

SEPARATION FROM THE MERELY NATURAL

A SERMON BY THE REV. N. BRUCE ROGERS

And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who have brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage". (Exodus 20:1,2)

These words form the opening statement of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments which the Lord spoke to the children of Israel from Mount Sinai. They do not form one of the commandments themselves; they are a preamble, a prefatory statement, without which the commandments themselves would lose in meaning.

That this is so does not readily appear from the literal sense. It is true that if the Speaker of the Commandments had not first declared Himself to be the Lord God who had brought the Israelites miraculously out of the land of Egypt, free from their Egyptian masters, the commandments would have lacked the necessary authority in their eyes. But in point of fact, for many of the Israelites the commandments lacked authority anyway; for despite their miraculous liberation, they continually distrusted the power of their God to fulfill His promises to them. Far from being willing to live a life in accordance with His commandments, they continually yearned to return to the idols and pleasures of Egypt, trusting rather in the servile life they had known than in Divine assurance of ultimate freedom and prosperity in the land of Canaan.

And yet the preface is given by the omniscient God, who knew what little effect it would have on the minds and hearts of its first hearers: "I am the LORD your God, who have brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Of what use was this announcement to a nation whose trust would never be first and foremost in the Lord and for whom the miracle of their

release would soon become but an historical event and never the basis of future confidence? For what reason has this statement been included as a preamble to the Ten Commandments, said first, in the most prominent position of any statement, unless it has a meaning beyond that of the literal sense, and unless it was intended, like the commandments themselves, not primarily for the ears of the Israelites, but for all mankind?

The importance of this opening statement really becomes clear only when seen in its internal sense. Here we find its universal message—meaning intended for all people, individually and collectively, at whatever time, in whatever circumstances. Here we find the reason for its being said first, a statement apparently referring to a particular event at a particular time, prefaced to commandments whose universal worth and applicability are plain. Since they were first given, they have been at the heart of each succeeding church established by the Lord.

And so, that we may know what the internal sense teaches, or what is meant universally by the opening words of the Decalogue, we turn to the Heavenly Doctrines and inquire what the land of Egypt means, what the house of bondage means, and finally what is meant by the liberation of Israel from it, which is said in Exodus 12:42 to be “a night of solemn observance to the LORD..., a solemn observance for all the children of Israel throughout their generations.”

Attending then to the land of Egypt, we find ourselves told again and again in the Doctrines that Egypt represents and symbolizes external knowledge, or knowledge belonging to the natural mind, which is gained through and based on the evidence and experience of the senses (*Arcana Coelestia* 31:2, 3727:3, 4967, 5275, 5406 end, and many other places). But in an opposite sense Egypt means such knowledge which is destructive of the Word and which is opposed to spiritual truth (*Arcana Coelestia* 4735:15, 5044:4, 4588 end, 5700, et al.); and

the land of Egypt means the state in which such merely external and perverted natural knowledge reigns in or dominates the mind (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 6855, 6976, et al.), that is, a natural mental state in which nothing is believed or intellectually trusted unless it is first proved to the sense or demonstrated by the reasonings of one's own intelligence (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 31:2, 130, 195:3, 1164, et al.).

Similarly we find that “the house of bondage” means spiritual captivity (*Arcana Coelestia* 8049, 8866), here the spiritual captivity which goes hand in hand with reliance solely on knowledge gained through and based on the evidence and experience of the senses and the consequent subservience of the mind to them. For wherever the natural world is worshiped, the spiritual world is denied, and whenever the senses and reasoning based on the senses are made the source of truth, the Word is scorned. Whoever denies the spiritual world and scorns the Word, also rejects the Lord, and with that rejection puts away all that is truly human, preferring slavery to the senses that we share with animals to the freedom that can come only by escaping what is merely natural or external and following where the Lord leads.

We can see from this what the liberation of Israel from Egypt, “out of the house of bondage,” means, namely, liberation by the Lord from what is merely natural and sensual, both intellectually and affectionally (*Arcana Coelestia* 8866). Here, in the internal sense, there is no reference to a physical Egypt or an external condition of servitude. Instead is a reference to a spiritual Egypt—a mental state oriented only to the world and the bodily senses, with its consequent internal condition of servitude to worldly and bodily delights, which in the end is a state of hell. “I am the LORD your God, who have brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage,” means nothing else but that it is the Lord who liberates from that state (*Arcana*

Coelestia 8866). This is the universal message of this preamble to the Decalogue, and unless it is believed, the Ten Commandments and all that they comprise are given in vain; for who will believe and obey the Lord's commandments, unless they first believe that the Lord makes it possible for them to do so?

In connection with this it is interesting to note a teaching of the Heavenly Doctrines given with specific reference to these words:

This is the first thing said by the Lord from Mount Sinai because it will be universally regnant in each and every thing that follows. For that which is said first will be remembered in what follows and will be regarded as the universal element in them.... What is said first will reign in what follows and involve it.... That which is first...is inmost, and that which follows in order adds itself successively to the inmost and so grows. That which is inmost reigns universally in those things which are round about, that is, in each and every thing; for originating from it is the essential of their existence. (*Arcana Coelestia* 8864:3,4)

Essential to the existence of the Ten Commandments, as the universal truth to be acknowledged before they can enter internally into the will, is the truth that it is the Lord who liberates from that external and merely natural state which is the state of servitude to worldly and sensual evidence and experience. The Lord has the power. He is a Savior, *the* Savior. And furthermore, as we are told that the Ten Commandments are "the firstfruits" of the Word, and "in a brief summary the totality of all those constituents of religion which are the means of the Lord's conjunction with mankind and of mankind's conjunction with the Lord," so that "they are so holy that nothing could be more so" (*Life* 54, *True Christian Religion* 283, see also *Apocalypse Explained* 1024:2, 675:5, 948:4, et al.), therefore this truth expressed in this preamble to the Decalogue becomes an expression of the essential and universal truth of the entire Word, namely, that He who has given the Word is Jehovah God,

the Lord who has liberated and who continually liberates from all that is infernal and opposed to His kingdom. As we are told in *Arcana Coelestia* 10083:5,6:

...the first thing of all is to acknowledge that the Lord is the Savior of the world, for without this acknowledgment no one can receive anything of truth and good from heaven, thus not anything of faith.... [This acknowledgment] is the first element of everything connected with spiritual life and the most essential constituent of the church.... [It] is the first of life from the Divine with mankind.

Therefore the Lord has prefaced His Ten Commandments with these words: "I am the LORD your God, who have brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." In the light of their inner meaning, moreover, and because the Hebrew verb has no real tense as we know it, we may alter this translation slightly to bring out that universality of application clearly intended in the spiritual sense and one probably intended also even in the literal sense, and read the preamble to say instead, "I am the LORD your God, who *bring* you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." For this preamble was intended not for a particular people at a particular time merely, but for all people at all times. The truth expressed in it is universal and essential to all life of genuine religion; and so if we seem to pay little attention to tenses of verbs, we do no harm to the Word, but on the contrary, we approach the thought of angels, for whom such tenses never exist, but only thought of the states which they symbolize (*Arcana Coelestia* 488:3, et al.).

"I am the LORD your God, who bring you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." In one sense this can be understood as an expression of the doctrine of eternal life. It is a statement concerning death and an assurance that death is but a passing from one state to another, a Divine liberation from what in a physical sense is merely natural and infirm, a liberation from a world of injury and disease, and freedom from enslavement to

physical appetite and depravity. For what else are injury and disease but merely natural states and thus infernal? And what else are appetite and depravity that belong to the body alone, hunger and starvation that reduce a person to the state of an animal, despair and anxiety brought on by worldly conditions that take hold of the mind and rob it of reason?

All this—that which is merely natural—is left behind at death. “I am the LORD your God, who bring you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage,” is our Divine assurance that this “Egypt,” this bondage, shall not be our lot forever, but that the time for some has come and for others will come. He who is omnipotent and has created all things will liberate us and save us and lead us to peace and happiness in the “Canaan” of His heavenly kingdom, provided only that we have prepared ourselves by obeying His commandments, without looking backward and insisting on retaining the idols and pleasures of that same “Egypt,” that same “house of bondage,” from which we had hoped to escape. Who will be prepared for death, really, without that assurance? Who will not see it as an evil, even as the Israelites saw their liberation as an evil, unless they first trust that the Lord is God omnipotent and the Savior of all, even as regards the outmost realities of His creation? “I am the LORD your God, who bring you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

In a deeper sense we have here also a statement regarding the establishment of a church, the essential and universal truth that a genuine church is established not by men but by the Lord (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 6589, *True Christian Religion* 635). A fallen church, a church without any internal goodness or truth, cannot and will not of itself produce people who will cast off the false doctrines and worldly interpretations of the Word that enslave it and prevent a sight of genuine truth. But the Lord Himself must descend, as He descended so long ago, to bring into the open the plagues that infest the church, as He caused plagues to come

upon Egypt, and to give the Word anew, as He gave it to Moses, by which to liberate people willing to be liberated.

Specifically we can apply this both to the establishment of the Christian Church and to the establishment of the New Church. It is apparent from the New Testament that it was the Lord who established the Christian Church, and He did this by opening the Word and giving it anew. Yet this Word, opened and given anew, could not and would not have been received unless it had first been acknowledged that He who opened and gave it was the Lord, the Son of God, in whom was the Father. The Ten Commandments cannot be received in life unless one first acknowledges and trusts that He who gives them is the Lord God who liberates from all that is opposed to a life according to them. Thus also the Word which the Lord spoke while He was in the world could not have been received unless people had first acknowledged and trusted that He who spoke it was the Lord God with the power and authority to liberate from the merely natural and external doctrines of the prior church, and to save from damnation those who followed Him.

So it is with the New Church. No man has liberated the people of this church from the external and man-made doctrines of the prior church and from the infestations of the hells which had grown to such a height before the Last Judgment. No man has been responsible for the establishment of this church—no, nor ever will be. It is the Lord who has liberated from “the land of Egypt,” the state of subjection to merely natural and man-made doctrines. It is the Lord who has redeemed us “out of the house of bondage,” from the state of spiritual captivity and infestation brought about by the fallen Christian Church. And what is more, no one can come into the New Church unless this is first believed. Essential to receiving the new doctrines, or the doctrines given anew, is the acknowledgment that it is the Lord who has brought this church and will continue to bring it out of “Egypt,” out of the bondage created and imposed by the previous

church. Unless this is first believed, the doctrines are given in vain, for who will follow what they cannot trust? And so we have it prefaced, as the essential truth to that which embraces all teachings of the Word and of the church, "I am the LORD your God, who bring you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Thus we may first acknowledge and trust that it is the Lord who redeems and liberates His church, who gives in what follows, the commandments or injunctions by which it is to be established.

Again there is another sense in which these words may be understood, and that is as they apply in the regeneration of the individual. How many times have people said, "I am what I am. I cannot change." How often have people felt it impossible to escape the natural failings and shortcomings, the weaknesses and enticements of the natural body and world which continually seem to rise up to enslave them? Who has not either said or thought, "I try to love what is good, but always I find love of self and conceit worming its way into the things I do, until it seems that regeneration, at least for me, is hopeless."

In this attitude lies concealed a profound heresy, and one that the hells love nothing more than to foster in us. The children of Israel felt that they could not become what they were not, a free nation instead of slaves; and yet the Lord accomplished it. They felt that they could not escape Pharaoh and their Egyptian masters; and yet the Lord accomplished it. The whole doctrine of regeneration involves this essential truth, that a person can change, that he can receive a new will and become what he was not, and this because the Lord wills it and is the Savior who can accomplish it. This truth is what is also expressed in the words: "I am the LORD your God, who bring you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Unless this is first acknowledged, no one can be regenerated, because no one will feel able to live according to the commandments.

And so in giving the Decalogue, the Lord first spoke the words

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that He did, that it might first be known that He is a Savior, *the* Savior, that He and His words might be trusted, without which trust His words are given in vain. This trust is the beginning of faith in a person, the beginning of the church. So the Lord encouraged His disciples, those who would follow Him, saying,

Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling-places; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. (John 14:1,2)

And referring to the life of love and charity, the practice of useful services according to His commandments, He says:

Whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it. (John 14:13,14)

People can change. They can become what they were created to be, followers of the Lord to the life of heaven and the church that is our spiritual Canaan. The Lord Himself will cause them to come out of "Egypt," "out of the house of bondage," provided only that they be first willing to follow and to trust that the Lord is their Savior, who can establish His law in the hearts of men.

Lessons: Exodus 12:29-42; John 14:1-14; *Arcana Coelestia* 10083: 5,6



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