

God's Way Out

"For Us And For Our Little Ones"

"Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance."

Ezra 8:21.

Lesson 8. From Egypt's Idolatry to Sinai's Purity

Many are making plans for the security of nations and peoples. Read in this chapter of God's sure way to peace, security, and happiness.

WHEN the Israelites saw the cruel, dreaded army of Pharaoh disappear below the waves, what wonder if wild shouts and songs of rejoicing rent the air and echoed from the distant hills! "Gone! Gone! The enemy is gone for ever!" they exulted. "Ah, Pharaoh's chariots! Ah, Pharaoh's horses! Ah, you cruel soldiers! You thought to take us again! Ah drowned in the Red Sea! Gone! Gone!" their shouts went up.

And for the very joy, with hearts overflowing with the relief of it all, the women of Israel danced and sang with sounding timbrels on the beach of the Red Sea, their little ones laughing and singing with them, till the sheep and the cows began lowing and bleating in strange amazement at the sight.

What a thrilling, happy day that was! A never-to-be-forgotten day! God who had made a way out for Noah to escape death in the Deluge had made a way out through the sea for His people. He will make a way back to Eden for all who trust Him.

Along the Red Sea Coast and to Sinai

And so Egypt was gone for ever. After they had rested a while, the great pillar of cloud moved majestically forward; they looked for the last time at that gap in the mountains on the farther shore, then marched south. South, along the Red Sea beach which is seen by the passengers on British and American ships now sailing between Europe and Australia.

Moses went forward with confidence. He knew that God was leading them first to Mount Sinai, for when the Divine Presence had appeared to him in the burning bush the word had come: "When thou has brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain." [1]

And there the pillar of cloud was leading now. It led them on to the wells of Marah. Then forward to the springs of Elim, and afterward to an encampment by

the seashore. Then leaving the coast, they turned south-east through the valleys that led to Mount Sinai.

How wonderfully God provided for them! If the water of the wells was bitter, He made it fresh and sweet. If there was no water at all, He brought a rushing torrent out of the rock. They needed food, much food, that great multitude. And behold! It seemed to have rained food during the night. For all over the ground was a small, round sweet grain which had all the goodness of good bread. Like wafers sweetened with honey! God had provided "a table in the wilderness." [2]

This wonderful bread lay on the ground every morning when they awoke--twice as much on Friday morning so that there should be no need to gather it on Saturday--the Sabbath. What divine provision!

"To wake in the desert dawn is like waking within the heart of an opal," says Miss Gertrude Bell, a modern writer, speaking of the district near Sinai. [3] But to the trustful Moses it was waking in the loving presence of God.

The lofty heights of Sinai, now known as Jebel Musa, or the "mount of Moses," by the Arabs, came in sight at last, and the pillar of cloud rested on its peak. It is a majestic mountain whose summit is eight thousand feet above the sea. The valley below was to be the camping-place of Israel's great cavalcade for over a year. Here God was to instruct them in the laws which, if followed, should make them the most wonderful nation on earth.

Moses Climbs the Mount

When the camp of Israel had finally been pitched, Moses started up the mountain to speak with God again. There is a narrow and steep ravine leading up to the top of Sinai, and probably Moses took this course. The path is still pointed out to the traveler. Scores of steps have been laid or cut since Moses' day, and up these the pilgrim climbs. Here by the side of the track is "a spring welling fresh and clear from a grotto under two vast rocks." Farther ahead is a running brook from the melting snow on the heights above. [4] From the summit of Sinai there stretches out a strange and grand panorama of mountains. "As if an ocean of lava with its waves running mountain high had been suddenly commanded to stand still." [5] Here probably the great winged eagle lived, and uttered its cry as it flew from crag to crag. No wonder Moses felt the might and majesty of the Creator and listened with eagerness and meekness for His voice.

And the Voice spoke again. The Lord God called to him out of the mountain and gave him a message for the waiting people in the valley below: "Tell the children

of Israel" commanded God: "You have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto Myself."

"Now therefore, if you will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people. You shall be unto Me a holy nation. These are the words which thou shall speak unto the children of Israel."

The People Promise to Keep the Law

The voice of God ceased. Moses reverently turned and retraced his steps to the valley below. He called the chief men of the tribes together and gave them God's gracious message. "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do," said the chief men unanimously, after they had listened. "To be a holy nation! God's special treasure! 'What a future!'"

These descendants of Jacob had increased to a great multitude in Egypt. The twelve sons who went down to the Nile had now become six hundred thousand men. [6] With their wives and children they formed a mighty army. And now, this week was to see "the birth of a great nation." With what royal ceremonies would the week be attended? What laws would the Most High issue, to guide this new nation to the leading position. He had planned? This knowledge would be of highest value to our statesmen who are thinking of "reconstruction."

Moses carried the answer of the people back up the mountain of God. Then the divine Voice instructed him to prepare the people to meet with God. Three days were occupied in this preparation. As the people had been accustomed to multitudes of "gods" in Egypt--some stronger, some weaker--it was necessary that they should see that the majesty and might of the living God, the great Creator of a thousand worlds, was not to be likened for a moment to Egypt's dumb deities. And the law of Jehovah was not a thing which could be carried out or neglected at will. It was God's standard of righteousness. Carried out it would bring happiness: if broken, misery and death would follow. So, on this day God would declare to them His great law of love to God and love to man: the Ten Commandments. What a solemn day that was! It brought fear and trembling and heart-searching to all.

God Proclaims His Law

The heights of Sinai were often touched with rosy hue at dawn. But this morning, as the people gathered in the valley below, the mountain was overhung with a

thick dark cloud which brought a strange dread upon the tribes. Fearsome lightning flashed about the cloud, and terrific peals of thunder followed.

"Listen! The sound as of a great trumpet up in the heights! It waxes louder and louder! The mighty God is summoning us to listen!" murmured the people to themselves. "See, a great fire is descending on the mount!"

"O God, keep us! the mountain is all of a smoke! It quakes! It trembles! Ah, listen! Ah, listen! The voice of God Himself speaks." Gone were all thoughts of self-confidence.

"And God spoke all these words, saying: I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

1. "Thou shall have no other gods before Me."
2. "Thou shall not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shall not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them. For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me. And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me, and keep My commandments."
3. "Thou shall not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes His name in vain."
4. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall thou labor, and do all thy work. But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God. In it thou shall not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it."
5. "Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God gives thee."
6. "Thou shall not kill."
7. "Thou shall not commit adultery."
8. "Thou shall not steal."
9. "Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor."

10. "Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shall not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's."

The people listened fearfully as the voice of God proclaimed the Ten Commandments. But as they heard the thundering, the noise of the trumpet, and the voice that shook the earth, they rushed away from the foot of the mountain and stood afar off.

"Speak thou with us, and we will hear," they called to Moses, in terror. "But let not God speak with us, lest we die."

"Do not be afraid," responded Moses. "God is come to prove you, and that His fear may be before your faces, that you sin not."

"That you sin not." This great sight had come to them in so impressive a way that they might ever remember the Ten Commandments in their new homeland, and never break them. We need to remember them, too, as the laws of Him who shall be our Judge. Up to this time the Israelites had been travelling south-east, and it must have seemed to many that they were going away from the Promised Land. But when they moved from Sinai, a year later, they turned and marched north toward Canaan. Sinai was "the beginning of the way home."

And what a home God intended that to be! Every man, woman, and child in that kingdom with the Ten Commandments written in the heart. An ideal kingdom! What joy and gladness there would be! What safety! What prosperity! Probably many a young Rachel and Gideon sang it aloud for joy: "Oh, we are going home. Home to the land of Joseph and Jacob, Isaac and Abraham!"

"Yes, Rachel! Home to the country where no one will covet our goods. Where no one will covet our land or our home. And no one will covet his neighbor's wife or anything that belongs to anyone else."

"And we shall not be dragged before judges on false charges, Gideon."

"No, Rachel! People will be ruled by the commandment which says: 'Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor.'" No scandal will be heard; no backbiting, no one will exaggerate our faults, no one will deceive people by flattery. What a wonderful country!"

"A lovely country it will be, Gideon! A lovely country!"

And they might have talked away for hours as they marched through the desert by day or sat gazing at the northern stars by night. In Egypt they had been forced

to give their toil for nothing, but in the new land, the law, "Thou shall not steal," would ensure servants due payment for their work. It would also keep the laborer from cheating his employer of the time he was paying for. Industry and diligence would be assured. No thieves! No bars to the windows! No prisons!

"Thou shall not commit adultery." In Canaan, that happy land, how sacred the marriage relation was going to be! There the rosy dreams of youth would become a heaven and not a desert mirage. There love and respect would ever continue. There the union of two loving hearts would ever be safeguarded by the sacredness of the marriage vows, by good common sense, and the tender, unselfish, thoughtful love of husband and wife. There loving children would ever look up to father and mother as their ideals of strength and loveliness of character.

What a change from the gross impurity and the dark practices of idolatrous Egypt! "Thou shall not kill." No more would mothers need to fear a Pharaoh who doomed their children to death in the Nile. When the land was in their possession, then-no more the sword! No more the battle shout! No more the war-chariot with its stamping, peacock-plumed horses! What a land of safety and peace!

Safety and Happiness for Children

If those wise laws should be kept by the grown men and women who were to settle by the flowing Jordan and on the green slopes of Mount Hermon, how much easier it would be for the children to obey as they heard the law, "Honor thy father and thy mother!"

Yes, one thinks then it would be easy. For surely parents who were wise in the keeping of God's law would be given wisdom in the upbringing of their children. Abounding love and care, compassion for the inexperienced feet, would be mingled with happy association in play and work, and with firmness and sound judgment. Those last six of the Ten Commandments ring forth our duty to one another. The other four, which showed man's duty to God, are just as practical.

God Planned for Rest and Gladness

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." There was to be no unending toil in the Promised Land. Each Friday evening, as the sun sank down in the west, work was to be finished, the sound of the saw and the hammer was to cease, and the song of praise to God was to rise from Hebrew homes, with the music of harp and viol. On the Saturday morning the families were to gather at the house of God for

divine worship. During the day parents were to enjoy with the children the loveliness of flowers and trees, the song of birds, and the beauty of hill and vale. They were to tell them of the guidance of the gracious God who created all things for the happiness of mankind. What a day of singing and gladness of heart it was to be! [7]

The Sabbath was to be a day of rest that they might be refreshed. It was also a "sign" distinguishing them from the idolatrous nations around, and pointing them out as worshippers of the true God, the Creator of heaven and earth. [8] How much we lose in these days if we forget the Sabbath!

By the third commandment the Hebrews were to treat with reverence the sacred name of God. "Thou shall not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." Farmers and merchants, mothers and maids, would gain faith in God's presence, and confidence in His power, if they guarded His name and His honor with care.

"Thou shall not make unto thee any graven image," commanded God. Back in Egypt the Hebrews had seen all manner of idols. There were images of human beings with dog's heads, frogs' heads, and hyena heads. There were images of cows and images of crocodiles and snakes. In the dim interior of the pillared temples were colossal ugly idols, and it was taught that spirits came and dwelt in these dumb images. Music of harps and viols and the perfume of incense gave enchantment to the temple service. Thus the people were led away from the worship of the great invisible God, the Creator of heaven and earth,

Besides this, there was danger that the Hebrews would be taught to adore images of the true God, of angels, patriarchs, and saints. All this was forbidden by the second commandment. God would not have His children, made in His own image, degrade themselves and Him by kissing wooden hands, bowing to stone saints, or kneeling before brazen serpents, [9] pots of manna, or pieces of food--however sacred the associations of these things might be. No worship of human beings, either--though they be priest, or king, or emperor! No worship of the sun, the moon, or the stars.

Only One True God

"Thou shall have no other gods before Me." "Him only shall thou serve."

It was common to worship a large number of gods in those nations of old. A foreign king on a journey would probably worship Bel and Merodach in Babylon quite cheerfully, as a matter of respect. If he were visiting the Philistines the next month he might gladly step out of his chariot at Ashdod and make an offering to

Dagon, the national fish god. If he arrived at Jerusalem he would be pleased to offer sacrifice to the true God.

But what a worship! Surely it was designed by the devil to throw contempt and ridicule on the Most High! Should men give to a stone fish or a metal calf the same honor as they give to the Eternal God, Creator of the heaven and earth? Never! It was a design of Satan himself! No! "Thou shall worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shall thou serve." This, the first commandment, was the very foundation of God's law.

At creation this law of God was in man's heart. Before sin came, Adam and Eve had no other gods beside the Creator. They would not have dreamed of making an idol-image of God. He walked with them in the cool of the day. They would not think of taking God's name in vain, nor of breaking the Sabbath, happiest day of the week. Day with the blessing of God on it! Set apart by Him for all holy purposes!

Nor would they have broken any of the other great commandments. Alas, that sin came in! Long centuries of wandering and sin! Sin was ingrained in human nature, and it was necessary to proclaim the law with the thunders of heaven to the nation chosen to represent God. All too soon the rosy picture of a sinless home for the Israelites in Canaan was spoiled by sin. They had promised to obey this bright law, but ingrained sin was stronger than their promises. That was the weakness of their covenant.

Better Promises

But now - now God has made a better covenant with man. "This is the covenant that I will make with them said the Lord, I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them." [10]

So our hope is not in what we can do. "Emmanuel, God with us," will do it for every willing man or woman, boy or girl. Jesus says: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him." [11] Yes, Jesus the Son of God, living in our poor hearts, will I cleanse them and, day by day, will cause us to walk in the glad way of His commandments. He whose finger wrote the law on slabs of stone can write it on our hard hearts. [12]

"Is religion simple" a middle-aged business man asked me rather wistfully, I thought, as our train sped rapidly toward a northern town. "Oh, yes, its duties are very simple. "Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." [13] "And its power is very simple. Trust the Lord Jesus to fulfil His promise

to come into your heart. 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shall be saved!' [14] This is God's Way Out.

REFERENCES

1. Exodus 3:12.
2. Exodus 15:23-25; 17:14; 16:14-31.
3. With Lawrence in Arabia, Page 106.
4. In the Steps of Moses the Lawgiver," Page 330.
5. In the Steps of Moses the Lawgiver," Page 340.
6. Exodus 12:37.
7. Isaiah 58:13,14.
8. Exodus 31:13,17.
9. 2 Kings 18:4.
10. Hebrews 10:16.
11. Revelation 3:20.
12. Ezekiel 11:19, 20.
13. Ecclesiastes 12:13.
14. Acts 16:31.

