Exodus - Commentaries by Frederick George Patterson

Words of Truth: Volume 1, Why the Bush Is Not Burnt

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What a wonderful discovery of God did Moses make when he kept the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, at the backside of the desert! The very discovery, dear sinner, you want to make of Him, to win your confidence to Him, and enable you to trust Him fully. It was surely a “great sight,” as Moses said. “I will now turn aside and see this great sight; why the bush is not burnt.” This was the wonderful secret. It was nothing wonderful that God should display Himself in a flame of fire, or in any other form He chose. Nor was it anything wonderful that a bush should be growing at the backside of the desert. But the wonder of all wonders was, why the bush was not burnt!

Think a moment, dear fellow-sinner, of the nature of God with respect to evil and sin. Such is His nature, that if He were to manifest it, where sin is, He must burn up and consume everything contrary to that nature. When Moses warned the children of Israel of the consequences of idolatry, thus provoking the wrath of God by going after strange gods, he says, “For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God.” (Deut. 4:24) How often did they experience this terrible character of God when they had provoked Him by their murmurs in the wilderness? When they complained and murmured (Num. 11:1), “His anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them and consumed them.” Again, when Borah and his company rebelled against the Lord’s authority, in Moses and Aaron (Num. 16), “There came out a fire from the Lord, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men that offered incense.”

We have in Isa. 6 a sample of a sinner under the beams of this burning holiness of God’s moral nature. There the prophet had a vision, in which he saw the Lord of Hosts, high and lifted up, His train filling the temple; and when the accompanying seraphim (or burners) cry, with faces vailed with their wings, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts,” the poor soul-stricken prophet fell upon his face and cried, “Woe is me, for I am undone!” He knew in his inmost soul that the very moment such an one as he, as a sinner, should have to do with that God, whose burning holiness was before him, he must be consumed!

Now, apply this character, this nature of God, to your own heart, dear reader, and just answer the question. Is there a single thing in my heart, in my whole being, that would not be consumed with this intense holiness of God if I were to stand before Him this moment in my sins? And yet, dear reader, if ever you come into His presence, you must come there so as to answer the full display of His nature. You could not, you dare not be there on other ground than this. It would deny His nature to have you there otherwise.

Now, if we look at the story of Ex. 3, we find that God was displaying His nature before Moses as a consuming fire. One who, however he may act in the display of mercy, and grace, and love, never denies Himself. And the secret Moses learned was this, that while God was a “consuming fire,” He was not acting in this character, but was revealing Himself to Moses in grace! This was the secret, dear fellow-sinner, that while God was there “a consuming fire,” He was not consuming! Oh, what a blessed revelation of Himself! How precious thus to know Him. How are you to know Him now? Just in this character of grace, dear fellow-sinner. Where are you to know Him thus In Christ! Why are you to know Him thus, and without fear? Just because the burning holiness of His hatred and abhorrence of sin burst in all its fullest display on the head of His own beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Because His Son, Jesus Christ, in His own person, bore the fullest burst of divine wrath—the cup of wrath—on His cross. Exhausted it, so that not a drop remained for the poor sinner. Thus it is, dear fellow-sinners, that you are to know God in this day of grace. If you know God, in Christ, you know a God of perfect grace. Out of Christ, you must know Him by-and-bye as a consuming fire.

Now, cannot you tell why it was that the bush was not burned? Cannot you say, “It was because God was revealing Himself as a God of grace, but who was not thereby setting aside His nature in doing so?”

Do you know Him thus, dear reader? Can you say, “I know Him, I know Him 2” Hold fast then this blessed discovery of Him. “Let us hold fast grace (margin), whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire.” (Heb. 12:28,29) “Our God,” that is, God as we know Him now in Christ.

Collected Writings, Numbers 23:19; Exodus 32:14

Q. How do you explain the apparent contradiction in Num. 23:19 and Exodus 32:14?

A. The context decides the use of the word, and meaning of the sentence. In the latter “Jehovah,” moved at the touching intercession of Moses, “felt compassion for” the people who had merited His judgments.

In the former, “God” is not man that He should lie, or the Son of Man that He should repent. Here the meaning is simply as it stands. His unalterable counsels are as unchangeable as His own nature.

The word is similar in both cases, but bears the meanings given to it, and the context decides that which is most applicable. In the one case it is Jehovah in government, whose thought of cutting off part of the nation and making of Moses (the faithful remnant) a great nation (Ex. 32:10), is turned at the intercession of Moses. In the other it is God in purpose, which is unchangeable.

Words of Truth: Volume N2, He That Gathered Much Had Nothing Over

The manna, which was God’s provision for His people in the wilderness, was not the fruit of human toil, or the product of man’s industry. In no way nor measure did it depend on the skill or diligence of them who fed upon it; but it was the sovereign provision of God, bestowed as the witness of divine grace and divine resources, upon a needy people, who had no other supply either around or within them.

It is, and we know by our Lord, as expressive of that eternal life, or true bread, which is as this manna, the sovereign gift of God to a people thoroughly destitute of it, and unable to acquire it by any industry or skill of their own.

Being this—having this chapter affixed to it—being the witness of God’s provision, and the gift of His grace out of His own stores to the needy, it is altogether beautifully and fitly said of it, “He that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack.” For God’s provision is sovereign; it is like Himself; it comes to enrich the poor; it acts upon its own character, having all independent virtue in itself; it is grace, and if so, it does not wait on the working or industry of man (Romans 11:6). Whether it be redemption or life, whether rescue from the strength of the enemy, or the breathing of a new life, it is sovereign, free, and apart from human aid or admixture, “otherwise grace is no more grace.”

Accordingly when God delivered Israel out of Egypt, Israel had nothing to do; their only place was to “hold their peace,” for the Lord would fight for them (Exodus 14:14). And so now, when God is feeding them in the desert, or giving them to live in the place of death which was refusing all supplies for life, their own doings are equally set aside; no industry added a bit to this, no slackness of hand diminished a bit from it; whether they gathered of the manna more or less, they quickly found that they had only just the thing given to them in grace, and what they needed. “They gathered every man according to his eating.”

We know how this great principle is exhibited in the gospel: “The righteousness of God,” for instance; the gift of the Spirit; the new life in Christ Jesus; these sovereign provisions of God in meeting our circumstances as guilty-ones, and as dead ones;—these cannot be improved by any diligence on our part, nor are they bestowed in larger or smaller measure. All the elect are equally justified, equally new creatures in Christ, or born again of the Spirit. There is not in them more or less of this righteousness or new creation. Not one of them is at all more delivered from a state of condemnation than another; but all, be their spiritual diligence what it may, are in the same sense, way, and measure, justified from all things, from which they could not have been justified by the law of Moses.

There is, it is true, another truth as well as this, fully consistent with it, I need not say, but still of a different character. There is attainment among the saints, as well as the common standing of the saints. And thus indeed “the diligent soul shall be made fat.” To the holy, careful keeping of the heart there is surely affixed much of present spiritual strength and refreshing. Peter attaches very blessed fruit to this holy diligence (2 Peter 1); and our own experiences, if genuine and spiritual, must and will verify God’s word in this. But this is another thing, as the reaping reward in the kingdom is another thing, “As it is written, lie that soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.” Quite true. The diligent soul shall have its larger spiritual comfort now, as the diligent servant shall have his ten cities by-and-bye. But this is all another thing, for touching the gifts of grace, whether righteousness or life, whether rescue from Egypt or from the state of condemnation; or whether the grant of the manna from the heavenly storehouses, or of life in the new creation in Christ Jesus, man’s skill and diligence are positively and utterly nothing. He that gathers much has nothing over. No stock there, no work of supererogation. Every man according to his eating, and not according to his gathering. His need is met by the sovereign unaided provision of God, and there the mystery ends.

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