

"A Thirsty Land and God's Channels"



By

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“A THIRSTY LAND AND GOD’S CHANNELS.”

1. THE THIRSTY LAND.

It is a land hardly to be imagined by those who have never known it. The cream coloured sand dunes trend away like billows, soft and deep, till they reach the horizon—the camel rider gazes in vain for the line of blue-green that means a distant oasis, or the little white dome that marks a well.

These thirsty lands of the Sahara extend in latitude from the borders of Morocco to the Nile Valley, and in longitude from the foothills of the table lands that rise from the coast of Algeria and Tunisia, down to the basin of the Niger. In Tripoli and beyond to the Delta, the desert meets the sea.

Belts of sand dunes lie from East to West, unbroken by vegetation, except for a wiry tuft of tamarisk or white broom now and again in the hollows. Between these sand-smothered districts you will find tracts of gravel, sun-tanned and bare, broken here and there by an outcrop of black rock, or a patch of scrub. All is death except where there is a water supply; then, all is life.

Life, and life more abundant than anything that our northern lands can shew. You would say that the soil was hopeless, sand dune and gravel bed alike. Bring

water and you will see; where God's touch has set the streams flowing, the miracle awakes. A forest of date palms will rise, sheltering beneath their shadow an undergrowth of fruit trees; pomegranate, fig and apricot interweave in a realm of luxuriance: within a literal stone's throw you have this garden of the Lord alongside the wilderness.

It is by means of channels, seen and unseen, that the supply comes. It is brought by the way of the water courses, by the way of the springs and by the way of the wells. Each of these should have its own chapter, for each has its own lesson concerning the other "thirsty land" that is figured by the literal waste places. Each has to do with us, if we would bear our part in the fulfilment of the word that "in the wilderness shall waters break out and streams in the desert."

The Sahara is a true picture of Islam: Islam is dry as the dunes, hard as the gravel, a problem that has baffled the Church throughout the thirteen centuries of its existence; and it dominates the seventh part of the world's population.

"Let it alone"—so say they whose imagination is caught by the outward solemnity of Moslem worship. If they lived awhile at close quarters, they would learn that those observances influenced heart and life no more than the glowing sand is influenced by the mirage that floats above it, beautiful and futile.

"Let it alone"—so speaks on the other hand the shallow, lazy unbelief that limits God's resources by the things that it has seen Him do. Would it not be something worth living for, if this generation were to

witness the first emerging of an oasis-island from the sand swept waste?

But to start with, let us face the facts of that thirsty land, as they are to-day. Why is Islam arid as no heathen religion, in its yield for God's kingdom? True, it stands for monotheism, and as monotheism it made its first brave fight. Only its deity was not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus-Christ. He was the Allah of Mohammed's invention, a far away Eastern Potentate, merciful and compassionate in name, but in character, uncaring, driving the universe relentlessly. Under this despotism all withers into the one word "fate." The Moslem believes that even his sins are decreed beforehand, and written on his forehead: he has no choice but to commit them, and Allah is responsible. Following this teaching to its natural sequence: man's responsibility is nil, so conscience ceases to raise a protest and becomes inert, and the sense of sinfulness dies away.

Next to a man's thought of God, comes the human ideal, in its influence for making or marring on the natural plane. The ideal of the Moslem is Mohammed—that is to say, first a visionary with a strong message, then a chieftain with magnetic powers of leadership, proud, wayward, dissolute, promising his followers a heaven polluted by indulgence in earth's sins, on the sole condition that they testify to the unity of God and to himself as God's Prophet.

This formula of "testimony" sums up the Islamic creed. It is repeated, times without number, by its adherents till their last breath, and leaves them, having

performed this duty, so as to act as they will. All is lifeless, loveless, void of aspiration, except where man's heart swings him away from the emptiness of orthodox formality into the sidetracks of Mysticism—a Mysticism debased with sorcery and magic, and pathetic in its search for the unknown God.

Where lies the hope? There are those who are looking to civilisation and education to give these lands a chance. Progress can alter the outward features of Islam, as the winds of the desert shift the dunes into new configurations. But the winds cannot give life: that remains for the streams. The world can bring the wind and only the wind—it is for us to bring the water. "Rivers of living water. . . . This spake He of the Spirit."

The setting free of "the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ" for Islam is the challenge to His Church to-day. Just because of its defiance to His Godhead and to His Cross, His honour is at stake, and the life-tide needs releasing in a way unknown till now. Unknown too are the possibilities among Moslem races when the God of those desert oases puts forth the power of Pentecost. For this miracle it is not yet too late—the essence of a miracle lies in the sudden intervention from His unfathomed resources.

The Water of Life may yet be brought to the thirsty land, but it cannot be brought lightly: the lessons that we shall see in the water-ways will shew us this. If the wilderness is to be made to rejoice and blossom as the rose, it can only be through channels in union, cost what it may, with Him from whose riven Heart the streams were set flowing.

Will it be worth while? Those will find out whom God calls to the venture.

2. "THE WAY OF THE WATERCOURSES."

In our northern lands a watercourse shews out as the richest green of the meadowland, broken by a ripple and glimmer and a glitter through reeds and ferns and moss.

Not such are the African watercourses and not such are God's counterparts in the spiritual kingdom.

Out here you can detect the channel by the clue that it will be the barest of places—sunbleached, rounded stones, stretching across a plain, or a deep-cut gully, winding among the tablelands that bound the Sahara to the north. The nearer the time of the water-floods among the hills, the more sterile they will look. "I will cause the rain to come down in his season," that is the promise: the season for that outpouring is when the apricot colour of the dried-up grass has faded to yellow-grey under the summer scorching.

But summer and winter you will see in those barren waterways a supply going down to the oases that cluster among the cliffs and bastions, where the plateau breaks down to the desert. Trace the gully upwards till it is but a trench, and you will probably find that it starts with a scooped-out hollow in the gravel, no more than a couple of feet across, holding a pool that shews a bubble now and then. In that pool lies the source of life for the oasis below. Will it win its way?

The water begins by grooving that trench at the lowest level that it can find, and it seeks all the time to make that level lower still. Gently it chisels and undermines, first on one side of its bed, then on the other, carrying away all the soil that it loosens. And as the stream works downward and ever downward, the flow grows stronger, receiving fresh infilling by little rivulets from the heights above, and these supplies only serve to lower the depth of the chasm, for a chasm it is now.

Further on the chasm becomes a gorge: the cliffs that it has hewn asunder stand back, and the stream suddenly finds a cluster of young palm trees on its shore, then another and another. A few hundred yards more, and the watercourse has reached the meaning of the lonely path, the stripping bare, the ever deepening emptiness. For the last sweep has sent it forth into the glory of its mission. Away beyond stretch thousands upon thousands of palm trees, waiting for the treasure that it has brought down. The power of the water, and the laying low of the channel—between them they have opened this great gateway. "Thou didst cleave the earth with Thy rivers."

Even now the water-way is as bare as ever: it has widened into a bed of shingle, holding a stream that hardly needs stepping-stones whereby to cross it, for it has been tapped farther up in the gorge for the supply of the higher slopes of the palm gardens, and here, below, it sinks away under the earthen banks and vitalises the lower stretches. When the oasis is left behind, the water and its channel vanish together: no

trace can be seen of one or of the other in the waste beyond—only the work that they have wrought remains.

Have we read the lesson as we went along, as the Arab children do when we tell them a story? If God has brought us inwardly by that path of the watercourses, it will need no explanation.

But others there may be, to whom it will be a new view of the meaning of being “channels only”—words sung so easily and with so little thought of what may be involved.

For many a one begins the quest for the Promise of the Father with dim comprehension and mingled motives. Hopes lie in the direction of becoming successful workers, always going about with a satisfactory sense of capacity for any task, and of fitness for any responsibility, any emergency. “All that would be very delightful,” as Bishop Wilkinson said once, “only it is not God’s way.” Instead of being a life of conscious power, it will probably, if He is going to do any deep work in us, be a path of humiliation, of stripping, of emptiness, where no flesh may glory in His presence.

For the way of God with us is as the way of the watercourses. The first step is a very simple one—“Receive ye the Holy Ghost”—no matter how unworthy of the Gift. It is not a question of an advanced spiritual attainment—“For the Promise is to you and to your children and to them that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.” Your thirst marks that “call”—“I will give unto him that is

athirst of the Fountain of the Water of Life freely." Your heart is like the little, sandy basin in the hills, all unmeet to be the vessel for those first living drops that rose within it: but such is God's will and His way. He has said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost": ours, if we are athirst is but to say "Amen." The price was paid on Calvary.

But that absolutely simple act of receiving by faith the personal incoming and indwelling Spirit, is but the initial step—the entering into new conditions—an act that soon develops into a pathway, as with the hollow in the hills. Full soon, as many of us can well remember in looking back, the way goes downward and downward into the valley of humiliation, for the self-life stands revealed by God's pure Presence. On and on, instead of the sense of power, there comes only more and more the overwhelming sense of insufficiency—for as in the natural world, if you want to seek water, look in the very lowest place that you can find. "Death worketh in us, but life in you."

Now and again, as on the North African tableland, a fresh rivulet from the heights above finds its way down to us for a new infilling, but this infilling gives nothing wherein we can glory—only more self-abasement, more sense of infinite shortcoming and unworthiness. The channel sinks by the heavenly inflow: that is all.

Even when the rain comes down "in his season" and the torrent sweeps through in a tide, it does but deepen and strip the watercourse yet more. The channels that God has chosen are ready to His Hand when He works in ordinary ways, and ready to His

Hand in equal abandonment of emptiness when He visits the earth and waters it with the flood of revival.

Whatever the ministry may be, it is the same story—the stream-bed going lower and lower, with nothing to glory in but the one wonderful glory of bearing the life-giving waters.

Look again at the contrast—the almost imperceptible starting point above, the wealth of palm forest below—“There is no limit to that which God can do with a man, provided he will not touch the glory.” Study His beginnings in the great revival tides within memory. In one case after another the channel was a handful of souls, or even one apart, bowed before Him in humiliation. The Thirsty Land of the Moslem world has seen tireless energy working against all odds, fine organisation, boundless self-sacrifice, and each has helped in preparing the way. But how much has Islam seen yet of the lonely night-watch of Peniel, the helplessness of the halting thigh, the daring of the defeated Jacob as he flung himself full weight on the Wrestler Who was bringing him low—“I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me” And in that hour came the word, “As a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.”—“And he blessed him there.”

Once more, shall we make the venture. The pathway may go very deep into the shadow, and it may lead very far—far in the road of intercession, far into the Christ-following of surrender. Little matter if we may in our turn, and in the measure of the vocation wherewith we are called, open a way from the hills of God to the thirsty land below.

3. "THE WAY OF THE SPRINGS."

We have seen the first and simplest of the forms of water supply in the Sahara, in the open watercourses that bring the streams from the hills, and lose themselves as soon as they have watered the first stretches of oases that lie close under the cliffs flanking the sand-ocean.

Next in order come the river oases that find their supply through underground springs; and right out in the length and breadth of the desert lie the wells: Each link in the water system has its lesson for us if we want to share in bringing the living tide to the Thirsty Land. If we are ready to lie low and bare like the open channels, if we yield to the inward urging of the outflow like the springs, if we consent to be broken to the depths of our being like the desert wells for the full uprisings of that tide, then will God find the water-way that He is seeking.

The supply of water through the gullies, at which we looked in the last chapter, is not available in the desert for any great distance from the hills that furnish it. If it ran even a score of miles across the wilderness it would involve a wasting away through evaporation. So in the economy of the natural world, the resources are hidden underground, till some chance is given them by an upward rift; but thus liberated, they afford the loveliest development of the water system of the South Land, a river oasis.

The Arabs tell us that there are hollows among the heights, where, if they lay their ear to mother earth,

they can hear the murmuring of the water underground.

If we know how to give heed, we should catch among the silences of the holy places, something of their resources for the Moslem world, for the River of God is full of water, only waiting to break through human hearts that will let Him have His way. What matter is it that Islam holds 234 millions of the most fast-bound and tenacious opponents of the Truth! "Thou hast ascended on high, Thou hast led captivity captive, Thou hast received gifts for men, yea even for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them." That promise covers the Mohammedan. Let us listen until we hear.

For out from the shelter of the hills, you will suddenly meet, full flow, the stream whose whisperings was to be detected up above.

It is a merry place, that river bed, especially in Tunisia, where it is practically common property. You will see a group of little village maidens, indigo clad, clanking their heavy anklets as their feet dance on the clothes that they are rinsing. Then will come a drove of donkeys from the house of a rich man, with amphora-shaped jars slung in pairs by hoops of palm-stalks across their backs. Brown babies will be paddling about in the pools, or an old man will be washing his head-scarf, and holding it between his outstretched hands to dry in the desert wind.

But all this is but the play-ground of the new-born river; its working days lie beyond. So precious is the

outflow that it is measured and paid for by the handbreadth, after the system of the old Berber races, which neither Romans nor Moslems, when each over-ran the country, could improve. There is nothing haphazard about it. The network of trenches is planned out so that each corner of every garden gets the fortnightly flooding, swirling round the roots of every tree, penetrating the soil of each patch of carrots and onions. The sand barriers that divide the interlacing channels are opened and closed in turn by a stroke of the hoe, so that the two or three handbreadths of water in the two or three hours that are allotted may do full work. This ministering of the tide is the owner's responsibility; if through indolence or carelessness he loses his chance of the life touch, death may have laid hold of some of the garden produce before it comes again.

The co-operation between supply and need is in perfect adjustment up to the measure of the ministration given by the spring. "Everything shall live whither the river cometh." The fertility is limited by the flooding, and by that alone.

We have touched in the first chapter on the capacity for fruitfulness locked up in the apparently hopeless sand and gravel of the Sahara. It is worth emphasizing. Ward Platt says in his book on "The Frontier"—"A peculiarity of the desert region is its soil. In these northern regions it shews a marvellous natural richness. The application of water works wonderful transformations. Products in quality and quantity are amazing. The soil in these dry climates has never been impoverished—the valuable mineral constituents have

not been dissolved and washed out by rain. These elements of fertility, under irrigation, accumulate rather than diminish."

May it not be that the same Lord over all has stored like possibilities of fruitfulness in the arid soil of Islam, leaving it for these last times to shew what His Spirit can do with it? Study a market crowd out here. Consider whether those forceful, thoughtful faces do not shew material for Him. Take a group of village women, left to themselves mentally and spiritually for all generations, and judge whether that fallow ground lies dead: it is simply unreachd, unvisited as yet by God. It may prove, like the desert soil, to have been storing the richer yield through a fettered past, awaiting the hour when the Spirit is poured forth.

But how is he to reach the hidden wealth? Turn again to our desert picture. Follow the oasis river up to its source, three miles perhaps from the town outskirts where we first saw it. Out and away, at the farthest tree limit, you will find one or two deep pools, each a few feet across, jade green, set in the ochre of the sand. The farthest pool holds the mystery of the river: it has liberated, far down, the spring that lies in the broken ground just beyond, liberated it by yielding to the silent urging of the living tide below, that was only seeking to be set free. The water wells out, clear, strong, unailing, able now to reach those countless palms to the utmost verge of their forest. It has been given right-of-way, that is all. The hidden rift, by simple yieldedness, ministers the resources from the hills—it waits on its ministering, and sets free the supply that it receives.

Do we follow once more the story of the inner life of God's channels? It is a further on lesson than that of the water courses.

For the springs teach us that the in-dwelling Spirit Whom we have received by faith holds sway in our hearts by heavenly impulses, that throb within us like the pulsing we have all noticed in living water. If we respond to that urging, He is set free in power: He is the Spirit Whom God has given to all them that obey Him.

The needs-be is that we should yield to His touch, in heart-sensitiveness and quick, full co-operation, whether the inward call is to action, or utterance, or prayer, letting Him work His way, as the hidden spring frees the silted channel—our aim, as Faber puts it, "Only not to impede the sweet grace from above." The measure and the swiftness of our yielding will be the measure of the putting forth of His power.

The converse is true. If by our unbelief we limit the Holy One of Israel, if we quench the Spirit, if we thwart Him by our obstinaey, our apathy, our slowness of heart, we shall be confronted at the Judgment Seat of Christ by the "left undone." For our life's possibilities have been measured up, measured out in heaven, as surely as the oasis-bounds have been determined by the water supply of the river.

"Work out"—these two words sum up the lesson of the indwelling and the releasing, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you to will and to do of His good pleasure."

"Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it."

4. "THE WAY OF THE WELLS."

The well system of the desert begins before the hills that bound it to the north sink out of sight. Caravan tracks skirt their long line of chiselled peaks and hollows and trend off to the nearer groups of oases. The wells in these northern stretches of the Sahara lie near enough to one another to make it a mere matter of inconvenience if one gets choked or runs dry. Such a mischance along the trade routes further south may be a case of life or death.

The way of the wells is not the way of the water-courses or the way of the springs. The watercourses quietly receive their supply from above and pass it on; the springs yield to the gentle pressure from within and set it free, but for the wells it involves sterner work to reach their resources. "He turneth the hard rock into standing water and flint stone into a springing well." But the prize is not lightly won.

For when a man sinks a well he determines that he will get through at all costs to the utmost of the hidden treasure: everything must go that would hinder his reaching it; all that comes in the way of the search is flung out as worthless. "This one thing I do" marks each hour of the quest, breaking through hindrances unknown till they were brought to light as the work went down.

As you go out into the Sahara the unfathomed resources widen and deepen. In the nearest group of oases, the Oued Souf, you can mount the great sand dunes that surround them and trace the windings of

the subterranean river, marked by the dotted palm gardens that it nourishes. Down through thirty or forty feet of ever shifting sand-drift goes the seeker, and then through a rock stratum of crystallised gypsum that shuts down the supply. Beautiful things they are, these crystals that lie embedded there, fashioned like stone carving and often a hand-breadth across, sometimes star-shaped, sometimes chiselled like flower petals, sometimes winged like butterflies. But ruthlessly go pick and shovel, tossing them out whole or in fragments, round the pit's mouth. Then the yield is reached and the upspringing comes, and the water rises to the brim of the well and keeps it level-full, no matter how many scores of times a day the leather bucket swings in and out for the irrigation of the palm garden planted in the sand-pit.

Beyond the region of that buried river the supply spreads into vast underground lakes, only now it has gone far deeper and it is by artesian wells that its wealth is being won. As the toilers sink the shaft they find first a sheet of salt water, worse than useless; far below lies another sheet, sweet and still. Then comes the fight for the overflow. Down and down they drive, piercing the rock till the last inch of resistance is shattered, and from the depth, it may be of 300 feet, comes the flood-tide, rising till it mounts above the surface of the desert in a great crystal dome, yielding in many cases up to thirty thousand litres a minute, night and day.

For in these regions there comes into view a new law, linking the seen and the unseen realms. The hill

streams showed us the impelling of the water to seek the lowest place: the wells reveal the further fact, that water, shut into that lowest place, must seek the level whence it flowed.

“Whoso drinketh of this water shall thirst again,” that is the world’s salt water that only mocks at our need, “But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst,” that is the cool pure water revealed to the heart that finds Jesus. But there is a third stage, “And the water that I shall give him shall be in him (literally, shall become in him) a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” And although we cannot lay down mechanical rules in the inner workings of God, there is a sequence that bears the semblance of a law: it is that this upspringing demands a price for its release.

For, to begin with, there may be remote regions in our spiritual life where God’s working must penetrate, breaking up unrecognised barriers of “I,” “me,” “mine,” that may remain after the obvious elements of the self-life have been dealt with by Him. To the very last we need these searchings, this clearing of ourselves, and that with a broken and contrite heart under His touch; when He chides us for our negligences and ignorances, we must not grudge even seemingly beautiful things, like the rock crystals, that must be thrown aside in the quest for the deepest depth that will reach the spring. Down and down He must go in His tender relentlessness. “The sweet heart-shattering of His way with us.” And when the last resistance yields, we shall

find "the end of the Lord" as did Job of old—an outflow and an overflow from "the undiscovered in God."

But the lesson of the wells does not finish here. The wayfarer in the Northern Sahara goes further out, only to find that the depths lie deeper and the up-spring rises higher. Look at St. Paul: his path led far into lonely walks with God and through all his epistles echo, so to speak, the sound of the blows and the uprushing of the fountain. "Death worketh in us but life in you" rings as the keynote of the apostolic life. For St. Paul was learning the mystery of the filling up that which is behind the afflictions of Christ for His Body's sake, which is the Church. "Bonds," "contentions," "adversaries," and a score of other tests to endurance in the Heavenly service, borne in union with his Head, were expected to liberate sources of grace for the converts. "For though He was crucified through weakness, yet He liveth by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you."

But for St. Paul and for many another who has followed in his train, those words "the fellowship of His sufferings" tell of wells that go yet deeper to reach the hidden ocean of the Love that is Life. There are words in the Epistles that reveal something of this, the "even weeping," over the false professors who were enemies of the Cross of Christ, the "great heaviness and continual sorrow" over stubborn Israel, so intense that he felt he could have thrown his own salvation into the balance if it would have availed. Those passages show that the Apostle knew what it meant to stand in the Holy Place

of the Lord's soul-travail over the transgressors, and catch there the vision of His broken Heart. Do we know that there is such a place? Have we ever had even a desire to reach it?

It was in that place of fellowship that Henry Martyn and David Brainerd of old, and Praying Hyde in our own day, found the flooding up and overflowing of the Spirit, and it has been entered by many another unknown saint whose intercession has made history in the unseen world.

And for us in our small measure there is one, and one only, place where we can find the deepest heart-brokenness, it is down before the broken Heart of Jesus, broken for our sins, for our selfishness, for the sin of the whole world for which we have cared so little.

Emptiness, yieldedness, brokenness: these are the conditions of the Spirit's outflow.

The Cross shows Christ in the stripping bare of the watercourses, in the yieldedness of the springs, in the brokenness of the wells. Such was the path taken by the Prince of Life to set free the flood-tide of Pentecost.

He steadfastly set His face to go that way. Shall we follow His steps?

THE FELLOWSHIP OF FAITH FOR THE MOSLEMS.

The Fellowship exists to unite in prayer, service and sacrifice all who love the Moslems, and seek in any way, anywhere, to win them for the Saviour.

In answer to the prayer of faith, the Holy Spirit can speak to the hearts of the Moslems. In answer to our united prayer of faith, Christ can break the chain that holds them in bondage to the teaching and traditions of the past. And though they are tied and bound by the chain of their sins, the pitifulness of His great mercy can loose them, and bring them into "the glorious liberty of the children of God."

This needs oneness of purpose in prayer by a multitude of believing, expectant Christians.

Do you feel called to join with us?

Occasional Papers with News of the Fellowship are issued and Meetings for prayer for Moslems are arranged from time to time.

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