

“What Is That in Thine Hand?”

“The LORD said unto him, What is that in thine hand?”

—*Exodus 4:2*

THE SETTING OF OUR LESSON

son is a point in Moses' life about forty years after leaving Egypt. Moses had been reared as a member of Pharaoh's family, and had received the benefits of education and position which would be available to such. Stephen, the martyr, reported this in his speech before the Sanhedrin, when he stated, “Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.”—Acts 7:22

In spite of the position and honor Moses enjoyed as a member of Pharaoh's family, his interest and sympathies were with his people, the Israelites. So strong was this feeling that it prompted him to slay an Egyptian whom he saw brutally mistreating an Israelite. Realizing the seriousness of the act, he sought to conceal it by hiding the body. However, the slaying became known, and we read in Exodus 2:15, “Pharaoh . . . sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled . . . and dwelt in the land of Midian: and he sat down by a well.”

While resting at this desert oasis, Moses watched seven young women bringing a flock of sheep to the well for watering. When the women started to fill the troughs, certain shepherds began to interfere. This aroused the ire of Moses, and he successfully interceded on behalf of the young women. Then, he also assisted them in the task of watering the sheep, performing the most difficult part, that of filling the troughs with water. Because of this help, the seven grateful and impressed young women returned home much more quickly than usual. When their father, Jethro, learned of all this he insisted that Moses be brought to his home as a guest. As one might expect, in time, Moses took as his wife Zipporah, one of the young women.

How different was Moses' life in Midian from what it had been in Egypt! From the comforts of the civilization and rich life of Egypt, he was suddenly transferred to the raw desert and to the humble task of herding sheep under primitive conditions. Broken, too, were the tender ties of family and friends which had meant so much. In the forty years between the incident at the well and the scripture which opens our lesson, Moses must have wondered many times about his people Israel, yet in Egypt.

We know, however, that Moses had not been forgotten by God. These forty years had been developing in him a rich growth of character. He had been learning well the lesson of humility which would be so necessary for one whom God would lift so high among the children of men. In a practical way, he had also been traversing the very wide expanse of desert which God knew would be the

route to Canaan which the Israelites later would tread. We can benefit by thus observing the hand of God working in the life of one of his faithful servants.

We also have the “desert” experiences. By force of circumstance we may be set aside for a while, and to outward appearances be forgotten of God. Yet, the hand of God led Moses in the wilderness of Midian and continued with him the forty years he served there as a shepherd. Likewise, God’s gentle leading for us may be from triumph to testing, from abundant fellowship to lonely days, but in it all he will be there to direct, however strange the circumstances may at first appear to us.

The beginning of the particular day in Moses’ life recorded in Exodus 3:1 must have seemed to him to be just “another” one in that long succession of lonely years. In our mind’s eye, we can visualize him as he arose that day to begin his normal activities. As he stood outside his tent, how different he appeared than when in Egypt. His garments were of rough homespun cloth, adequate but not necessarily appealing to the eye. His feet were shod with sandals that in all probability his own hands had fashioned. In his hand was a simple shepherd’s rod. As he stood gazing over the vista before him, he little realized how momentous would be that day and the many yet to follow. That day, in a special sense, he was to begin a career as an highly honored servant of God.

We, too, who are children of God, can look back to a similar point of time in our lives. Once, with many of us, we were in the world just drifting with the tide of men and quite unmindful of our God, or

of his plan. However, there came that day, a special day, when we perhaps heard a Bible discussion, read a tract or a booklet, heard the message of truth presented over some form of media, or in some other way heard the voice of God, and our lives were changed forever.

As Moses walked and tended the sheep on that memorable day for him, he was startled by the appearance of a burning bush. As he looked he realized that, although burning furiously, the bush was not being consumed. When he went closer to inspect, he heard coming from the bush a deep, resonant voice speaking his own name, "Moses, Moses." Instinctively, he answered, "Here am I." (Exod. 3:4) Then he heard the voice identify itself by the memorable words, "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."—vss. 5,6

Fear gripped Moses, and he covered his face with his hands, turning away from the strange sight. However, the voice of God continued speaking. Moses heard God speak of the sad plight of his people in Egypt and also the welcome assurance that they were to be delivered from bondage into their own land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Then the voice of God spoke to Moses in a most direct manner saying, "Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt." (vs. 10) These words seemed to shock Moses. Recovering from his startled fear, he attempted to

reason with God, and even to argue against the suggestion.

No doubt Moses quickly recalled the pomp and grandeur of Pharaoh's court and just as quickly contrasted his own rustic appearance. For forty years in a strange land he had tended sheep, far from the busy kingdom of Pharaoh, and out of touch with the progress of that day. The long years of menial work under primitive conditions had taken away Moses' youthful self-assurance. He felt inadequate for what God had suggested. Note how this is shown in his reply: "And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (vs. 11) How much we can sympathize with Moses in this statement! Was not this our attitude when we began to realize we were being invited to become a son of God, to be used eventually in delivering the world from bondage to sin and death? As we realized the grandeur of the call, its lofty purpose, the holiness of our God, did not we say, "Who am I, that God should call me?"

God began patiently to explain to fearful Moses how the deliverance of his fellow Israelites would be accomplished. He answered questions Moses asked. Additionally, God told him that Pharaoh would resist, but that he would force compliance by a demonstration of mighty power. At the conclusion of God's speaking, however, doubtful Moses again expressed his fears in the words, "Behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee."—Exod. 4:1

IN MOSES' HAND

Then to Moses came a most unusual question. The Lord said to him, as recorded in the words of our theme text, "What is that in thine hand?" Moses knew well what he had in his hand—it was the mark of his work, a shepherd's rod or stick. If his eyes had rested upon it at that time he would have noted the well-worn rod which he had probably used for years. It was a stick he had cut from a tree to be used in herding his sheep, killing harmful snakes, or overturning rocks. It was a useful thing, to be sure, but very commonplace and of no financial value. Yet, in a sense, that stick represented nearly all that Moses possessed, because the sheep he tended were the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law.

What an abrupt change in thought was introduced by this question. Prior to this, God had been outlining his momentous plan for liberating Israel, and now he asked Moses, "What is that in thine hand?" Puzzled, Moses answered with the simple words, "A rod." As he did, he probably reached out his hand which grasped the rod. In verses 3-5, God demonstrated to Moses the power that this simple shepherd's rod had when used under divine authority and purpose.

When Moses finally realized he was to return to Egypt as God's servant, he made arrangements with his father-in-law to take his family and depart. The account reads, "Moses took his wife and his sons, and set them upon an ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt: and Moses took the rod of God in his hand." (Exod. 4:20) Notice the phrase, "the rod of God." This common rod had now an honored place. No longer would it be used to prod sheep,

strike snakes, or overturn rocks. It was now the rod of God. It had changed ownership.

Indeed, such is the case with us who have become disciples of Jesus. That which we had in our hands at consecration, great or small, that which represented all we had and were, now belongs to God. As Moses used the rod thereafter at God's direction, so we, as stewards, are to use our time, talents, our all, as God directs. If we do this, God will bless our efforts. The result of his blessing our efforts may be great and be readily seen as was the case with Moses, or we may need to wait until the kingdom to see all that is accomplished by this power. However, whether results are now great or small does not matter. What does matter is our willingness to be used.

IN GIDEON'S HAND

In looking back over the long history of God's dealings with his servants, we can see many instances when God's power blessed the "little" thing in the hand of a servant. In reverent contemplation, our minds go back to a faraway time in Israel's history. At the time we have in mind, the Israelites are to be found cowering fearfully in the mountain caves. They have been driven there by a ruthless enemy who is plundering the farms of the defeated people. The position of Israel seems hopeless because the conquering nation, now entrenched, greatly outnumbered them, and is naturally warlike.

From the heights above, one can look down upon the enemy's well-disciplined army, numbering well over one hundred thousand men. (Judg. 8:10) Israel has no army at this time, so there seems no possible

solution for the hopeless situation. That is, there is no solution unless one would look to God obediently with faith.

We might imagine being there at that time and perceiving a young, determined man of Israel in earnest conversation with a few men. As we approach, we inquire, "What is that in thine hand?" Promptly comes the reply, "An earthenware pitcher with a lamp inside." How strange it would have seemed if the one to whom we spoke insisted that with such meager implements he and the three hundred with him expected to rout the mighty host below! Yet, such was the case when Gideon and his band of three hundred were used of God to defeat the Midianites. It was all they had in their hands, but in their hearts was great faith, and God blessed that faith with a resounding victory.

We read that Gideon deployed the three hundred in the hills surrounding the Midianites, who were in the valley below. At a given signal from their leader, each blew a trumpet, then shouted the words, "The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon." (Judg. 7:18,20) Then they broke the pitchers to reveal the lamps inside, and consternation broke out among the army below which had bedded down for the night. It appears that the enemy mistook each light to be a torchbearer of a troop. Historians indicate it was the custom in that day for each torchbearer to represent six thousand warriors. Hence the Midianites quickly concluded they were surrounded by a force many times larger than their own. In the darkness, confusion reigned and the Midianites' hands were turned against each other, and a rout ensued.

All that Gideon and his men had in their hands were a pitcher, a lamp, and a trumpet. In their hearts, however, was a willingness to serve God, and faith that he would provide the victory. Once more the question comes to us, “What is that in thine hand?”

IN DAVID’S HAND

We now travel down to another troubled point in Israel’s history. At this time, Israel has an army, well-trained and ready for battle. A valley separates them from a formidable army of Philistines, and the Israelites are afraid. In addition, they are being daily humiliated by a personal challenge from a “champion” of the Philistines—the giant Goliath. His daily taunt is, as recorded in I Samuel 17:10,11, “I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together. When Saul and all Israel heard those words of the Philistine, they were dismayed, and greatly afraid.”

As Israel was being subjected to the taunts of evil Goliath, the young man David came on the scene. He was shocked to see the army of Israel flee from the presence of such a man, and in dismay he proclaimed, “Who is this . . . Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (vs. 26) This statement of David does much to reveal his faith. To him this was not Israel’s army, or Saul’s, but it was the army of “the living God.” This living faith in the heart of youthful David prompted him to speak of his willingness to accept Goliath’s challenge.

When word reached Saul concerning one in the camp willing to battle for Israel in combat with Goliath, David was called before him. “David said

to Saul, Let no man's heart fail because of him; thy servant will go and fight with this Philistine. And Saul said to David, Thou art not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him: for thou art but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth." (I Sam. 17:32,33) Youthful David was not to be denied. With enthusiasm, and displaying great faith, he recounted previous deliverances he had by the hand of God while doing battle with wild beasts. In conclusion, he said, "The LORD that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine."—vs. 37

David's strong faith in God greatly impressed King Saul, and he agreed to David's fighting as a representative of God and of Israel. Saul's sympathies were with David to such an extent that he made arrangements for the youth to wear the King's armor. However, after David tried on the helmet and coat of mail, and had placed the sword on his side, he decided against wearing the armor. He said that he had "not proved them." He felt unqualified to wear Saul's armor unless he had previously tried them in combat.—vss. 38,39

If we had been present at that time we would have wondered greatly as David began to remove the coat of mail. Especially would we have been concerned because it was apparent that David still intended to do battle. We would have watched as the unarmed youth, with only staff in hand, headed down the valley and toward mighty Goliath. We would have been puzzled to see him stop at the brook and, for a moment, busy himself. As he arose we would have seen that he had gathered five

smooth stones. He had with him a staff, a shepherd's bag, and a sling, and he was walking toward a giant to do battle. In his heart was faith in God—he knew the battle was the Lord's.

The account states that Goliath disdained the youth, and said, "Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves? And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. And the Philistine said to David, Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field." (vss. 43,44) Young David, with complete faith in God, was unafraid. Note the courage in his words that came back to the approaching giant: "Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied."—vs. 45

So David, with merely a few stones in a bag, and a sling in his hand, marched out, as the opposing armies watched, and with his sling hurled one of the stones that slew mighty Goliath. This demonstration of faith in God has, throughout the centuries since, stirred many hearts. May we who are now servants of God keep it well in mind. As we engage the hosts of evil in battle, let us not think of their might, or of our own weakness. Instead, let us think as did David, whose final words to Goliath were, "All this assembly shall know that the LORD saveth not with sword and spear: for the battle is the LORD'S."—vs. 47

That which we have in our hand may be only a stick or a stone, but if the Lord indicates it is acceptable in his service, it will be blessed abundantly. What do we have in our hand?

IN MARY'S HAND

Let us once more go back many years to the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. Imagine ourselves in a home in Bethany where are gathered for a meal Jesus and his disciples. We behold this scene, and among those at the table we note Lazarus, who had been raised from the dead. As we stand watching, we see a sister in the doorway manifesting much agitation of spirit as though uncertain about a decision. We reach her side and notice something in her hand, but before we can inquire concerning it she moves quickly toward our Lord. When she reaches him we see that it is Mary, so desirous of showing her love for the Lord because of his awakening Lazarus from the dead that she anoints Jesus with the costly ointment from the alabaster box we had previously observed in her hand.

Some of the disciples expressed indignation at the scene just described, saying, "To what purpose is this waste?" (Matt. 26:8) Jesus, however, defended Mary and said that she had poured this ointment on him for his burial. This was not understood by them at that time, nevertheless, the tone of his remark was such that she felt commended and the disciples reprov'd. All Mary had in her hand was the "alabaster box of very precious ointment."—vs. 7

The Lord blessed this simple act of devotion. When the alabaster box was broken, the perfume quickly filled the room, and its fragrance, symbolically speaking, is with us to this very moment. This is true, because Jesus said, "Verily I say unto you, Whosoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her." (vs. 13)

How beautifully this illustrates the Lord's approval of our serving one another. One may ask in doubt, "What can I do to be a blessing to my brethren?" To such we would reply, "What is that in thine hand?" If the Lord so appreciated an act of simple devotion that he decreed it should be told wherever the Gospel was preached, would not he be mindful of each thought of love one has toward another? Indeed, if we attempt to express it, asking the Lord's blessing, it shall surely be blessed.

How often a pen in the hand of a saint has been blessed by the Lord in bringing blessings to another. A saint who has recently been called home by our Lord was often the source of encouragement to her isolated brethren. It mattered not that her hands were gnarled with arthritis. With much time and great love in her heart, her aching fingers penned for others messages of love and encouragement which the Lord blessed. So it may be that in our hand is just a stick, or stone, perfume, or pen, but by the Lord's grace these can be used to bless others if our hearts are willing. What is that in thine hand?

IN PAUL'S HAND

Our minds now turn back to the period of the establishment of the Early Church. In Corinth, we walk close by the water's edge and there behold men performing various tasks. Fishermen are coming in from the night of toil. Laborers are bending their backs as they unload the ships from distant ports. Then we note two men in animated conversation, yet hard at work. To one we inquire, "What is that in thine hand?" The hand held out for us to

inspect had grasped between the thumb and forefinger a needle strung with cord. We ask of him, "What work do you do?" The answer, clear and forthright, comes back, "I serve God with this needle and cord." This imagined conversation could have taken place if we had then talked to the Apostle Paul. When he was called of God, in his hand was the needle and cord which he had learned to use as a sail and tentmaker. It was all he possessed at the time, but he was willing to use it, and God wondrously blessed him in the service of the brethren.

In Acts 18:1-3, we read, "Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth; And found a certain Jew named Aquila . . . And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers." Paul's time and talent was consecrated to God, and he considered himself merely the steward of these things which God could and did bless. His trade was a means of serving God and his people, by laboring so that he would not be a burden upon those whom he visited in his travels.

We note well Paul's love for and dedication to his brethren: "We were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us. For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God."—I Thess. 2:7-9

IN OUR HANDS

What is in our hands? Some of us may be salesmen, teachers, office workers, or one of many other occupations. Do we consider it a means of furthering our service to God? Have we prayed that God open our eyes to our privileges, and seeing them, have we joyfully attempted to fulfill God's will? To a true child of God, only such a course can bring full joy and peace of heart.

To Moses of old, God blessed a stick in his hand, and with Gideon it was the earthen pitcher and lamp. Youthful David saw God bless his efforts with the pebble from the brook, and Mary the perfume. Faithful Paul wrought "night and day" with his needle and cord so that he could preach the Gospel. We must have something in our hand. Let us pray to see and know that which we have, and humbly ask God's blessing on our efforts to serve him, his people, and his truth. ■