

It was no ordinary fire that flamed in the bush, but

The Glory of the Lord

which often was manifested in like fashion. In the vision of Genesis 15, Abraham beheld a burning lamp. It was a pillar of fire which gave light to Israel in the passage of the Red Sea. When the people abode at Sinai, "**the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount**" (Exodus 24:17). Out of the midst of the fire the Lord spoke to them: "**And the Lord spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice . . . Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as thou hast heard, and live?**" (Deuteronomy 4:12, 33). Out of the midst of "**a fire infolding itself**" the cherubim and the throne were revealed to Ezekiel

(Ezekiel 1:4). In the Patmos vision John saw **"seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God"** (Revelation 4:5).

It pleased GOD to display His glory in the thornbush and likewise to manifest His presence in Israel. As the fire had lit up the bush but had not consumed it, so would GOD, the holy GOD, dwell among the people for their blessing, but the nation would still be preserved. True, on the one hand, were the words of Moses as he spoke to them at the end of his path, **"The Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God"** (Deuteronomy 4:24). Israel would prove this, yet, on the other hand, they would learn that the Holy One would dwell in their midst in sovereign grace, and that on the ground of the blood of sacrifice. Thus the flame in the bush spoke of the marvel of the divine presence amid a sinful and failing people and His purpose thereby to irradiate them with His light, to enfold them within its blaze, and to transform them to the likeness of His glory.

From the bush GOD told Moses of His purpose to bring Israel from Egypt that they might serve Him upon the mount. He made Himself known as **"the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"** (Exodus 3:6). When Moses asked His name that he might tell it to the people, GOD said unto him: **"I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations"** (Exodus 3:14-15).

Three clauses claim our careful consideration.

"I AM hath sent me unto you."

"The Lord God . . . hath sent me unto you."

"This is my name for ever."

With these we link the words of Exodus 6:2-3: **"And God spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I am the Lord: And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them."**

The name was Jehovah. Certainly it had been on the lips of the fathers of the nation ere GOD appeared to Moses, but now it was made known as to its sacred content. The declaration **"I AM THAT I AM"** was an unfolding of the meaning of the name Jehovah. The form of the word *Jehovah* appears deliberately to intermingle future and past tenses, i.e., He will be, He was, and so He is, and possibly even the sense the He causes to be, or brings to pass.

The name speaks of

The Unchangeable One

with whom essentially there is no past nor future, but rather an eternal present. That which He is, He ever has been. His progressive revelation to His creatures of His glory, and of His purposes for them, is the outflow of all that He is, but it betokens neither change nor development in Him.

Again, that which He is He ever shall be. His name is therefore one of ceaseless promise. His infinite Person abides the same. With Him there can be no weariness and no exhaustion, but ever the greatness, the wealth, and the vigor of eternity.

The fire and the name proclaimed similar truths. The fire was self-sufficient; it required nought from any other source to support its blaze; it was a manifestation of the divine glory. The name told of the One whose being is independent of all other existence, the One who later said, "**I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me**" (Isaiah 45:5). In His kindness He gives to His creation all that it needs, but He Himself is in need of nothing from it, "**neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things**" (Acts 17:25). All His works and ways in His universe have their fount in His own nature. Nothing external can impose any necessity upon Him, or add to Him, or take away from Him. Dependence is a basic law of all created existence. The CREATOR alone possesses the freedom of an absolute independence.

Because GOD, the timeless One, had been with the people in their sufferings in Egypt, they had not been destroyed, but the more they were afflicted, the more they multiplied and grew. GOD was about to manifest His presence still further in power and glory among His people, and this was indicated in the burning bush. As the bush grew in the wilderness, so would Israel be brought to that same place and, because of their unbelief, would be compelled to wander forty years along a desert way. Cut off from natural resources for daily supplies, they would learn the lessons of the wilderness and find that GOD alone could meet their needs.

Then, as the name of GOD was spoken to Moses from the flame of fire, so would GOD be revealed in Israel in the wealth of His character and ways. His mind for the nation was that He would use it to the proclaiming of His name to the sons of men. In spite of Israel's failure, the name was revealed, until amid the nation, and born of it as to His human birth, there was manifested the only sinless Man, and from His pure lips there came the words, "**Before Abraham was, I am**" (John 8:58). To the Jews who heard Him the claim was unmistakable. For them there could be no middle course. Either they must own His rightful use of the title, "**I AM**," and worship Him, or they must account Him a blasphemer worthy of death. In their folly they rejected Him, but it was He who had spoken to Moses from the bush who now spoke to them in lowly manhood.

B. Amid the Nation at Sinai

The time came when the lessons of the bush were proved true indeed. The nation was encamped by Sinai, and while Moses was on the mount with GOD receiving the two tables of testimony, the people tired of waiting for him and sought gods to lead them. When Moses came down to the camp, he found them worshipping a golden calf. They had left Egypt, but were still tainted with its idolatry. So truly did the bush bear its thorns. Thus, at the very beginning of the national history, Israel commenced that course of perversity that would lead ultimately to the coronation of their King with a crown of thorns. Though Gentile hands would fashion the actual crown, did not Israel, in a deeper sense, even in Moses' day, begin to plait the thorns that would pierce His brow?

Not only did the Lord plague the people for the sin of the worship of the golden calf, but He said

to Moses, **"I will send an angel before thee . . . for I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiffnecked people: lest I consume thee in the way"** (Exodus 33:2-3). **"And he said unto him, If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence. For 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"** (Exodus 33:15-16).

It was as if Moses had said,

"What Distinguished the Thornbush

from others in the desert but the presence in it of the Lord? What will distinguish and separate Israel from other nations but that same presence?" The thornbush had shone with a radiance not its own. So would the presence of GOD give the nation a unique character. The true mark of GOD's people is always GOD's presence. Yet the Lord had said that He would not go in their midst, lest He consume them in the way.

But was not the lesson of the bush that He would be in their midst, and yet they would not be consumed?

To Moses it was unthinkable that they should journey apart from the company of GOD. If he had found grace in His sight, then he craved the display of that grace toward the nation. Only on the ground of grace to the guilty could a people so guilty know the abiding of their Lord among them. The plea was granted, and the Lord replied, **"I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken: for thou hast found grace in my sight, and I know thee by name"** (Exodus 33:17).

Again Moses prayed, **"I beseech thee, shew me thy glory."** As in Psalm 90 his prayer had been, **"Let thy [glory] appear,"** so now he sought the fulfillment of the promise of the bush in a new glimpse of the glory. He was not disappointed, for when next he went up into Sinai, **"And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth"** (Exodus 34:5-6). Moses did behold the glory, and that in accordance with the terms of the word in Exodus 33:23, **"And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen."** As from the flame in the bush the name was proclaimed, the supreme name, Jehovah, the I AM, so from the presence cloud that name was told out afresh: **"[Jehovah] God, merciful and gracious."**

In this case there was linked with it the unfolding of the divine character. GOD would deal in mercy and grace with His frail and sinful people.

He Would Abide Among Them

He would do marvels. Then, as the flame beautified the bush with its light, so the glory of the presence lit the face of Moses till it shone, not only accrediting his position as mediator of the covenant, but betokening the desire of GOD to beautify all His people. **"He will beautify the meek with salvation,"** said the psalmist (Psalm 149:4), but in Moses the meek the lesson was taught

long ago.

III. THE BLESSING -- THE GOOD WILL OF GOD

How truly Moses rejoiced in the kindness of GOD manifested at the bush was evident in his words as he drew near to the close of his life. With God-given sight, he looked back over the lessons of the past and forward to the goodness which GOD had decreed for His people, and he blessed the tribes. The blessing of Joseph, so stirring in its recital, reached its climax in the words of Deuteronomy 33:16, "**the good will of**

him that dwelt in the bush."

The experiences of the years of Israel's wanderings had not dimmed Moses' sense of the goodness of GOD. Rather the truth set before him forty years before had become increasingly precious, so that as he surveyed the blessings of GOD and the riches He would bestow upon His people, he found nothing to say concerning Joseph to surpass the kindness wherein GOD had deigned to dwell among the wayward tribes.

We must not miss the force of the word *dwelt*. Brief as was the actual flaming of the glory in the bush, GOD displayed His purpose, not merely to visit His people, but to dwell among them. It was this which was further manifested to Moses when he was instructed concerning the building of the tabernacle, "**Let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them**" (Exodus 25:8). It was this for which provision was made righteously in the many sacrifices of the Levitical order. And when the long drama of time is ended, and all things are made new, and death, sorrow, crying, and pain shall be no more, then will the voice from Heaven declare: "**Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and**

God himself shall be with them

and be their God" (Revelation 21:3). The desert will be past, and every mark of the curse will be removed, but the presence which has never failed will be the gladness of eternity.

Our Lord has not changed in His love for His redeemed ones. As He delighted to presence Himself with His people of old, such is His delight in respect to His own today. The passing years prove more and more the desert character of this poor world through which we pass and deepen within us the sense of our weakness and shortcoming, so that we who belong to CHRIST see ourselves not ineptly pictured in the thornbush. This is true, moreover, of each local company of believers, whether large or small. As a consuming fire, our holy Lord deals with our dross, but His heart's yearning is to display His own likeness in us. So will it be when we are with Him in Heaven; so would He have it even now while the desert lies about us. In the coming day we shall know the fulfillment of His words, "**The glory which thou gavest me I have given them**" (John 17:22), but here and now He seeks to light each believing life and each assembly of His people with the radiance of His presence and to reveal His blessed name more and more. Soon the desert will be exchanged for the paradise of GOD, "**and his servants shall serve him: and they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads**" (Revelation 22:3-4).

~ end of chapter 3 ~