

## SERMON OF THE MONTH.

## Lessons from the Pentateuch.—II.

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“Our God is a consuming fire.”—HEBREWS XII. 29.

THE story of Joseph as recorded in Genesis might be called, in the Italian use of the term, a “comedy,” a story of various adventure, and of doubtful issue that in the end turns out well, and the picture ends with a warm and a happy scene of family life in Egypt, under the favour of the reigning Pharaoh. But how differently the Book of Exodus opens, with its terrible picture of the groaning Israelites burdened with a burden that could not be borne, set to tasks that they could not fulfil, labouring under the heat of the Egyptian sun, and lashed by the whips of their Egyptian taskmasters! And their cry was exceeding bitter and mounted up to God. And yet, right there in the midst of that terrible picture of anguish and pain there comes the story that is hardly second to any for beauty in the Old Testament—the story of the birth, and of the finding of Moses.

Thus Exodus opens with the stories that are to be characteristic of all revelation, that it is in man’s extremity that God finds His opportunity.

Now, to go through the whole of the Book of Exodus in a single address, and point out its beauties and its teachings is, of course, impossible. I venture, therefore, to take rather an artificial point of view, and look at one aspect of the Book—viz., its remarkable threefold revelation of God by fire.

The whole story of the Book, as I hinted before when dealing with Genesis, is to be read in the light of that chapter in which we read of Moses turning aside in the wilderness to see the wonder of the burning bush. We shall find in that story the first revelation by fire, the revelation of the God of Love.

What was the fire that burned in that bush? What did it mean? The Scottish Churches in their hour of tribulation took

this sign of the burning bush for their own, because it typified the people in Egypt, who, though they were oppressed, were yet not consumed. They revived their dying hopes by this motto and this symbol ; and to-day take it for their coat of arms. But I feel inclined to doubt whether the meaning is simply that the bush was to remind Moses of the people whom he had left behind, whom he had probably despaired of ever helping, whom he thought he had forfeited the right to help by reason of his haste and rash behaviour ; I think rather that there was more in it for Moses and the followers of Moses to learn. The story is written down for us to see the revelation of the illuminating light of God's life-giving Spirit ; the bush burned with a fire, but not with a fire that devoured, with the fire that quickened and made a new thing of it. And so as Moses looked he learnt that despite his failure he was still to be God's chosen instrument ; and as he looked he learnt afresh the lesson of his weakness and impotence, till at last the Divine power was burnt in on his soul, and he turned back to the land from which he had fled to lead the people out, convinced that God had not forgotten His plan, that God had not lost His power, that God had not abandoned that process which we have already seen working through the ages of the Patriarchs ; the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob was to be the God of Israel now, and was to bring them out of Egypt.

In the light of this revelation of God's love at the burning bush, the next few chapters receive a wonderful but awful illumination. Israel, indeed, in the Land of Goshen suffers no disabilities, but around them plague follows hard upon plague, and sorrow upon sorrow ; as Pharaoh hardens his heart, so the wrath of God becomes fiercer and more cruel ; and then follows the strange and solemn mystery of that midnight feast, not to be taken sitting down in robes of state, with garlands of pleasure on their heads, but to be eaten in haste, with their staves in their hands, and their loins girt, by the men who were to rise up and flee from a dreadful fate, the men who were to see at what *cost* God was going to deliver them.

Next, as their weak faith grew strong, they set out, and as

they left behind them the cries and the flashing lights of stricken Egypt, there gleamed before them the second revelation by fire—the revelation of liberty, in the pillar of God's guiding light.

At last the people were free, and the light led them forward in a pillar of fire by night, and a pillar of cloud by day, and when once more failure seemed imminent, and the hosts of Egypt pursued them close behind, the pillar moved behind the great company, and stood between them and the Egyptians, so that the Egyptians and the Israelites came not near each other all night long. From redemption to liberty!

They were glad enough of their liberty at first, and they sang their song of gratitude and praise, not unmixed with that primitive and vindictive feeling that always to some extent marred the poetry of the Hebrews; but after a while they forgot Him, and as they went through the wilderness, and various troubles and annoyances beset them, they were willing enough to murmur and disbelieve; they were still only a rabble, they had no loyalty, no feeling of unity, no sense of the national significance of their deliverance, no real conception of the cost of it; they were a murmuring, grumbling, thankless crowd.

So God gave to them a third revelation, a revelation of Law. And that is given by fire too, by the rushing fires of Sinai on the hill that none might touch; only a few elders approached that hill, led by the man who had probed the mystery of the fire of the burning bush, and need have no fear now of the fire that consumes.

This revelation by fire is very terrible; and we not unnaturally wonder if it can be a revelation of the God who is the God of Love. We can appreciate the story of the burning bush; it has been called "Moses' Pentecost"; we love the story of the crossing of the waters, and we have made hymns on that; but what of this revelation by fire on the hill of Sinai? Is the God of Sinai the God of Calvary? In ages past there were not wanting men who denied it, and said that the revelation could not be the revelation of the same God, for Israel cowered in fear and awe beneath the revelation of a God of Law. But Israel was a rabble, and what could make them a nation? The first necessity

for a nation is law. The measure of a nation's majesty is the measure of its just proportion of liberty and restraint. How was Israel to learn the awful lesson of restraint and law-abidingness and national unity in the service of the one eternal God, unless by some revelation that should sweep away their selfishness, their ignorance, and their spiritual stupidity?

Israel had to learn by fear that as God is holy, they must be holy too, to learn by fear what holiness means—that it means for the men who have been slaves that they are to be merciful to their slaves, to the men who have been delivered by a great God that they are to be faithful to that God. God's revelation of love must issue in the liberty of the enslaved. But they to be truly free must learn the character of law. And if they cannot learn it by love alone, they must learn it by fear.

Even while Moses was learning the laws which he was to teach them, the people below were showing how little they understood the character of God, for they thought that God was removed from them, and they made for themselves a golden image that they might have somewhat to worship.

It was only through fear that Israel could be trained; but if we read the Book of Exodus alone we shall sadly misinterpret the Law of God. There was a prophet who thought that this revelation of God on Sinai in fire and awe was final, and he called down fire from heaven, and he hacked the prophets of Baal down. But disappointment and despair ensued until he was made to stand in the cleft of the rock, and there passed by him wind and earthquake and fire; but the Lord was in none of those. But at last there came a still, small voice. That revelation to Elijah stands midway between Sinai and another hill, where Jesus led his three disciples up, and was transfigured before them, and there appeared unto Him Moses, who had mounted Sinai, and Elijah, who had heard the voice of God at Horeb, and they spake with Him of His decease which He must shortly accomplish at Jerusalem. Our God is a consuming fire, yet it is He who spared not His own Son, but freely gave Him up for us all.