

The Battle of Life and Other Sermons - The Rt. Rev. Phillips Brooks
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The Egyptians Dead Upon the Seashore

"And Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore." - Ex 14:30

It was the Red sea which the children of Israel had crossed dry-shod, "which the Egyptians essaying to do were drowned." The parted waves had swept back upon the host of the pursuers. The tumult and terror, which had rent the air, had sunk into silence, and all that the escaped people saw was here and there a poor drowned body beaten up upon the bank, where they stood with the great flood between them and the land of their long captivity and oppression. It meant everything to the Israelites. It was not only a wonderful deliverance for them, but a terrible calamity for their enemies. It was the end of a frightful period in their history. These were the men under whose arrogant lordship they had chafed and wrestled. These hands had beaten them. These eyes they had seen burning with scorn and hate. A thousand desperate rebellions, which had not set them free, must have come up in their minds. Sometimes they had been successful for a moment; sometimes they had disabled or disarmed their tyrants; but always the old tyranny had closed back upon them more pitilessly than before. But now all that was over; whatever else they might have to meet, the Egyptian captivity was at an end. Each dead Egyptian face on which they looked was token and witness to them that the power of their masters over them had perished. They stood and gazed at the hard features, set and stern, but powerless in death, and then turned their faces to the desert, and to whatever new unknown experiences God might have in store for them.

It is a picture, I think, of the way in which experiences in this world become finished, and men pass on to other experiences which lie beyond. In some moods it seems to us as if nothing finally got done. When we are in the thick of an experience we find it hard to believe or to imagine that the time will ever come, when that experience shall be wholly a thing of the past and we shall have gone out beyond it into other fields. When we open our eyes morning after morning and find the old struggle on which we closed our eyes last night awaiting us; when we open our door each day only to find our old enemy upon the doorstep; when all our habits and thoughts and associations have become entwined and colored with some tyrannical necessity, which, however it may change the form of its tyranny, will never let us go, — it grows so hard as almost to appear impossible for us to anticipate that that dominion ever is to disappear, that we shall ever shake free our wings and leave behind the earth to which we have been chained so long. On the long sea-voyage the green earth becomes inconceivable. To the traveller in the mountains or the desert it becomes very difficult to believe that he shall some day reach the beach and sail upon

the sea. But the day comes, nevertheless. Some morning we go out to meet the old struggle, and it is not there. Some day we listen for the old voice of our old tyrant, and the air is still. At last the day does come when our Egyptian, our old master, who has held our life in his hard hands, lies dead upon the seashore, and looking into his cold face we know that our life with him is over, and turn our eyes and our feet eastward to a journey in which he shall have no part. Things do get done, and when they do, when anything is really finished, then come serious and thoughtful moments in which we ask ourselves whether we have let that which we shall know no longer do for us all that it had the power to do, whether we are carrying out of the finished experience that which it has all along been trying to give to our characters and souls.

For while we leave everything behind in time, it is no less true that nothing is wholly left behind. All that we ever have been or done is with us in some power and consequence of it until the end. Is it not most significant that these children of Israel, whom we behold to-day looking the dead Egyptians in the face and then turning their backs on Egypt, are known and appealed to ever afterwards as the people whom the Lord their God had brought "out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" ? In every most critical and sacred moment of their history they are bidden to recall their old captivity, When God most wants them to know Him, it is as the God of their deliverance that He declares Himself. The unity of life is never lost. There must not be any waste. How great and gracious is the economy of life which it involves! Neither to dwell in any experience always, nor to count any experience as if it had not been, but to leave the forms of our experiences behind, and to go forth from them clothed in their spiritual power, which is infinitely free and capable of new activities, - this is what God is always teaching us is possible, and tempting us to do. To him who does it come the two great blessings of a growing life, — faithfulness and liberty: faithfulness in each moment's task, and liberty to enter through the gates beyond which lies the larger future. "Well done, good servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

All this is true, but it is very general. What I want to do this morning is to ask you to think about the special experience to which our text refers, and consider how one truth is true of that, and of what corresponds to it in all men's lives. It was the end of a struggle which had seemed interminable. The hostility of Hebrew and Egyptian had gone on for generations. However their enmity may be disguised or hidden, the tyrant and the slave are always foes. If hope had ever lived, it had died long ago. Patient endurance, grim submission, with desperate revolt whenever the tyranny grew most tyrannical, - these had seemed to be the only virtues left to the poor serfs. Not to be demoralized and ruined by their servitude, to keep their self-respect, to be sure still that they were Abraham's children and that Abraham's God still cared for them, patience and fortitude, - these must have been the exhortations which they addressed to their poor souls as they toiled on in the brickyard or by the river.

It does not prove anything, if you please, about our present life, but it certainly sets us to asking new questions about it, perhaps to believing greater things concerning it, when in our typical story we behold all this changed. Behold, the day came when the chains were broken and the slaves went free. Are, then, our slaveries as hopeless as they seem? Are we condemned only to struggle with our enemies in desperate fight, and shall we not hope to see them some day dead like the Egyptians on the seashore?

Surely it is good for us to ask that question, for nothing is more remarkable than the way in which, both in public and personal life, men accept the permanence of conditions which are certainly some day to disappear. The whole of history which teaches us that mankind does conquer its enemies and see its tyrants by and by lying dead on the seashore, often appears to have no influence with the minds of men, all absorbed as they are in what seems a hopeless struggle. But look around! Where are the Egyptians which used to hold the human body and the human soul in slavery? Have you ever counted? The divine right of rulers, the dominion of the priesthood over the intellect and conscience, the ownership of man by man, the accepted inequality of human lots, the complacent acquiescence in false social states, the use of torture to extort the needed lie, the praise of ignorance as the safeguard of order, the irresponsible possession of power without corresponding duty, the pure content in selfishness do you realize, in the midst of the cynical and despairing talk by which we are surrounded, can you realize, how these bad tyrants of the human race have lost their power over large regions of human life? They are dead Egyptians. Abominable social theories which fifty years ago, in the old days of slavery, in the old days of accepted pauperism, men stated as melancholy, but hopeless, truisms are now the discarded rubbish of antiquity, kept as they keep the racks and thumb-screws in old castle-dungeons for a tourists' show.

Is there anything more wonderful than the way in which men to-day are daring to think of the abolition and disappearance of those things which they used to think were as truly a part of human life as the human body, or the ground on which it walks? Ah! my friends, you only show how you are living in the past, not in the present, when you see nothing but material for sport in the beliefs of ardent men and brave societies which set before themselves and human kind the abolition of poverty, the abolition of war, the abolition of ignorance, the abolition of disease, the sweeping away of mere money competition as the motive power of life, the dethronement of fear from the high place which it has held among, aye, almost above, all the ruling and shaping powers of the destiny of man. I recognize in many a frantic cry the great growing conviction of mankind that nothing which ought not to be need be. I hear in many hoarse, ungracious tones man's utterance of his conviction that much which his fathers thought was meant to cultivate their patience by submission, is meant also to cultivate their courage by resistance till it dies. "The Egyptian must die." That is the assurance which is possessing the heart of man.

When any evil does finally perish, then there is something infinitely pathetic in the remembrance of the way in which mankind for generations accepted it as inevitable and drew out of its submission to it such blessing and education as pure submission to the inevitable is able to bestow. The poor man, who thinks his poverty, and the ignorance and servitude which his poverty entails, all right, comforts himself by saying that God made him poor in order that he might be patient and learn to possess his soul in self-respect. By and by when the iniquity of the system under which he has lived gives way and he finds himself admitted to the full rights and duties of a man what then? Infinitely pathetic, as it seems to me, is the recognition that he wins of the great love and wisdom with which God would not let even that darkness be entirely fruitless of light; but while He was making ready for the fuller life of which the poor man never dreamed, at the same time fed him in the wilderness with manna which the wilderness alone could give, so that no delight of freedom to which he afterwards should come need make him wholly curse or utterly despise the regions of darkness and restraint through which he came to reach it.

Is it not thus that we may always explain at least a part, the best part, of that strange longing with which the world, when it has entered into any higher life, still finds itself looking back to the lower life out of which it has passed? It is not properly regret. It is not a desire to turn back into the darkness. The age of real faith does not covet again the chains of superstition. The world at peace does not ask to be shaken once more by the earthquakes of war. But faith does feel the beauty of complete surrender which superstition kept for its sole spiritual virtue; and peace, with its diffused responsibility, is kindled at the thought of heroic and unquestioning obedience which the education of war produced. Still let superstition and war lie dead. We will not call them back to life; but we will borrow their jewels of silver and jewels of gold as we go forth into the wilderness to worship our God with larger worship. Do you not feel this in all the best progress? Do you not see it in the eyes of mankind, in the depths of the eyes of mankind always, as it turns away from the dead forms of its old masters and goes forth into the years to be; the hoarded power of the past glowing beneath the satisfaction of the present and the fiery hope of the unknown future?

Ah, well, there is always something fascinating in thus dwelling on the fortunes of the world at large, peering, like fortune-telling gypsies, into the open palm which she holds out to all of us. It is fascinating, and is not without its profit. But just as, I suppose, the shrewdest gypsy may often be the most recklessly foolish in the government of her own life, so it is good for us always to turn speedily and ask how the principles which we have been wisely applying to the world, apply to that bit of the world which we are set to live.

Do we believe - you and I - in the death of our Egyptians? What is your Egyptian? Some passion of the flesh or of the mind? — for the mind has its tyrannical passions as well as the flesh. Years, years ago, you became its captive. Perhaps you cannot at all remember when. Perhaps, like these

children of Israel, you were born into its captivity. It was your father, or your father's fathers, that first became its slaves. When you first came to know yourself, its chains were on your limbs. As you grew older you knew that it was slavery, but it was such a part of all you were and all you did that you accepted it. That has not made you cease to struggle with it, but it has made you accept struggle hopelessly, as something never to be outgrown and left behind. You have looked forward into the stretch of years, and in prophetic imagination you have seen yourself an old man, still wrestling with the tyranny of your covetousness, or your licentiousness, or your prejudice, getting it down, planting your foot upon its neck, even compelling it to render you, out of the unceasing struggle, new supplies of character; absolutely fixed and determined never to give up the fight until you die - to die fighting. All this is perfectly familiar. Countless noble and patient souls live in such self-knowledge and consecration. But there comes something vastly beyond all these, when the soul dares to believe that its enemy may die, that the lust, or the prejudice, or the covetousness may absolutely pass out of existence, and the nature be absolutely free sure no doubt to meet other enemies and to struggle till the end, but done with that enemy forever, with that Egyptian finally dead upon the seashore.

When that conviction takes possession of a man, his fight is a new thing. The courage not of desperation, but of certain hope, fills every limb and gives its force to every blow. The victory which the soul believes is coming is here already as a power for its own attainment.

Has a man a right to any such hope as that, or is it the mere dream of an optimistic sermon? I dare appeal to you and ask you whether, in your own experience, God has not sometimes given you the right to such a hope? Are there no foes of your youth which you have conquered and left dead, passing on to greater battles? I am not speaking of the vices which you have miserably left behind, merely because the taste is exhausted and the strength has failed – vices which you would take up again if you were once more twenty years old. Those are poor victories. Those are no victories at all. But I mean this: Whether you are a better or a worse man now than you were twenty years ago. Are there not at least some temptations to which you yielded then to which you know that you can never yield again? Are there not some meannesses which you once thought glorious which now you know are mean? Are there no places where you once stumbled where now you know you can walk firm? I pity you if there are not. Other enemies which you then never dreamed of you have since encountered, but those enemies are done with. The Moabites and Midianites are before you and around you, but the Egyptians are dead. And in their death your right and duty are to read the prophecy of the death of every power which stands up between you and the Promised Land!

The appeal is not only to experience. It is to the first Christian truth concerning man. I have preached it to you a thousand times. I will preach it again and again until the end. The great truth of Christianity, the great truth of Christ, is that sin is unnatural and has no business in a human life. The birth of Christ proclaimed that in one tone: His cross proclaimed it in another! And that

which is unnatural is not by any necessity permanent. The struggle of all nature is against the unnatural - to dislodge it and cast it out, That beautiful struggle pervades the world. It is going on in every clod of earth, in every tree, in every star, and in the soul of man. First to declare and then to strengthen that struggle in the soul of man was the work of Christ. That work still lingers and fails of full completion, but its power is present in the world. When He takes possession of a nature He quickens that struggle into life. No longer can that nature think itself doomed to evil. Intensely sensitive to feel the presence of evil as he never felt it before, the Christian man instantly and intensely knows that evil is a stranger and an intruder in his life. The wonder is not that it should some day be cast out: the wonder is that it should ever have come in. The victory promised in the sinless Son of man is already potentially attained in the intense conception of its naturalness. This is Christianity.

Is not this the change which you can see coming in the faces of the sinners who meet Jesus and feel His power in the wonderful stories which fill the pages of the Gospels? The first thing which comes to them, the great thing which comes to them all, is a change in their whole conception of life. What used to seem natural comes to seem most unnatural. That which they called unnatural becomes so natural that they cannot see why it should not immediately come to pass. The rich young man's money begins to fade in his hand, and he feels its tyranny passing away. The Magdalen's face grows luminous with a new vision of purity as the only true human life. Bigotry looks to Nicodemus what it really is. The simple naturalness in the hope that the children of God should live the life of God comes and folds itself around each of them. And in that atmosphere of their new life the old life with its old bondages dies.

You see how positive all this is. And that, too, seems to me to be depicted in the old Hebrew story, which we are using for our parable. It was on the farther seashore of the Red sea that the Egyptian pursuers of the Israelites lay dead. It was when the people of God had genuinely undertaken the journey to the land which God had given them, that the grasp of their enemy gave way and the dead hands let them go. You may fight with your enemy on his own ground, only trying to get the immediate better of him, and win what he claims for yourself, and your fight will go on, more or less a failure, more or less a victory, forever. You must go forth into a new land, into the new ambition of a higher life, and then, when he tries to follow you there, he perishes.

O selfish man! not merely by trying not to be selfish, but by entering into the new joy of unselfish consecration, so only shall you kill your selfishness. When you are vigorously trying to serve your fellowmen, the last chance that you will be unjust or cruel to them will disappear. When you are full of enthusiasm for truth, the cold hands of falsehood will let you go. Get the Egyptian off his own ground, seek not the same low things by higher means; seek higher things, and the low means will know that they cannot hold you their slave. They will lie down and die.

And then the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud will have you for their own and lead you on in your free journey.

With regard, then, to a man's permanent escape from evil, may we not say these two things, – that it must come about as the natural privilege of his life, and it must be positive ? To the soul which has finally escaped from sin into the full freedom of the perfect life, the soul which has entered into the celestial liberty, must not these two things be clear, first, that his old dream of life was a delusion, that he was never meant to be the thing which he so long allowed himself to be; and, second, that the great interests of the celestial life, the service of God which has there claimed the child of God, makes sure forever that there shall be no return to the old servitude ? And what we dare to believe shall there in heaven come perfectly, and with reference to all wickedness, why may we not believe that here and now it may come in its degree with reference to some special sin ? Know that it is not natural that you should steal, that you should lie; get rid of the first awful assumption that it is bound up with your constitution, cease to be a weak fatalist about it. That is the first thing. And then launch bravely forth into brave works of positive honesty and truth. Insist that your life shall not merely deny some falsehood, but that it shall assert some truth. Then, not till then, shall the lie let you go, and your soul count it impossible ever again to do - wonderful, almost incredible, that it ever should have done — what once it used to do from day to day.

I think that there are few things about our human nature which are more constantly marvellous than its power of acclimating itself in moral and spiritual regions where it once seemed impossible that it should live at all. The tree upon the hillside says: “Here and here alone can I live. Here my fathers lived in all their generations. Into this hard soil they struck their roots, and drank their sustenance out of its rocky depths. Take me down to the plain and I shall die.” The gardener knows better. He takes the doubting and despairing plant and carries it, even against its will, to the broad valley, and sets it where the cold winds shall not smite it, and where the rich ground feeds it with luxuriance. And almost as they touch each other the ground and the root claim one another, and rich revelations of its own possibility flood the poor plant and fill it full of marvel with itself.

Of less and less consequence and meaning seem to me those easy things which men are always saying about their own natures and character. “I have no spiritual capacity,” says one. “It is not in me to be a saint,” another cries. “I have a covetous soul. I cannot live except in winning money.” “I can make many sacrifices, but I cannot give up my drink.” “I can do many things, but I cannot be reverent.” So the man talks about himself. Poor creature, does he think that he knows, down to its centre, this wonderful humanity of his ? It all sounds so plausible and is so untrue! “Surely the man must know himself and his own limitations.” Why must he? How can he know what lurking power lies packed away within the never-opened folds of this inactive life? Has he ever dared to call himself the child of God, and for one moment felt what that involves ? Has he ever

attacked the task which demands those powers whose existence he denies, or tried to press on into the region where those evil things cannot breathe which he complacently declares are an inseparable portion of his life? There is nothing on earth more seemingly significant and more absolutely insignificant than men's judgment of their own moral and spiritual limitations.

When the fallacy has been exposed, when the man has become something which he used to go about declaring that it was absolutely impossible that he should ever be, or has cast finally away that which he has counted a very part and portion of his life, it is often very interesting to see how he thinks of his castoff sin. He, if he is a true man, counts his escape complete, but he never forgets his old bondage. He is always one whom God has led "out of the land of Egypt." Egypt is still there, although he has escaped from it. Egypt did not cease to be when the Egyptians with whom he had to do fell dead. Men are still doing the sin which has now become impossible for him. He understands those men by his past, while he cannot imagine himself sharing their life today. He is full of sympathy with the sinner, which is one with, of the same substance as, his security against the sin. Pity and hopefulness and humility and strength all blend into the peaceful and settled composure of his life.

It is a noble attitude towards a dead sin. You look into its dead face and are almost grateful to it. Not with a gratitude which makes you any way more tolerant of its character. You hate it with your heart but look! Has it not given you self-knowledge, and made you cry out to God and set your face towards the new life?

My friends, get something done! Get something done ! Do not go on forever in idle skirmishing with the same foe. Realize, as you sit here, who your chief enemy is, what vice of mind or body, what false or foul habit. Cry out to God for strength. Set your face resolutely to a new life in which that vice shall have no part. Go out and leave it dead. Plenty of new battles and new foes, but no longer that battle and that foe! Get something done! May He who overcame, not merely for Himself but for us all, give you courage and make you sharers in His victory and in the liberty which He attained.