

"THE BEGINNING OF MONTHS."

Lord's Day Morning, January 1st, 1928.

"This month shall be unto you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you."—EXODUS xii. 2.

NO doubt most of you here present have had some apprehensions of this particular day, and no doubt you have this morning felt some concern, anxiety, and perhaps fear, as to what would happen in it—would there be any proof or evidence of the Lord's hand being with us or not? and no doubt this concern has exercised both you and me from day to day for some time. Here is an instance in the Scripture in which similar fear, anxiety and apprehension, took hold of a man and of a people. The Lord knew all about it, and took into His own hands the management of all. He gave Moses instructions from time to time. Moses was not allowed to know in advance what the Lord would do, but had to wait for every word. The Lord had not told him the exact day of Israel's departure out of Egypt. He had not told him the order of the plagues beforehand, nor how Pharaoh would act from time to time, except this, that he would not let the people go. Moses had to wait and listen, and having waited, listened and heard, he must obey. Now that is God's order. The future is wisely hidden. Some things we must do, but they must be subservient always to the mind and will of God. When the Lord commands, it is our wisdom to obey, to leave Him to provide, and there the whole matter must be left. What the Lord gives, we shall gather; when He withholds, we shall not gather; but if He give, as I trust He will, it will be gathered to the praise and glory of His great and holy Name.

Moses went down, as we read, with a word from the Lord to Egypt. O how fearful he was, even after the Lord had shown him the bush which burned with fire, and yet was not consumed—after He had spoken to him out of the midst of the bush concerning Israel's affliction in Egypt. Moses was not satisfied. He anticipated the children of Israel asking, "Who hath sent you to us? What right have you to come and speak like this? Whence have you received your authority? and what is the Name of the God whom you say has sent you?" And God gave him a Name by which they might know who had sent him: "Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. . . . The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, appeared unto me, saying, I have surely visited you, and have seen what is done unto you in Egypt." Moses was assured that they would hearken and receive his word: "And they shall hearken to thy voice," said the Lord (Exod. iii. 18), and that must have removed from His servant many gloomy fears. It is of the Lord to make a people listen and hearken, to take heed unto the truth, to bow the heart and the ear to attend to His word. Apart from that, we are like the wild ass's colt, not broken in, not tamed nor trained. But the Lord can do all this—tame us, train us, and make us willing to hear what He will speak. If the Lord speaks there will be authority in the word, there will be power and solemnity in it. We shall receive it. It will not be received as the word of man, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which worketh effectually in them that believe.

My text contains a command of God, that "this month . . . shall be the first month of the year to you." It was the month Abib, which had hitherto been reckoned seventh in order; now it was to be the first, and they were to observe it, and keep the Passover as a memorial of their deliverance from Egypt. "This day came ye out in the month Abib" (Exod. xiii. 14). They were now to have sacrifices, feast days, special

services, and they must attend to them on a particular day in a particular month. God set the months in their order, and the beginning of this month was to be the first day of the first month of the year. By that they must reckon all their movements, and all their attendances on the things which God would give them in charge, as He did in the Levitical law.

We have entered this morning into a week. This day is the first day of the week, the first day in the month, the first day of the year, also the first day of a period—a new period. It is new to me, and new to everyone of you. We cannot alter that. The sun rises and sets in the same way, the day begins and closes in the same way, but these things we are to note. God makes beginnings just as He makes endings. It is not for us to make a beginning, neither is it for us to make an ending. God is the first cause and the Author of all things. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. i. 1). In the days before the Flood men lived a great many years, even centuries of time; then a change was brought about in the length of man's life, but not in the nature of it. The sun rose and set just the same when God said to Abram: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee;" and he went out in that year which was the beginning of a period, a new era, a new state of things. How little did Abram know when he went out where he was going, or why he was going! It was interpreted to him from time to time, but he knew it not all at once. There is a great need of looking well to one's feet, to exercise prudence in walking and speaking, and to seek to act in obedience to the Word of God. Abram obeyed God, "and he went out, not knowing whither he went." Obedience has nothing to do with knowledge. He knew enough, though he did not know much. He knew the Lord had spoken, but he did not know the full intent and extent of that word. He knew God had said: "Get thee out of thy country . . . unto a land that I will shew thee;" and he did so. An act

of obedience can be performed without great knowledge. A child who obeys its parent does not know what is in the mind of the parent, and does not need to know; he obeys and fulfils in this respect the whole intention of the parent.

At length the Lord gave the word of command to Moses. There had been a number of plagues—nine severe ones had fallen on the land of Egypt—but before He sent the tenth, and showed forth His great majesty in their deliverance, He speaks to His servant Moses and tells him that this particular month is to be the beginning of months—there should be a great change, a change in the affairs of the national life of Israel; they should soon be well on their way to the land to which He would take them. He would send them forth; they should be clean brought forth out of that land of bondage—not a hoof should be left behind. Look into God's Word, and see how matters stood. Nine terrible calamities had fallen upon Egypt, and now the heaviest was about to fall. Until now Pharaoh had changed his mind time after time, and God so ordered it that until Pharaoh should say the word there should be no going forth; but after God's hand was lifted up for the last time, the king said, "Rise up and get you forth from among my people, both ye and the children of Israel; and go, serve the Lord as ye have said. Also take your flocks and your herds as ye have said, and be gone: and bless me also. And the Egyptians were urgent upon the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste; for they said, We be all dead men" (Exod. xii. 31—33). So the Lord sends a terrible calamity, taking the firstborn out of every house, and only the Israelites were exempt. This was a terrible beginning, and yet it was of the Lord. "By terrible things in righteousness wilt Thou answer us, O God of our salvation; who art the confidence of all the ends of the earth, and of them that are afar off upon the sea" (Ps. lxxv. 5). Thus He shows His might and the terrible things He can do for His people when they need Him. It was a great event, a momentous event, fraught with great conse-

quences. Their hearts must have been filled with fear and apprehension as they sat in their homes that night waiting whilst the Avenger of blood passed over them. God sent His angel with a sword in his hand, passing over the Israelites and smiting the Egyptians. We read: "This is that night of the Lord to be observed of the children of Israel in their generations." Four hundred and thirty years after God spoke to Abraham, and gave him the covenant and promise concerning this people, "even the selfsame day it came to pass." God had never once lost count of the years, nor of the months, weeks or days. It came to the very day, the very night; it was a beginning and it was also an ending. In this life we have endings and beginnings; we pass out of one phase and begin another. A time comes when we must leave certain things and immediately begin other things. There is no interlude between, but just a turning from one period to another. This was the case with Israel. They had made their last tale of bricks, finished with all their taskmasters' demands, and now they must put on their sandals, gird up their loins, take their staff in their hand, eat the Passover in haste, because the time had come for the great change. And what did it mean for the days to come? Well, we have the record, and what a mercy God has left it. What did it mean to Moses as he looked upon the people and saw and heard them on and after that day? When they looked back and beheld Pharaoh and his host marching after them they were sore afraid, and they chode Moses for bringing them out of Egypt, saying, "It had been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness" (Exod. xiv. 12). Those were hard days for poor Moses, but for all that the Word of God was in his heart, the Lord stood by him, and kept His covenant promise to him. He sees all these people committed to his care. How is he going to bear the burden? A little farther on you find him speaking to the Lord (it must be said) peevishly, and in a tone of complaint: "Why should I take up the people? They are not my children. I cannot bear

this burden"—no, he could not bear the burden. So we shall find our burdens are too heavy for our shoulders, but God gives in every case the strength, the courage, and all that is required. Poor Moses might well sink at heart when he saw what was laid upon him, but the Lord had told him He would be with him. "Certainly I will be with thee." O what a word that must have sounded in his ears! Other things might be uncertain, but that could not be. "Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee that I have sent thee"—how Moses must have listened to this—"When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain;" on that very mountain where the bush burned with fire and was not consumed. Certainly He will be with us if He says He will! If God had not said this to Moses, how could he have stood and done all he had to do? He had to deal with a very murmuring, complaining and petulant people. Moses was a man of like passions with ourselves. If left to ourselves, we fall; if we are held up, we stand; and this is our mercy—that the Lord has passed His word that we shall not have laid upon us more than we can bear. He will not let His children be wholly crushed. No; He gives wisdom to them, and a way of escape in temptation. There is a way of escape provided which no man can shut and no man can alter—we have the Throne of grace, the Mercy-seat; that is the effectual way of escape from every trial, every tribulation. If the Lord is for us, all will be well; but if He is against us, it will go ill. That is where we have to stand.

Moses had to pass into a wilderness journey—a long, devious, painful journey with a trying people, yet a covenant people. We may in our movements here find this out. You and I know that we are not always the same. We have our changes, and some of the Lord's children whom He loves have not the best of tempers or the best ways of doing things, and sometimes these things work havoc for the time being in the feelings of those who fear the Lord. But here is sweet conso-

lation for us all: *the Lord changes not*. Well, this is what we need, for God to be with us in the wilderness, giving the manna day by day, and water out of the rock. The first thing the Israelites found when they got into the wilderness was the shortage of water (Exod. xv. 22), and they began to murmur against Moses. Again, in Rephidim they were ready to stone him, and the Lord gave them water from the rock in Horeb. In that very place Amalek came down and strove with them. They would rob them of that water; and so we shall find it now. It is a land of drouth and barrenness in itself, but when the Lord sends some cheering and supporting and comforting word He makes it like Eden, which is known by the enjoyment of the presence of the Lord. You know Eden could not be enjoyed when the Lord's presence was gone from it. As soon as the Lord frowned, man was driven out. So in the things that we come into, the Lord's presence makes an Eden or the garden of the Lord. If the Lord should make our souls His garden, if He brings forth from them the sweet odour of His pleasant fruits, it will be indeed His work and the granting of His favour, and that is what we need. I feel to need that—there never was a weaker creature called to preach the Gospel. I have sometimes felt so weak that I could scarcely stand when preaching, but the applied word revives and strengthens one to go on. We need the Lord to command the blessing; and when He does command it, who can withdraw it? In the early hours of Wednesday morning before we left Sale I believe the Lord spoke to me this word very sweetly and blessedly: "I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." This much comforted me, lifting me out of my despondency. This is what we want—the Word of God applied to us; and so the Lord told Moses and Aaron, "This month is to be the beginning of a new year to you; in that year ye shall hear My voice." It may not always be very comforting to hear the Word of God. It may be a word of rebuke and reproof; it may be instruction, counsel or warning; but from time to time I believe

He will "speak comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, her iniquity is pardoned; for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins." That is the Gospel proclamation—the word of the living God to His redeemed people. If the Lord should give me strength during this year, I desire to set before you His everlasting love to His redeemed people, His care for them, and His mercy in Christ. The Lord was continually bearing the evil manners of Israel in the wilderness, and leading them out through a rough road. It is the wilderness way that leads to the holy city. That is how He led Abraham, Moses, Paul, and all His saints, from first to last, to "a city that hath foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God;" and there, I trust, He will take many of us one day: *Here* it is the wilderness; and even this wilderness, if the Lord is with us in it, will be made glad sometimes, and we shall rejoice together and flow together to the goodness of the Lord. If His love unites us, we *shall* be united, and united to Him. May He use us as shall be for His glory and our souls' good. That is the main thing—His glory. May He add His blessing. Amen.
