

## The Wilderness

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“See, I have called by name Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship...” (Exodus 31:2-3).

Escaping from the land of Egypt, and slavery under Pharaoh, the Children of Israel miraculously passed through the Red Sea and fled into the barren wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. For three months they wandered about in this wasteland, until the Lord directed them to camp near the base of Mt. Sinai. Here they were to remain for over a year, receiving the commandments and statutes of Jehovah, building a Tabernacle at His direction, instituting a priesthood, and ordering the people according to their tribes. Over thirty-eight years of wandering in the wilderness still lay ahead of them, after leaving this camp by Mt. Sinai, before they would be allowed to enter the promised land of Canaan.

When the Children of Israel made their camp at the foot of Mt. Sinai, they were a disorganized, ill-fed, ill-clothed, and rebellious people. They knew little, if anything, concerning the Jehovah God who was supposedly leading them. It was only through mixed feelings of helplessness, fear of Egyptian slavery, awe for the apparent power of Moses, and hope born from the promises of Jehovah, that they had consented to follow and obey. Moses himself, though, fully respected and honored Jehovah. He had had firsthand contact with the terrible power and might of Jehovah, both through the miracle of the plagues and the miracle performed in their flight from Egypt. Yet even Moses was bewildered when Jehovah instructed him that a beautiful Tabernacle was to be built by this impoverished and confused people out in the middle of a barren wilderness. In response to his bewilderment, Jehovah said to Moses, “See, I have called by name Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship.”

In the spiritual sense of the Word, the building of the Tabernacle in the wilderness contains part of the story of our reformation and regeneration. Egypt, the wilderness lands, and Canaan all represent states of life that the human mind must pass through. The movements of the Children of Israel, and the things they did, describe how the mind progresses through each state, the various influences and pressures that bear upon it, and the changes in character that take place.

Egypt represents the whole field of natural knowledge, which a person comes into through education and experience. That the Children of Israel are enslaved there by Pharaoh represents how the love of self—Pharaoh—endeavors to hold the mind in the delight of merely natural knowledges and sensual pleasures, the “flesh pots of Egypt.” From the influence of the love of self, the mind inclines to make the proof of all reality rest entirely in the observable and demonstrable things of the senses. Spiritual concepts it rejects as mere abstractions and fanciful imaginations of no real existence. It accepts moral concepts of honesty and civil concepts of justice only as the inventions of society, necessary for the preservation of natural order. Such is often a person’s state in early adult life. However, as the young mind drinks in the knowledges, attitudes, and pleasures of the life of Egypt, something else is born in the mind. For as the mind

is educated in natural knowledges, something of the natural knowledge of the Word is included in these knowledges. Such knowledge—the natural truth of the Word—is represented by the birth of Moses. As Moses grows he exerts more and more of an influence. He begins to curb and destroy the harsh and cruel taskmasters of Egypt and to judge between what is right and what is wrong. Moses is the development of conscience from the natural truths of the Word.

When Moses finally leads the Children of Israel out of Egypt, we see something of the great power that resides even in the natural truths of the Word. For no matter how much the mind may be captivated by external things and influenced by the falsities and evils of this state, if it attempts to look to the Lord at all, then the Lord, working through the natural truths of the Word, can break off the bondage of Egypt. From the instruction of the Word in its natural sense, the mind begins to see something of the nature of evil and falsity that are present in purely external and sensual life—the life represented by the ten plagues. Thoughts about the purpose and meaning of life arise, and natural and scientific knowledge alone cannot satisfactorily answer these. Many sensual delights are found to be short-lived, and too often pleasures sought as immediate, desired goals turn into mere phantoms, filled with heartache and regret.

From the affection of truth and the delights of what is good and true, which the Lord has given in early infancy and childhood, the mind looks to the promise of the Lord's Word for a better life and for answers to the whole purpose of creation. It does so with true skepticism. But, even so, if it consents to follow and obey Moses—the external truths of the Word—looking to the Lord as best it can from its natural state, then the bondage of Egypt can be broken, and a new state can begin.

Now, between the life of what is purely external—Egypt—and the beginning of the formation of spiritual life—the conquest of Canaan—there lies the wandering in the wilderness. Before a person can begin to be formed into an angel, he must dwell in that state of life represented by the wilderness. What is this wilderness state of mind that we enter once we have broken out of Egypt?

A wilderness in the Word can have two different meanings. When a wilderness is depicted as a scorched, ruined, and burnt-out land with nothing living, it represents a mind that has been devastated of all goods and truths, so that only evils and falsities remain. This is the state of a devil in hell. Because his interiors are evil, all goods and truths that have rested merely in his memory are removed through vastations. They are not really part of him; he would only use them to deceive others, and so they are removed. Because a wilderness has this signification, much of the land on which the devils in hell live actually looks like a desolate and ruined wilderness. And so a state of mind in which nothing is left of good and truth is sometimes referred to in the Word as a wilderness. Thus, in Ezekiel, we read a prophetic judgment upon the state represented by Pharaoh:

*Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am against you, O Pharaoh king of Egypt, O great monster who lies in the midst of his rivers, who has said, 'My River is my own; I have made it for myself....' I [the Lord] will leave you in the wilderness, you and all the fish of your rivers" (29:3,5).*

And in warning humanity where *not* to look for Him in His second coming, the Lord said, “[I]f they say to you, ‘Look, He is in the desert (wilderness)!’ do not go out” (Matthew 24:26).

But in the story of reformation and regeneration, the wilderness state has a different signification. For a wilderness need not be a ruined land. It may be uninhabited and uncultivated, but such land, with effort, can be transformed into something useful and even beautiful. It is clear, even from the letter of the Word, that the wilderness state of a person’s life is one in which the Lord wills many changes in the person’s thoughts and loves—indeed, that something of the life of heaven be born in the mind. “The wilderness becomes a fruitful field” (Isaiah 32:15). “For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert” (Isaiah 35:6). “The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose” (Isaiah 35:1). “He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in it, thanksgiving and the voice of melody” (Isaiah 51:3).

So, the mind is led to leave the bondage of merely natural thought and life by something of the Divine promise contained in these prophecies. As it leaves Egypt and enters the wilderness, the mind has no sure conviction about the Lord. It has no real understanding of the Lord and the nature of His kingdom, for it is not yet inhabited by spiritual truths and by a faith in such truths. Nor is there yet a love for truth and good, not even a natural love of the natural truths of the Word. Therefore, in the beginning, the wilderness is uncultivated without the presence of living forms. But, still, there is a perception from the Lord, in the person’s understanding, that there is a God, that there is a Divine intelligence and purpose in creation, and that there is something more to the meaning of life than the merely sensual pleasures and external knowledges to be found in Egypt. These perceptions provide the means whereby the mind consents to follow the Lord, hopeful for the future, encouraged by the Divine promise of a better and more useful life, but still confused and skeptical, looking back longingly to the state of Egypt where, although there was bondage, there seemed to be some safety and nourishment.

The Children of Israel were to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Forty signifies temptation, and this is the key to the work that is to be accomplished in the wilderness state. Four essential things were to take place for the Children of Israel in the wilderness: the Divine commandments and laws were to be given to the people; the Tabernacle was to be built; the priesthood was to be instituted; and the tribes were to be ordered.

After it has left the state of Egypt and consented to follow the Lord, the next thing the mind must do is to seek instruction from the Lord in His Word. This is what is represented by the Lord’s giving Moses the Ten Commandments and the laws from Mt. Sinai. The fact that a person must first receive the *external* truths of the Word before he can receive the spiritual and *internal* truths is represented by Moses smashing the first tables of stone written by the Lord, but preserving the second tables, which he copied himself.

Through learning the truths of the Word the mind is faced with its first major temptation. For from the Word it sees that there is a Divine order and Divine law in all things of creation. The truth demands that his understanding make this acknowledgment. But the love of self—the golden calf—which is still very much a part of a person’s state, knows that if the understanding

makes this acknowledgment, then henceforth the Word must be considered the ruling authority and law in all things of life. The love of self will not do this, for it desires to be the sole authority—indeed, the very object of worship. The temptations and struggles which take place with a person before he permits the understanding to rule over the love of self are not accomplished suddenly. A person does not, from *one* decision, acknowledge that the Lord in His Word is the Divine law and only just order in all things of creation, or that everything good and true come from the Lord alone and nowhere else. The love of self rises up again and again to challenge the rule and authority of truth from the Word. But, while this is so, there still must be a beginning, and that beginning is one of the landmarks in the process of reformation.

The Heavenly Doctrines make it clear that a person cannot stop indefinitely to reason as to whether he will acknowledge the supreme authority of Divine truth or not. He cannot halt long between two opinions, or enmesh himself in a host of reasonings, for the truth makes it clear to him that such halting and reasoning are from the promptings of the love of self. However immature and simple the acknowledgment of the Lord's authority may be at this time, it nevertheless must be intellectually complete; no part of that golden calf of self-love can be allowed to remain outside of its rule (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3428, 3833, 10331).

The importance of acknowledging the authority and law of Divine truth is evident from the fact that the Lord cannot find a dwelling place with a person unless such an acknowledgment is first made. The building of the Tabernacle represents how the Lord gradually finds a way of being permanently present with a person. He can have a presence through the temptations of the wilderness state of life when a person makes an effort to obey and to use those natural truths that he has to the best of his ability. In return, the Lord can begin to build a natural love of good and truth, in which there is something of the Divine presence. Truly, the structure of the Tabernacle was frail and weak in comparison to the mighty and beautiful temple that would someday be built in Jerusalem. But, still, it represented something of the permanent presence of the Lord. And this initial presence is holy and precious, represented by all the costly and beautiful materials of which the Tabernacle was constructed.

The wilderness state of life may seem to contain little that is heavenly or beautiful. It is still a natural state, filled with temptations, uncertainties, confusions, regrets and complaints. We feel little of the Lord's presence, and the states of delight and peace that the Lord has promised seem rather vague and obscure. We constantly thirst for more understanding to see our way through the countless troubles, burdens, and complexities of natural life. When deeply troubled, we secretly cry out against the Lord. At times, we wish we were back in Egypt where we were not bothered with the responsibilities and demands that the knowledge and acknowledgment of truth have forced to our attention.

When we are told that, in such a wilderness of ignorant and unregenerate states, the Lord is building His Tabernacle in our minds, we are somewhat dumbfounded and unbelieving. This is because we see, feel and know so little of what the Lord is doing for us through our efforts. "See, I have called Bezaleel...of the tribe of Judah. And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship." Bezaleel of the tribe of Judah represents the good that is formed from love to the Lord (see *Arcana Coelestia* 10329). Even while this love is still only external, it can begin to have the lowest heavenly good

joined to it. Because it is from heaven ,it can receive something of the wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and even the workmanship of the entire heavens. This is the change that the Lord is secretly effecting in a person's mind. It must be born through the trials of the wilderness before it can permanently possess any part of the promised land or be introduced into the spiritual and celestial loves of regenerate life.

Once a natural love of good and truth has been formed by the Lord in a person's mind, this is what communicates with the Lord and with the delights and loves of heaven. Such communication was represented by the institution of the priesthood. Who could enter the Tabernacle to talk to the Lord and to care for the functions of the Tabernacle. The ordering of the tribes around the Tabernacle represents how the Lord secretly and perfectly arranges and orders all things of a person's life under the love that rules at any one time—in this case the rule of the natural love of good and truth.

And so the story of the wilderness tells of the birth of a natural, but heavenly, love of good and truth. It is a story which must be written in the life of every person who wishes to become an angel. It is a story which must precede the opening of the spiritual mind and the formation of spiritual loves—the conquest and settlement of the land of Canaan. The structure of love that is fashioned in the wilderness is from the Lord, but let us remember that it cannot be built without the free consent and effort of the individual person. He must consent to learn truth, to follow its leading, and to recognize its authority by compelling himself to obey. And, while in his work, there is but an obscure presence of the Lord and the delights of heaven, there is nevertheless a clear and unmistakable recognition of the voice of truth crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord." And in that truth is the promise of Divine mercy and love which will bring forth the goods of heaven and plant them in a person's heart, according to his desire to receive. So the Lord fulfills His promise that the wilderness should daily be covered with manna from on high (see Exodus 16:13-15; Isaiah 40:3).

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 31:1-11; Isaiah 35; *Arcana Coelestia* 3428