

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 9. Fire on the Mountain.

In Exodus chapter 16 the respite is over and ,just 4 weeks out of Egypt, the Children of Israel set out once more into the Desert of Sin (the name probably derived from "Sinai", no spiritual state intended!). Though it didn't take them long to sin – in verse 2 the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron for bringing them out of Egypt where "we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted" – having worked up an appetite as slaves, of course!

God's answer in verse 4 is staggering in its graciousness. "I will rain down bread from heaven for you" and is continued in verse 12 – "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.'"

True to His word, that evening quail came and covered the camp. Quail are numerous in the Sinai desert, migrating north in the spring in large flocks; exhausted by their flight, they could easily be caught by hand or with nets.

Then the next morning as the dew evaporated, thin flakes like frost appeared on the ground. The people were mystified but Moses explained that this was the food uniquely sent by God, to feed them during their desert wanderings. Verse 31 says it was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey. As in 1 Timothy 6:17, we see that God richly provided them with everything for their enjoyment! The people called it "manna" which simply means "what is it?"

Television news often shows stark pictures of starving people in war-torn countries fighting madly for their meagre share of food being distributed from army trucks. There was to be nothing of that sort here. God commanded that the strong men should take no more manna than they needed so that there would be plenty for the weaker ones who were slower to gather it. Each morning they had to gather just enough for themselves for that day and not store it up, as there would be plenty more next day. However they were to gather twice as much on the 6th day so that the following day, the Sabbath, could be a day of rest. Of course the Israelites had to be perverse: during the week, any manna left overnight "was full of maggots and began to smell" (verse 20) while on the 6th day the manna stayed fresh for the whole Sabbath Day and those who were obedient enough to gather the extra were fed for that day. Those that disobeyed went without. This was a quieter, gentler miracle than the parting of the Red Sea, but just as much a unique work of a powerful God.

People have offered natural explanations for the occurrence of this manna but there are none. This was a mysterious, unknown substance beyond local experience; it came daily with twice as much regularly each eve of the Sabbath and none on the Sabbath day; it was to arrive in abundance wherever the Israelites wandered for the next 40 years, as verse 35 tells us, only ceasing when the nation came to a land that was settled, the border of Canaan. And today, God still provides for us, in natural ways, as with the quails, and supernatural ways as with the manna. The God Who redeems us from sin and bondage, will not leave us without resources for our daily walk with Him.

Once again, in Chapter 17, the nation set off on its wanderings, striking camp at Rephidim and once again they complained to Moses at the lack of water. In answer to Moses' cry God told him to walk on ahead with some of the elders, taking with him the staff he had used to such effect in Egypt. In verse 6 God says, "I will stand there before you by the rock of Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." And that was just what happened. Bible scholars talk of "Theophanies", the appearances of Christ in some symbolic form in the Old Testament, quoting this as one of them. It is interesting that Saint Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:4, talking of these Israelites, "they drank from the

spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.” The ministry of Jesus did not begin with His birth as a human in Bethlehem!

Verses 8-16 describe the first war the new nation encountered. Years ago, Esau had sold his birthright to Jacob and now Amalek, the grandson of Esau, mustered his tribe together to try and prevent these descendants of Jacob from entering the promised land of Canaan. Joshua, warrior as well as servant, went out to fight while Moses took his stand on the top of a hill to watch the battle’s course. Significantly, while Moses held up his hands in prayer to God the battle went in Israel’s favour, but when tiredness brought those hands down, the battle swung to the Amalekites. To solve the problem Aaron and Hur held up the arms of Moses until, with the blessing of God, Israel won the battle. It’s great to note that, in verses 14-16, Moses ensured that this momentous victory would be recorded for Joshua and all the nation, and that he honoured God by building an altar of praise to Him.

The greatest and most Godly leader needs the support of his followers. We know nothing about Hur except that he had a position of responsibility among the nation’s elders. It seems a small job that he did - no preaching, no rallying to war, no imperious commands – simply holding aloft the arm of Moses, which no doubt became heavy over time! Let us never fail to uphold our spiritual yet human leaders in prayer, however small seems our contribution.

Chapter 18 gives a delightful interlude in the midst of the Israeli saga. Jethro, father-in-law to Moses, is named in Exodus 2:18 as “Reuel” which means “friend of God,” and his earlier treatment of the fugitive Moses implies he had a high concept of religion and faith. During the tumultuous days of the exodus from Egypt he had provided shelter for Zipporah, (his daughter and Moses’ wife) and their sons Gershom and Eliezer. Now that the whole nation had migrated to Jethro’s territory not far from Mount Sinai, he was free to bring about a reunion of the family.

Verses 7 and 8 show the warm respect Moses accorded his father-in-law and verse 9 shows the equally warm response given by Jethro to the news of God’s blessing on the whole nation. He was “delighted” to the point of praising God, acknowledging His goodness and offering a sacrifice to confirm his faith. The scene is one of blissful domestic fellowship.

But in verses 13-26 Jethro could see that Moses, a perfectionist, was wearing himself out through being unable to delegate, and ventured to give his son-in-law some sensible advice about sharing responsibility. Moses fortunately was humble enough to accept Jethro’s wisdom; his reaction was timely as soon God was to instate Moses as the law-giver for all Israel, a demanding job which would need all his commonsense and trust in his subordinates!

In the great saga of the escape to freedom, God showed His concern for the supposedly little details of Israel’s new life. It is comforting to know that He is just as concerned that we should trust Him to look after the minor details of our lives today.

The Mountain, the Moment and the Milestone.

Chapter 19 gives us the climax as, 3 months after their escape from Egypt, the Israelites reached their destination at the foot of Mount Sinai, often referred to in Scripture as “the Mountain of God.” This was the same spot where, only months ago, God had revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush; now events had brought him full circle!

Verse 3 says that Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain; it was surely a defining moment for Israel! Now that the toddler nation was beginning to walk, it was time for God to give them His covenant, a treaty setting out the conditions of their relationship - unlimited love and care on God’s part and trust and obedience on the part of His people. “You have seen how I carried

you on eagles' wings," God declared, "and you will be for Me My treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

The illustration of an eagle is very apt. If an eagle chick is reluctant to leave the nest the parent eagle will kick him out and then, as the chick flutters awkwardly downwards, the parent will swoop down underneath him and catch him on spread wings. Just what God was doing with Israel!

The Old Testament word expressing the personal commitment expected of a covenant partner is "hesed." It combines the ideas of love, loyalty and ready response to need, and has been translated variously as mercy, grace, love, loving-kindness, steadfast love and loyal love. It is one of the richest words in the Hebrew vocabulary. So God bound Himself to Israel as He established her as a nation, His grace unlimited while they maintained fellowship with Him through their faith and obedience.

This great privilege finds full fruition today in the same tremendous privilege believers have through the atoning work of Christ on the Cross. Deuteronomy 7:6 talks of Israel as being "a people holy to the Lord your God His people, His treasured possession", echoed in 1 Peter 2:9, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light." The nation of Israel was the Kingdom of Christ's followers in embryo.

Verse 17 could be a summing-up of Moses' life. "Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God." In response God revealed Himself in fire, the mountain trembling violently as it was engulfed in smoke; thunder and lightning and a very loud trumpet blast heightened the effect. God had to teach Israel about Himself, primarily about His holiness and His mighty power. In answer to the people's natural fear Moses encouraged them in chapter 20:20 – "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

And God's next step was to give them the Ten Commandments, in chapter 20, an impeccable guide for living which has had no equal in any other time or nation. Down through the ages other nations who have recognised its value have adopted it for themselves, and students of world history have found that such nations have enjoyed in general greater success, peace and prosperity than those nations without any such commitment to God's laws.

It is important here to correct a misunderstanding among many Christians that in the Old Testament the way to salvation was through obeying the law, while in the New Testament we have the easier path of grace. When did God give them the Law? Not when they were in Egypt, with Him making obedience to it a condition of their escape. God saved them by His redeeming grace when they were helpless to help themselves, owning them as His children, and only then did He give them His rules for godly living. Our salvation today depends, just like Israel, on our trust in God and His Son Jesus, and then it is up to us to live our lives according to His law. As with Israel, so with us; keeping the Law was not a way to life, but a way of life.

From another aspect this Law was a gift of love from God, for it gave Israel the dignity and security of becoming a nation - a nation under the leadership and total care of God. As such, it was a high privilege.

To emphasise the love of God that shines strongly throughout the Old Testament, I quote Deuteronomy 7:7-9 - "The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoplesBut it was because **the Lord loved you** That He brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; He is the faithful God, keeping **His covenant of love** to a thousand generations of **those who love Him** and keep His commands."

The first 4 of the 10 commandments concern our relationship to God, the next 6, our relationship to our fellow man; the 2 facets always go together in God's plan . The name of God embodies His character; to abuse His name is to abuse Him. All creatures – yes, animals, verse 10 – need one day of rest in 7; that is God's system, and we abuse it at our peril. Honouring parents ensures the continuance of their heritage and stability for the next generation. The sin of coveting leads to the sins forbidden in the 4 preceding commandments. 1 John 5:3 says, "This is love for God: to obey His commands. And His commands are not burdensome." Real peace, joy and contentment come only as we follow God's blueprint for our lives, a blueprint that comes purely out of His great love for us.

Chapters 21 to 23 set out more conditions and very practical rules for good living, ending with the promise in 23:31 that echoes God's covenant with Abraham, "I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the desert to the River (Euphrates)." This was fulfilled literally in the reign of King Solomon. God keeps His promises!