



Pietro Perugino. *Moses' Journey and Circumcision of His Second Son*. 1481.

At the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, we find Moses and Joshua and the whole nation of Israel on the plains of Moab preparing to enter the Promised Land. They are at the end of a 40-year journey through the wilderness. This scene calls to mind the whole story of the Exodus and the sojourn of the people of Israel through the desert. It provides us with a rich and powerful image of the journey of the human soul. It can be read as a kind of allegory of the soul's interior journey from a life dominated by sin, but then redeemed and purified by God on its way to the promised land of Heaven. It is, in many ways, the narrative of an event that is an exterior expression of what goes on within us in a hidden way.

The Exodus story begins when the Israelites find themselves enslaved in a foreign land, oppressed and burdened by their hard servitude. This serves as an image of our common human experience, the experience of feeling oppressed by the weight of our own guilt and sinfulness. How often it happens that men or women during their youth and early

adulthood throw themselves into the pursuit of the pleasures this life affords. Then, after some years of self-indulgence and self-seeking, they begin to experience the emptiness of it all. They begin to realize that the passing things of this world cannot satisfy the deepest desires of their hearts and the life of sin begins to be experienced as an oppressive burden. They then begin to long for liberation, but find themselves helpless to free themselves by their own efforts. The Exodus story is told in such a way as to make it abundantly clear that the Israelites' liberation from bondage is not a human work; not the result of human planning and effort. It is a divine work. It is not the Israelites who take the initiative in freeing themselves, it is God who takes the initiative. Our religion is not so much characterized by man's pursuit of God, but rather by God's pursuit of man.

The Israelites then experience a miraculous liberation. The greatest miracles we can witness are not miracles of the physical order, like healings or the multiplication of loaves and fish. God's greatest miracles are the moral miracles; the miracle we see

happen when someone who was formerly living for himself, completely focused on the pursuit of the things of this world, undergoes a profound change of heart and begins instead to genuinely seek God. That is a clear sign of a divine work in the soul.

At the beginning of a deep conversion, one usually experiences joy and gratitude for having been freed from the futile and frustrating life of sin. God typically gives many sensible consolations and we experience the warm embrace of His presence. But after having experienced a miraculous liberation through the waters of the Red Sea and after the first fervor of this new way of life begins to wane, the soul begins to realize that it doesn't find itself in the Promised Land, but in a desert—a desert that is a place where we are surrounded by various kinds of trials and hardships.

The Israelites were subject to a number of ordeals and difficulties, but in considering them all, we can distinguish three basic kinds of trials they experienced during their time in the desert. A number of the trials of the Israelites were focused on the question of sufficient food and drink: Can God provide for us here in the wilderness? Out in the desert, it is not in the peoples' power to take care of their own nourishment. The nourishment they need is not something they can supply for themselves; it is not something under their control to produce. They have to rely on God. Can we count on God to nourish our souls on this journey?

When someone experiences a deep conversion, they turn away from the pursuit of the things of this world; they give up trying to satisfy their appetites with the coarse foods of material possessions and wealth and pleasure and begin instead to seek the will of God; they begin to orient their lives not to this world, but to another world. At the beginning of this journey, God can give them a taste of another kind of food, a food that can be the source of spiritual delight. But then it frequently happens that, after some time, periods of dryness and desolation set in. The time of sensible consolations has largely passed and one no longer experiences God in the same way as before. The nourishment that God wishes to provide for the soul is no longer perceived by the senses and emotions. In the midst of periods of dryness, it is natural to begin to

wonder: can God really satisfy the hunger and cravings of my heart? In the midst of this dryness, we can be tempted to go back to the coarser food of the senses and emotions, even though God wants to give us a more substantial and spiritual nourishment.

The second kind of trial the Israelites experience in the desert has to do with the matter of security and protection. In Egypt, it was true the people were enslaved, but at least they felt secure and the ways of servitude were familiar to them. Now, out in the wilderness, the people feel exposed and threatened. They are exposed to new hostile forces and menacing evils of such a nature that they can no longer rely on themselves and their own resources for protection. Can they count on the Lord to protect and defend them?

So also, when people undergo a deep conversion and, under the inspiration of grace, commit their lives to the Lord, they leave the familiar and secure paths of the ways of the world. They begin to live differently and, very often, they are misunderstood and misjudged by family and friends; not infrequently they are exposed to ridicule and derision. The spiritual combat becomes more real and intensifies and now we have to face new hostile and menacing forces, both human and demonic; forces that oppose and threaten us. Can we trust God that He will protect us from harm? We can be tempted to return to ways that feel more secure and safe.

The third kind of trial that the Israelites experienced in the desert centers on the question of authority and the representatives and leaders God had chosen for the community. There were various rebellions in the course of the forty years in the wilderness. In one of the first, Miriam and Aaron raised the objection: "Has the Lord indeed spoken *only* through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" (Nm. 12:2) This is also a common trial for those who have determined to live a devout life. When we come in closer contact with the leaders of the Christian community, the priests and the bishops, we begin to see just how human they are; how flawed and sinful they can be and we can begin to wonder and question: does God only work through such broken instruments? We can begin to question

the way God has established His Church and placed such authority in the hands of flawed and sinful men. As we look down the history of the Church we see there is a perennial temptation to this kind of rebellion.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses reveals to the people the purpose for which God brought them into the desert; he tells them why God did this. It was so *“that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart”* (Dt. 8:2). And so it is with us. But it is also helpful to keep in mind that the time of the Israelites in the desert was not only a time in which their weakness and rebelliousness and infidelity were on display; it was also a time in which the holiness and mercy and faithfulness of God were revealed and shone forth in great splendor. It was a time when God gave wonderful food and drink to His people, when He provided them with unexpected means of salvation and showed them His care. Many centuries later, the prophets looked back at this period of Israel’s history with a kind of longing and nostalgia. They saw

it as a time of special intimacy with the Lord. Because it was seen as a privileged time of God’s care for His people, the prophets express a desire to return to those times. The desert always exercises an allure, a kind of attraction on the soul: it is a fearful place but also the place of deepest encounter.

However, in the end we have to see that the desert is not a place of destination; it is not the goal. It is a place of passage. We have to pass through the desert on our way to the Promised Land. And if we find ourselves on the plains of Moab, longingly looking across the Jordan, but also fearful of the passage, we may recall the words of Moses to Joshua:

*“Be strong and of good courage; for you shall go with this people into the land which the Lord has sworn to their fathers to give them; and you shall put them in possession of it. It is the Lord who goes before you; he will be with you, he will not fail you or forsake you; do not fear or be dismayed.”* (Dt. 31:7-8)

