

CHAPTER SIXTEEN – IN THE DESERT

When the people on the river banks looked around for the wonderful Stranger they could find Him nowhere. He had quietly left the place where He had been glorified, and, climbing the steep side of a mountain, had entered a lonely country full of barren rocks and gloomy caves, a region rugged and dreary beyond description. There He spent forty days and forty nights, neither eating nor drinking. The wild creatures of the wilderness were His only companions. The tortoise came out of its rocky hole, the lizard darted across His path as He walked. When evening fell He heard far off on the mountain side the jackal's mournful cry. Lions and leopards passed Him on their way to a stream, or came up and fixed their great, wondering eyes on Him as He knelt in prayer. He was their Lord and Master, and He was sinless—they did not harm Him.

After He had fasted forty days and forty nights the devil, who had been watching and suspecting, came to Him. He wanted to find out who this extraordinary man was. He knew that the time was at hand for His Coming who was to redeem the world and save us from sin and hell. Was this holy One the Redeemer, or only another of the prophets? If he was no more than man, He could be tempted and fall into sin like other men.

There are three desires which, unless resolutely checked lead people into sin—the desire of pleasure, such as the enjoyment of the body in eating and drinking; the desire of notice and admiration; the desire of riches, and of the comforts, power and importance that riches bring. We must bear in mind, however, that these three p's—pleasure, plenty and praise—are things not bad in themselves, nor is the moderate desire of them wrong.

What is bad is the immoderate desire, the reckless use of them simply because they are nice. The devil knows that we are inclined to rush after enjoyment for enjoyment's sake, so he uses these things as baits to catch and ruin us. Men, women, children, all are tempted, some by one bait, some by another, but no one escapes, the Saints least of all. They do not go to Heaven alone, but take many with them, hence the enemy of souls hates and fears them more than others. With what hate, then, did he look upon this Holy One who might be not a Saint only but the Saint of Saints and the Redeemer of men.

The forty days were over, and Jesus, who had been six weeks without food, was sitting worn and weak on a rock in the midst of the desolate country. Scattered around were great stones something in the shape of loaves. And the tempter coming said to Him:

"If Thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread."

By these cunning words he meant to find out what he wanted so much to know, for God alone could change a stone into bread. But we wonder, perhaps, where the temptation was. Our Lord was very hungry and He was asked to change a stone, not into anything dainty but into bread. It was temptation because He was urged to satisfy His hunger before the time appointed by His Father, and to do this by a miracle. He had come into the world to suffer, not to use His divine power to escape suffering. His miracles were to be for others, not for Himself. And He had something far more important to do at that time than to provide for His bodily need. And so the answer came promptly:

"It is written; Man liveth not by bread alone but by every word of God."

He would suffer as long as His Father willed, and wait patiently till His Father should send relief. The devil had found out nothing and his temptation had been treated with contempt. But he had two more in reserve. He took our Lord into his loathsome grasp and bore Him away to the holy city, Jerusalem. There he set Him on one of the lofty pinnacles that overlooked the Temple Courts and said to Him:

"If Thou be the Son of God cast Thyself down, for it is written: that He hath given His Angels charge over thee, and in their hands shall they bear thee up lest perhaps thou dash thy foot against a stone." As if he would say:

"At the sight of Angels flocking round Thee to guard Thy sacred feet, the worshippers in the Courts below will fall prostrate before Thee and adore Thee as the Son of God." See how determined he is to get our Lord's secret from Him, how cunningly his tricks are devised, and how he can turn even holy words to his own purposes. Jesus answered calmly:

"It is written again: Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." Did He mean that He Himself was the Lord God? The crafty spirit could not tell; he was foiled again. But there was a third trial, he might succeed yet. The man, if he was only man, was very weary, very suffering, he might yield just to purchase peace. Again the devil took Him up into a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them and said to Him:

"All these will I give Thee if falling down Thou wilt adore me."

"Begone, Satan! for it is written: The Lord thy God shalt thou adore and Him only shalt thou serve."

Like a thunderclap from a cloudless sky came those tremendous words. Jesus was weary even to exhaustion. But when His Father's honour was assailed He spoke in words of power which terrified the coward that thought to take advantage of His weakness.

"Begone!" The Evil One quailed before Him and fled. And behold Angels came and ministered to Him.

They had been hovering near all through this marvelous scene, wondering and worshipping. And now in joyful throngs they offered Him their service, who, though so spent and suffering, they knew to be very God of very God. They brought Him refreshment in His hunger and thirst, and by their bright, beautiful forms gladdened His sight.

You will ask, perhaps, how our Lord could see from one mountain all the kingdoms of the world? Or how it was that Satan, who is so clever and watchful, did not know from all that had gone before who He was?

Many people are asking nowadays how certain things we read in Holy Scriptures are possible, how they can be explained. These are two distinct questions, not two forms of the same. How things that we cannot understand are possible, should be no difficulty to us in

these days of marvellous discoveries and inventions. A hundred years ago, wireless telegraphy, the X-rays, the cutting off of a man's leg without hurting him, would have been pronounced impossibilities had anyone predicted them, and any genius who should have made them facts would in the Middle Ages have run the danger of being treated as a wizard for his pains.

Wise folks are becoming very wary of declaring anything impossible. It is a thought to make us humble that we are perhaps only beginning in this twentieth century to find out the possibilities of this wonderful kingdom of Nature which is beneath us. It ought to make us ready to believe that in the spiritual world which is above us, there are multitudes of things which we cannot understand. We know from the testimony of our senses that the gramophone and chloroform are facts. But very few of us could give a satisfactory explanation of these marvels; knowledge and terms would alike fail us were we to try. Nay, for the same reasons we should hardly understand the explanation of an expert, even were he to do his best to be simple and clear by the use of our own familiar words.

What wonder, then, that we cannot comprehend those spiritual things which we can neither see, nor hear, nor touch, nor reach by any of our bodily senses! Even God Himself cannot make these things perfectly clear to us now; we are too ignorant, and the words of our poor human speech are too weak to express the wonders that Angels understand perfectly, and that we shall understand some day. When God speaks to us in the Holy Scriptures He has to use our imperfect words to express His divine thought. He is like a father who in answer to his children's questions tries to put some grand astronomical fact into their childish language. We are all children now, and even the most learned must be content to say when it comes to the mysteries of faith:

"I know it is so, because God has said it. I do not know how it is, because of my ignorance. God cannot at present explain it to me. But I shall know some day, and meantime I can wait." But there are plenty of things which with a little thought we can understand quite well in Holy Scripture, and God means us to learn from the Life of our Blessed Lord all we can. This wonderful fact of His conflict with the devil was for our sakes, to teach us how to meet temptation. Our enemy is stronger than we are, but he has been completely conquered by our Leader, and this gives us an immense advantage over him. For a foe that has been beaten again and again comes on to the field in a very different spirit from one who has never known defeat. We have to fight the same enemy who fled in terror at our Lord's word

"Begone!" And our Lord stands beside us always. He encourages us to use His own word:

"Begone, Satan!" and promises us victory if we only ask Him for it and do our best. He has taught us by His own example that temptations are not sins; that we are not to be surprised or frightened when temptation comes; and even if it comes again and again and in different shapes we are to meet it calmly and patiently, trusting in His strength whose soldiers we are.