

The Burning Bush

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"And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. Moreover he said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God. And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites."

(Exodus 3:3-8)

The great sight which Moses turned aside to see was nothing less than the symbol of the Divine Presence, as this passage expressly declares. Not only is it said that God called unto Moses out of the midst of the bush, but that he commanded him, saying, "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground," - an expression, which, taken in connection with what is elsewhere stated in Scripture, can only be understood as implying that God was present there in a very peculiar manner, just as he afterwards was in the most holy place in the tabernacle and temple, - in the cloud of glory, - which all, with the exception of the high priest once a-year, were forbidden, on pain of death, to approach or gaze upon. We are further told, that the Lord said unto him, "I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob:" and that "Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God." No language could declare more expressly than this does that Moses was in the presence of a Divine Person, - admitted to hear the voice of God, and to look on the symbol of his glory. It is, indeed, said in the second verse, that it was the Angel of the Lord that appeared unto Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. But so far from being inconsistent with what is afterwards said, when it is declared that it was God who called to Moses out of the bush, this statement of its being the Angel of the Lord does in reality convey most important and instructive information respecting the Person who did thus appear; plainly intimating that it was the second Person in the Godhead, - the Eternal Word, - who was afterwards made flesh, and dwelt among men; and they beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Of the many titles which are given to Christ in the Holy Scriptures, there is none more frequently used, in one form of expression or another, than that of his being the Angel, the Messenger, the Sent of the Lord. When Jacob invoked the divine blessing on the sons of Joseph, it was in these words, - "God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God which fed me all my life long unto this day, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads," - words which do expressly give the name or title of Angel to God, and in such a connection as plainly shows that the person intended was the Son, the Redeemer, the Second Person of the Godhead. In a subsequent part of this same book, we find the people of Israel, on their way from Egypt to Canaan, thus warned, - "Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared. Beware of him, and obey his voice; provoke him not; for he will not pardon your transgressions; for my name is in him." In the prophecies of Malachi, Christ is foretold, in language too plain to be misunderstood, under the same title, when it is said, - "The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the Messenger of

the Covenant, whom ye delight in; behold he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts." And in the New Testament, how frequently do we find our Lord representing himself under the character of the Angel or Messenger of the Lord, - as having been sent of God to reveal the divine character and counsels!

And by what name or title could Christ be more appropriately foretold before he came, or designated after he did appear? It was only in virtue of the covenant between the Father and him, that any communication of a gracious kind, any intimation of mercy, could have been made to our fallen race; and it was only through him, and for his sake, that God could ever have been known to us in any other character than that of the righteous Lawgiver and Judge, vindicating the honour and rectitude of his law by inflicting its penalty upon transgressors. As the one only Mediator between God and sinners, he was from the beginning the channel of communication whereby every revelation of the divine will and character, and every intimation of the divine purposes concerning the salvation of sinners, has been conveyed to the children of men. And we find, accordingly, many instances recorded in Scripture, not only of communications being made to the church of old by angels commissioned by him, but of his own personal manifestation to his servants, and that in such a way, and on such occasions, as very plainly to set forth the great work for the accomplishment of which he was one day to become incarnate, and to tabernacle for a season among men. And such was, in a peculiar manner, the occasion of his appearing, as recorded in the passage under consideration. He had come down to deliver his people out of the hand of the Egyptians, - a deliverance which furnishes the plainest and most instructive type of the great work of redemption which is to be found in the history of the Old Testament Church: - "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey."

Assuming, then, that the great sight which appeared to Moses was a manifestation of the Eternal Word himself, the manner of his appearance cannot fail to suggest to us his actual manifestation in the fulness of time, when he appeared to take away sin by the sacrifice of himself. The bush in the desert of Horeb was no unfit emblem of the human nature of Him who was afterwards foretold by the prophet under the figure of "a root out of a dry ground;" while the fire which burned, but did not consume it, afforded an equally striking representation of those inconceivable sufferings which he endured when he bore the penalty of his people's guilt, becoming a curse for them, that he might redeem them from the curse of the law, - suffering, the just for the unjust, that he might bring them unto God. There is not in nature a more expressive representation of intense suffering than fire; and no emblem is more frequently employed in Scripture to set forth the terrible nature of the wrath of God, - the infliction of his righteous displeasure on sin. We find, accordingly, that the leading type whereby the faith of the Old Testament Church was directed to Christ was the burnt-offering, - a type which was familiar to Abraham, and which, after the establishment of the Mosaic economy, was exhibited daily, morning and evening, besides on many other special occasions. It will be remembered, too, that in the case of the institution of the Passover, very strict and special instructions were given that the lamb slain on that occasion was to be roasted with fire, and that if any part of it was not eaten, but remained until the morning, it was to be burned with fire. We cannot doubt that all these instructions were very significant; and as the sacrifice to which they referred did so plainly set forth the atoning sacrifice of the Redeemer, we can as little doubt that the burning with fire was intended to typify his sufferings, - that inconceivable agony which filled his soul with sore amazement, and under which he exclaimed, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

And remembering these things, we can hardly read this passage, I think, without having our thoughts directed to the same solemn and most salutary subject of meditation, even Christ's endurance of that wrath, which, but for his interposition, must have been to us a consuming fire.

We say salutary subject of meditation; for where are we to see the true character of sin, and the punishment which must be awarded to it by a holy and righteous God, if it is not in the sufferings and death of the Lord Jesus? Or how is a sense of its deformity and hatefulness to be awakened and kept alive in our minds, if we are not frequently conversant with what the Scriptures testify concerning these sufferings? We are but too prone to regard sin, in many of its less revolting forms, as a light and trivial thing; and, familiar as we are with it every day, we stand greatly in need of having our minds frequently occupied with what is fitted to place its character and consequences in their true light, in order to counteract our natural tendency to regard it with indifference. And no subject is better fitted to exercise such a salutary influence on our heart than that of our Lord's sufferings, nor is there any one that is more frequently urged upon our attention in Scripture. From beginning to end of the Old Testament, we find it presented to us in predictions, promises, and types, which, though but imperfectly understood by those to whom they were first communicated, do now exhibit Christ and him crucified as the grand subject of the whole revelation of God; and in the New Testament, when these sufferings were actually undergone, they are urged on the attention of Christians, as furnishing at once the foundation of the believer's hope, and the motive of the believer's obedience. And one of the privileges which the New Testament Church enjoy over believers under the old economy, is the greater clearness with which they now see innumerable intimations of a suffering Saviour, both predicted in prophecy and prefigured in type, in consequence of which their motives to believing and cheerful obedience are greatly multiplied and strengthened. And the remark is peculiarly applicable to the subject before us. Whatever might be the extent to which Moses foresaw, in the great sight which he turned aside to see, the mediatorial work of the Lord Jesus Christ, we cannot read what was addressed to him without having our thoughts irresistibly turned to that work. "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and I am come down to deliver them," is language which might have been employed literally to describe the great purpose for which the same glorious Person was afterwards "manifested in the flesh," when he came "to seek and to save that which was lost," - "to preach good tidings unto the meek, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison-door to them that were bound." It was, without doubt, a great and glorious object for which the Lord appeared in Horeb, when he came down to deliver Israel from bondage. But it was still only a type of his future manifestation, when for a season he did in very deed dwell with men on the earth, - and when, in the accomplishment of his mighty work, he endured what was but figuratively set forth in the burning bush of Horeb.

But if believers are thus impressively reminded by the statement in this passage of what is due to sin, and of what was necessary for its atonement, they are reminded also of the precious truth that the atonement has been fully made, - that the penalty of sin was inflicted to the uttermost, and endured until it was exhausted, - and that in the pardon of the guilty, the divine law has not only been vindicated, but magnified and made honourable. Under the inconceivable burden which Christ sustained, when the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all, his soul was filled with sore amazement, and he "offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears, unto him that was able to save him from death." But he did endure, till he could say, "It is finished;" and we have at once an emblem of his condition under the intense agony which he endured, and a prediction of the glorious issue of his undertaking, in the great sight that appeared to Moses, - "The bush burned with fire, but the bush was not consumed."

But there is another subject which is naturally, I may say irresistibly, suggested by the remarkable appearance here recorded, - I mean the sufferings of the Church of Christ, - the people whom he died to redeem. Even to Moses himself, the great sight which he turned aside to see could hardly fail to suggest the condition of his afflicted brethren in Egypt, as well as the remarkable interpositions which they had experienced in the midst of oppression unexampled in the history of the world. We find that condition elsewhere in Scripture repeatedly set forth under the figure of the iron furnace; and we have only to read the very brief history contained in the two preceding chapters of this book, to see how appropriately it was so described, and how clearly it was owing to the immediate interposition of divine power that they were not consumed in that furnace. It is obvious from that history, that nothing but self-interest prevented the king of Egypt from taking direct measures for utterly extirpating the Israelites out of his land, and that by the most violent means, even by blotting out their name from under heaven. He found it to be for his advantage to enjoy their labour as his slaves, - to turn them to good account, in the way of ministering to the gratification of his own and his people's vanity; and hence his obstinate unwillingness to let them go. But in order to prevent them increasing beyond what he thought necessary and safe, - to prevent them, in fact, from becoming dangerous, in the event of a foreign enemy invading the land, - he issued a decree that every male child of the Hebrews should be cast into the river, - a decree which plainly showed that he who issued it would as readily have issued another for the total extirpation of the whole Hebrew race, if he had felt it to be for his interest to do so. But his avarice, or his ambition, or some other motive was made to lay a restraint on his cruelty, - nay, his wrath was made to praise the God of the Hebrews, and the remainder of his wrath was so restrained, that, in spite of all his skill and his power, Israel grew, and multiplied, and became a great nation in Egypt, - and that, too, under the pressure which was sufficient to have crushed them into utter despondency. But in the midst of this fierce and fiery persecution, the Angel of the Covenant was with them; therefore, though the bush burned, it was not consumed.

The miraculous sight which appeared to Moses could hardly fail to suggest to him all this, - he himself being a living example of that marvellous providence by which the murderous purpose of the king of Egypt had not only been frustrated, but made the means of preparing an instrument for the overthrow of his tyrannical power, and the deliverance of his oppressed and enslaved prisoners. Nor can it be doubted that it was designed to set forth the presence of Christ with his suffering Church and people, not only in Egypt during the sojourning of Israel there, but in all other times and countries. Its primary object, as I think, was to typify the sufferings of Christ himself, as I have already had occasion to state and illustrate. But such is the intimate relation, the oneness, of Christ and his people, that their sufferings are represented as his; and whatever, therefore, was employed to foretell or prefigure the one may be regarded as a prediction also and a type of the other. It is said, in regard to the sufferings of the Old Testament Church, "In all their afflictions he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them;" - "He found Israel in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him; he kept him as the apple of his eye;" - "For thus saith the Lord of hosts, After the glory hath he sent me unto the nations which spoiled you: for he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye." And in the New Testament, the sufferings of Christ's people are everywhere identified with the sufferings of Christ himself. "If we are children," says the apostle, "then we are heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ: if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together." The same apostle declares, that he counted all things but loss, and had actually "suffered the loss of all things," that he might know Christ, "and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable to his death." And he expresses

the same truth still more strongly in his Epistle to the Colossians, when he says, "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the Church."

The great sight, then, which Moses saw, did very plainly and expressively intimate that the Church might lay her account with suffering, and such suffering, too, as would threaten her utter destruction. And so it has been in manifold instances, subsequently to the period here spoken of, both under the Old Testament dispensation, and since the coming of Christ. I might enumerate various occasions on which the Church, - the people of God in their collective capacity, - were brought into the furnace of affliction, exposed to persecution in every form which the cruel ingenuity of man could devise, and so despised, oppressed, and broken, as, humanly speaking, to leave no hope of even a remnant being preserved. It might easily be shown, too, that these persecutions, though ostensibly justified on different grounds, and ascribed to something in the character and conduct of believers which required that they should be so dealt with, may be all traced to the enmity of the carnal mind against God, - the principle of which our Lord warned his disciples, when he said to them, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep your also." And with this recorded warning before us, we have good reason to wonder, not that the persecutions of the Church have been so many, but that they have been so few, - and that if there have frequently been long intervals during which persecution, in the strict sense of the term, was unknown, there is some room for the inquiry, whether the cause of such respites has not been, that the Church did at such seasons conform too closely to the sentiments and practices of the world, - so closely as not to exhibit prominently that purity, and holiness, and spirituality, which, when palpably manifested, will never fail to excite the world's enmity. One truth the history of the Church has established, namely, that times of persecution have been times of purity; and they have been numerous enough, moreover, to verify the prediction in the verse under consideration, that as the Church then was, so she might and would again be, as a bush that burned.

But the great sight which Moses turned aside to see was not merely a typical prediction of what the Church might expect to meet with, and would assuredly suffer. It intimated also, in a way the clearest and most emphatic, that however fierce might be the fiery trials which awaited her, and however certain and unavoidable her utter destruction might at times appear to be, yet the furnace should never have power to destroy her. "The bush burned, but was not consumed." Such had been the case with Israel in Egypt, - the house of bondage, - the iron furnace; and so it has ever been, and ever will be. The promise, indeed, which was figuratively or typically given in the burning bush on Horeb, was frequently afterwards repeated in express words, and has in all ages ministered to the consolation of the people of God in seasons of trial. Nor was it merely the promise or assurance that against the Church of Christ the gates of hell should never prevail, precious and animating as that promise is. The sight which appeared to Moses intimated also why it was that the Church never could be destroyed, - even because Christ himself dwells in the midst of her, - not merely as the omnipresent God, who exercises an immediate control over all his creatures and all their actions; but as her living Head, imparting to her life, and light, and strength, and accommodating the communications of his grace to her necessities. And what was thus typically exhibited to Moses was afterwards, like the other predictions involved in that great sight, most expressly promised, and verified, moreover, by the actual manifestations of Christ's presence with his people, or on their behalf, in seasons of extremity. "God is our refuge and

strength," says the Psalmist, "a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early."

In the writings of the prophets, we find many glorious things spoken of Zion, as the permanent dwelling-place of the Lord of glory, - the place where God delights to dwell, which he had chosen as his rest for ever, and on which Messiah was set King, where he is to reign till he shall receive the heathen for his inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession; - all which statements plainly intimate that the Church, - the whole body of true believers in their collective capacity, - are meant to be set forth by the title of Zion; and that the glory of Zion is the presence of her King in the midst of her. And to render this presence of Christ with his people still more palpable, and to give the Church the strongest assurance of the reality of that presence, we read of his actual manifestation for the deliverance of his servants in such circumstances as to furnish a striking commentary on the passage under consideration; for when the three children of the captivity were, by the command of the king of Babylon, cast into the burning fiery furnace, and fell down bound therein, apparently beyond all hope of escape or deliverance, "Nebuchadnezzar the king," we are told, "was astonished, and rose up in haste, and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? and, lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God." All these, and many other Old Testament intimations which might be quoted of Christ's presence with his Church, are confirmed by our Lord's own assurance to his disciples when he said, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." This promise, of course, refers to all times and all circumstances; so that in every condition, whether prosperous or adverse, the people of God, if living in the exercise of faith, and in a course of holy obedience, may reckon on Christ being in the midst of them, in a manner as peculiar as the Divine Presence was wont to be in the midst of Israel of old.

But the great sight described in this passage, - the bush that burned, but was not consumed, - does especially assure the Church of the presence of her living Head in seasons of trial. And many are the instances in which this assurance has been amply verified. For what is the history of the progress and establishment of Christ's kingdom in the world, but a record of his marvellous interpositions on behalf of his people? - not always, indeed, to save them from persecution, or deliver them from the hand of the oppressor, - but, what did far more clearly demonstrate the reality of His presence with them, even to inspire them with such firmness and fortitude as enabled them to endure without shrinking the utmost that human cruelty could devise, and made their oppressors feel that they were contending with an unseen power which could not be subdued, and waging war with a cause which gathered strength from apparent defeat, - rising into renovated vigour when apparently on the point of being for ever put down. "The bush burned, but was not consumed."

We may thus find, in the past history of the Church, illustrations in abundance of the great truth which was symbolically, but very expressively set forth, in the sight which appeared to Moses; and it cannot be doubted that her future history will in like manner continue to bear testimony to the same truth. Whatever may be the nature and extent of the opposition which the Gospel is yet destined to encounter on the part of an ungodly world, - whatever may be the form which that opposition may assume, - whether it be the prevalence of error and infidelity, to such an extent

as to threaten the utter extinction of the truth, or whether it be a more palpable manifestation of hostility in direct persecution, - however fierce and formidable that opposition may be; the Church, the body of Christ, united by faith to her living and life-giving Head, will successfully combat and ultimately triumph over it all, inasmuch as he that is for her is far greater than all that can be against her.

But the question here occurs, - and it is a momentous question to every one, - Are we individually so united to Christ? Unless we are so, it will avail us nothing to know, and professedly to believe, and even to feel something like satisfaction in believing, that against the Church of Christ the gates of hell shall never prevail. If we belong to that Church only in name and by profession, we have no personal interest in the blessings which she now enjoys, nor in the triumphs which she is yet, through the Captain of her salvation, to achieve. We cannot enjoy the presence of her living Head unless he is in our own souls, - Christ formed in us the hope of glory. That presence is not like the Shekinah, or cloud of glory, of old, which dwelt in the midst of Israel, but dwelt apart from every individual, though in a place to which every individual might look. If Christ is now present with his Church, it is not with the Church generally, but with each believer personally. He does not animate and communicate spiritual blessings to his body as a whole, but to each individual member thereof; and no outward relation, therefore, in which we may stand to the Church, will make us partakers of these blessings, unless Christ be dwelling in our hearts by faith. If, indeed, he sends his Church a season of outward peace, and what may be called prosperity, when none are exposed to trial or tribulation on account of the profession which they make or the principles which they avow, we may enjoy, like others, all the comfort and security of such a season; and so long as this state of things continues, we may have no difficulty in persuading ourselves that we are indeed Christians, and are participating in all the blessings and privileges which the Gospel was ever designed to convey. But if we are not partakers of something better, all this will avail us nothing when the day of trial comes. The support which is promised to the Church under that trial, and which will assuredly be forthcoming, is such as we can have no lot or portion in, unless it be merely of an external kind, the removal of the trial itself; for it will be found, in respect to the consolation, and peace, and inward support whereby the people of God are at such seasons sustained, that we are altogether strangers thereto, there being in reality no established communication between our souls and that inexhaustible Source of all grace and strength, through which that consolation may flow in upon and refresh us. Should the trial, then, prove a severe, or, as the Scriptures express it, a "fiery" one, what could be expected but that our profession should be thereby consumed, - that we should be as glad to be regarded as having no concern or brotherhood with Christ's persecuted Church, as ever we were to enjoy the respectability which attaches to a Christian profession in times like our own, when it is found that a man's connection with some church or another is essential to his succeeding in his worldly avocations.

But such public and general calamities as have been referred to are not necessary to bring to a test and to disclose the true character of those who have a mere profession, a name to live while they are dead. The people of God may be, and, I believe, generally are tried, and very severely too, even during those seasons when the Church at large is suffering no persecution; and the great sight which Moses saw is just as applicable to individual believers as it is to his whole body, the Church, in her collective capacity. In various ways they are brought into the furnace. By personal and family affliction, - by reverses in their worldly circumstances, - by the misconduct of those who are dear to them as their own souls, - by the assaults of their great spiritual adversary, suggesting to their troubled minds suspicious and unworthy thoughts of their heavenly Father's dealings with them, - and by the accusations of their own conscience, which,

in a season of darkness and unbelief, lower over them like a cloud full only of wrath and judgment, individual believers may be, and frequently are, tried as severely as those who had no other alternative but to deny Christ or to suffer martyrdom.

The bush, therefore, may burn, though outwardly there may be no intimation that it is on fire; and what could mere nominal professors do, or whither could they betake themselves for shelter, in such circumstances? They must be destitute of all true consolation, - bereft of all solid hope. The refuges in which they really trusted for all their enjoyment were but refuges of lies, - and they are burned up and consumed. They have not, as true believers have, a stronghold to which they can flee, an hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest. They have never so known Christ as to be assured in their own experience, that to them who are united to him by a living faith, he is as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. It is not, therefore, in the prospect of public and general calamity alone that it is needful for us to make sure of our personal interest in Christ, as our only security in the midst of tribulation. There are trials of a personal and private kind, - so private as that the world perhaps never knew or took notice of them, - under which we stand as much in need of the presence and sustaining power of the great living Head of Church, as ever did the martyr as the moment he was consigned to the flames; and multitudes, who have lived and died in the most peaceful times, have had as unequivocal proofs of Christ's presence with them, sustaining their fainting spirits, ministering strength to them in the midst of their weakness, and enabling them patiently to endure, as ever the persecuted saints themselves had; so that, humble and obscure as their condition might be, and unknown or unnoticed by the world as their trials were, there was enough in their personal history and experience to illustrate the meaning and to verify the truth of what was set forth in the great sight which appeared to Moses. And when, in their glorified state, they call to mind their own frailty and helplessness during their sojourn in this wilderness of sin and suffering, and reflect on the many and severe trials through which they passed, but which, though very formidable to anticipate and very painful to endure, did contribute largely towards their growth in grace and their preparedness for glory, - it will ever be to them a subject of growing admiration, and gratitude, and praise, that though troubled on every side, yet they were not distressed; though perplexed, they were not in despair, - that the fiery trial, which at times threatened to devour, served only to purify them, - that though the bush burned, it was not consumed.