

MEDIATION OF MOSES

NO. 2398

A SERMON

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“And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.”
Exodus 32:14

I SUPPOSE that I need not say that this verse speaks after the manner of men. I do not know after what other manner we can speak. To speak of God after the manner of God is reserved for God Himself and mortal men could not comprehend such speech. In this sense, the Lord often speaks, not according to literal fact, but according to the appearance of things to us, in order that we may understand so far as the human can comprehend the divine.

The Lord's purposes never really change. His eternal will must forever be the same, for He cannot alter, since He would either have to alter for the better or for the worse. He cannot change for the better, for He is infinitely good—it were blasphemous to suppose that He could change for the worse. He who sees all things at once and perceives at one glance the beginning and the end of all things, has no need to repent.

“God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent,” but in the course of His action, there appears to us to be sometimes a great change, and as we say of the sun that it rises and sets, though it does not actually do so, and we do not deceive when we speak after that fashion, so we say concerning God, in the language of the text, “The LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.” It appears to us to be so and it is so in the act of God, yet this statement casts no doubt upon the great and glorious doctrine of the immutability of God.

Speaking after the manner of men, the mediation of Moses worked this change in the mind of God. God in Moses seemed to overcome God out of Moses. God in the Mediator, the Man Christ Jesus, appears to be stronger for mercy than God apart from the Mediator. This saying of our text is very wonderful and it deserves our most earnest and careful consideration.

Just think, for a minute, of Moses up there in the serene solitude with God. He had left the tents of Israel down below and he had passed within the mystic circle of fire where none may come but he who is specially invited. And there, alone with God, Moses had a glorious season of fellowship with the Most High.

He lent his listening ear to the instructions of the Almighty concerning the priesthood, and the tabernacle, and the altar. And he was enjoying a profound peace of mind, when, on a sudden, he was startled. The whole tone of the speech of the Lord seemed changed, and He said to Moses, “Go, get thee down; for thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.”

I can hardly imagine what thoughts passed through the great leader's mind. How Moses must have trembled in the presence of God! All the joy that he had experienced seemed suddenly to vanish, leaving behind, however, somewhat of the strength which always comes out of fellowship with God. This Moses now needed if ever he needed it in all his life, for this was the crucial period in the history of Moses, this was his severest trial, when, alone with God on the mountain's brow, he was called to come out of the happy serenity of his spirit and to hear the voice of an angry God, saying, “Let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them.”

The language of God was very stern, and well it might be after all that He had done for that people. When the song of Miriam had scarcely ceased, when you might almost hear the echoes of that jubilant note, “Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea,” you might quickly have heard a very different cry, “Up, make us gods.”

And in the presence of the calf that Aaron made, the same people blasphemously exclaimed, “These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.” Such a prostitution of their tongues to horrid blasphemies against JEHOVAH, such a turning aside from the truth to the grossest of falsehoods, might well provoke the anger of a righteously jealous God.

It is noteworthy that Moses did not lose himself in this moment of trial. We read at once, “And Moses besought JEHOVAH his God.” He was undoubtedly a man of prayer, but he must have been continually in the spirit of prayer, or else I could conceive of him, at that moment, falling on his face and lying there in silent horror. I could imagine him flying down the mountain in a passionate haste to see what the people had done—but it is delightful to find that he did neither of these two things, but that he began to pray.

Oh, friends, if we habitually pray, we shall know how to pray when praying times become more pressing than usual! The man who is to wrestle with the angel must have been familiar with angels beforehand. You cannot go into your chamber, shut the door, and begin a mighty intercessory prayer if you have never been to the mercy seat before. No, Moses is “the man of God.”

You remember that he left us a prayer, in the ninetieth Psalm, bearing this title, “A prayer of Moses the man of God.” There is no man of God if there is no prayer, for prayer makes the man into “the man of God.” So, instinctively, though startled and saddened to the last degree, Moses is on his knees, beseeching the Lord, his God.

I. This, then, is the scene I have to bring before you, and my first observation shall be that NOTHING CAN HINDER A TRULY LOVING SPIRIT FROM PLEADING FOR THE OBJECTS OF ITS LOVE.

There were many things that might have hindered Moses from making intercessory prayer and the first was, *the startling greatness of the people’s sin*. God Himself put it to Moses in strong language. He said, “The people have corrupted themselves: they have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto, and said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.”

This terrible accusation from the mouth of God, spoken as God would speak it, must have impressed Moses greatly with the awful character of Israel’s sin, for farther on, we find Moses saying to God, “Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold.”

It has happened to you, I suppose, as it has to me, that in the sight of a great sin one has almost hesitated to pray about it. The person sinned so wantonly, under circumstances so peculiarly grievous, transgressed so willfully and so altogether without excuse, that you felt thrust back from the mercy seat and from pleading for such a sinner. But it was not so with Moses. Idolatry is a horrible sin, yet Moses is not kept back from pleading for its forgiveness. It astounds him—his own wrath waxes hot against it—but still, there he is, pleading for the transgressors.

What else can he do but pray? And he does it after the best possible fashion. Oh, let us never say, when we see great sin, “I am appalled by it. I cannot pray about it. I am sickened by it, I loathe it.” Sometime ago, we had revelations of the most infamous criminality in this great city which we cannot even now quite forget, and I must confess that I sometimes felt as if I could not pray for some of the wretches who sinned so foully.

But we must shake off that kind of feeling, and even in the presence of the most atrocious iniquity, we must still say, “I will even pray for these Jerusalem sinners, that God may deliver them from the bondage of their sin.”

A second thing that might have hindered Moses was, not only the sin, but *the manifest obstinacy of those who had committed the sin*. Moses had it upon the evidence of the heart-searching God that these

people were exceedingly perverse. The Lord said, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people."

Poor Moses had to learn, in later years, how true that saying was, for though he poured out his very soul for them and was tender towards them as a nurse with a child, yet they often vexed and wearied his spirit so that he cried to the Lord, "Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them, that thou shouldest say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father bears the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers?" He was crushed beneath the burden of Israel's perversity, yet, though God Himself had told him that they were a stiff-necked people, Moses besought the Lord concerning these obstinate sinners.

Then, thirdly, the prayer of Moses might have been hindered by *the greatness of God's wrath*, yet he said, "LORD, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people?" Shall I pray for the man with whom God is angry? Shall I dare to be an intercessor with God who is righteously wrathful? Why, some of us scarcely pray to the merciful God in this Gospel dispensation in which He is so full of goodness and longsuffering.

There are some who profess to be God's people who make but very little intercession for the ungodly. I am afraid that if they had seen God angry, they would have said, "It is of no use to pray for those idolaters. God is not unjustly angry. He knows what He does and I must leave the matter there." But mighty love dares to cast itself upon its face before even an angry God. It dares to plead with Him and to ask Him, "Why doth thy wrath wax hot?" although it knows the reason and lays no blame upon the justice of God.

Yes, love and faith together bring such a holy daring into the hearts of men of God that they can go into the presence of the King of kings, and cast themselves down before Him even when He is in His wrath, and say, "O God, spare Thy people, have mercy upon those with whom You are justly angry!"

Perhaps it is an even more remarkable thing that Moses was not hindered from praying to God though, to a large degree at the time, and much more afterwards, *he sympathized with God in His wrath*. We have read how Moses' anger waxed hot when he saw the calf and the dancing—do you not see the holy man dashing the precious tablets upon the earth, regarding them as too sacred for the unholy eyes of idolaters to gaze upon? He saves them, as it were, from the desecration of contact with such a guilty people by breaking them to shivers upon the ground!

Can you not see how his eyes flash fire as he tears down their idol, burns it in the fire, grinds it to powder, straws it upon the water, and makes them drink it? He is determined that it shall go into their very bowels—they shall be made to know what kind of a thing it was that they called a god!

He was exceeding wroth with Aaron. And when he bade the sons of Levi draw the sword of vengeance and slay the audacious rebels, his wrath was fiercely hot, and rightly so. Yet he prays for the guilty people. Oh, never let your indignation against sin prevent your prayers for sinners! If the tempest comes on, and your eyes flash lightnings, and your lips speak thunderbolts, yet let the silver drops of pitying tears fall down your cheeks, and pray the Lord that the blessed shower may be acceptable to Himself—especially when you plead for Jesus' sake.

Nothing can stop the true lover of men's souls from pleading for them. Nay, not even our burning indignation against infamous iniquity. We see it and our blood boils at the sight, yet we betake ourselves to our knees and cry, "God be merciful to these great sinners, and pardon them, for Jesus' sake!"

A still greater hindrance to the prayer of Moses than those I have mentioned was *God's request for the pleading to cease*. The Lord Himself said to the intercessor, "Let me alone." Oh, friends, I fear that you and I would have thought that it was time to leave off praying when the Lord with whom we were pleading said, "Let me alone: let me alone."

But I believe that Moses prayed the more earnestly because of that apparent rebuff. Under the cover of that expression, if you look closely into it, you will see that Moses' prayer was really prevailing with God. Even before he had uttered it, while it was only being formed in his soul, JEHOVAH felt the force of it, else He would not have said, "Let me alone."

And Moses appeared to gain courage from that which might have checked a less earnest suppliant—he seemed to say to himself, “Evidently God feels the force of my strong desires and I will therefore wrestle with Him until I prevail.” It was a real rebuff and was, doubtless, intended by the Lord to be the test of the patience, the perseverance, the confidence, the self-denying love of Moses.

JEHOVAH says, “Let Me alone, that My wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them.” But Moses will not let Him alone. O you who love the Lord, give Him no rest until He saves men. And though He Himself should seem to say to you, “Let me alone,” do not let Him alone, for He wishes you to be importunate with Him, like that widow was with the unjust judge! The wicked man granted the poor woman’s request because of her continual coming—and God is testing and trying you to see whether you really mean your prayers.

He will keep you waiting a while, and even seem to repulse you, that you may, with an undaunted courage, say, “I will approach You. I will break through all obstacles to get to You. Even if it be not according to the law, I will go in unto the King of kings and if I perish, I perish! But I will pray for sinners even if I perish in the act.”

And dear friends, there is one thing more that might have hindered the prayer of Moses. I want to bring this all out, that you may see how tender-hearted love will pray in spite of every difficulty. *Moses prayed against his own personal interests*, for JEHOVAH said to him, “Let me alone, that I may consume them.” And then, looking with a glance of wondrous satisfaction upon His faithful servant, He said, “I will make of thee a great nation.”

What an opportunity for an ambitious man! Moses may become the founder of a great nation if he will. You know how men and women, in those old days, panted to be the progenitors of innumerable peoples and looked upon it as the highest honor of mortal men that their seed should fill the earth. Here is the opportunity for Moses to become the father of a nation that God will bless.

All the benedictions of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, are to be met in Moses and his seed. But no, he will not have it so. He turns to God and cries to Him to bless the sinful people. It seems as if he passed over the offer that God made, *sub silentio*, as we say. Leaving it in utter silence, he cries, “Spare thy people and bless thine heritage.”

II. Now I introduce to you a second thought, which is that NOTHING CAN DEPRIVE A LOVING SPIRIT OF ITS ARGUMENTS IN PRAYER FOR OTHERS.

It is one thing to be willing to besiege the throne of grace, but it is quite another thing to get the ammunition of prayer. Sometimes you cannot pray, for prayer means the pleading of arguments, and there are times when arguments fail you—when you cannot think of any reason why you should pray. Now there was no argument in these people, nothing that Moses could see in them that he could plead with God for them—so he turned his eyes another way—he looked to God and pleaded what he saw in Him.

His first argument was, that the *Lord had made them His people*. He said, “Lord, why does Your wrath wax hot against Your people?” The Lord had said to Moses, “Get thee down, for *thy* people have corrupted themselves.” “No,” says Moses, “they are not *my* people—they are *Your* people.” It was a noble, “retort courteous,” as it were, upon the Ever-Blessed One.

“In Your wrath You call them my people, but You know that they are none of mine—they are Yours—You did choose their fathers and You did enter into covenant with them, and I remind You that they are Your chosen ones, the objects of Your love and mercy, and therefore, O Lord, because they are Yours, will You not bless them?”

Oh, use that argument in your supplications! If you cannot say of a sinner that he is God’s chosen, at least you can say that he is God’s creature, therefore use that plea, “O God, suffer not Your creature to perish!”

Next, Moses pleads that *the Lord had done great things for them*, for he says, “Why does Your wrath wax hot against Your people, which You have brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?” “I never brought Israel out of Egypt,” says Moses, “how could I have

done it? I did not divide the Red Sea. I did not smite Pharaoh. You have done it, O Lord, You alone have done it, and if You have done all this, will You not finish what You have begun?"

This was grand pleading on the part of Moses and I do not wonder that it prevailed. Now, if you see any sign of grace, any token of God's work in the heart, plead it with the Lord. Say, "You have done so much, O Lord. Be pleased to do the rest and let these people be saved with Your everlasting salvation!"

Then Moses goes on to mention, in the next place, that *the Lord's name would be compromised if Israel should be destroyed*. He says, "Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? If God's people are not saved, if Christ does not see of the travail of His soul, the majesty of God and the honor of the Redeemer will be compromised. Shall Christ die to no purpose? Shall the Gospel be preached in vain? Shall the Holy Spirit be poured out without avail? Let us plead thus with God and we shall not be short of arguments that we may urge with Him.

Moses goes on to mention that *God was in covenant with these people*. See how he puts it in the thirteenth verse, "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever."

There is no pleading with God like reminding Him of His covenant. Get a hold of a promise of God, and you may pray with great boldness, for the Lord will not run back from His own Word—but get a hold of the covenant and you may plead with the greatest possible confidence. If I may compare a single promise to one great gun in the heavenly siege-train, then the covenant may be likened to a whole park of artillery—with that you may besiege heaven and come off a conqueror.

Moses pleads thus with the Lord, "How can You destroy these people, even though You are angry with them, and they deserve Your wrath? You have promised to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob that their seed shall inherit the land, and if they are destroyed, how can they enter into Canaan and possess it?" This is grand pleading! But what bravery it was when Moses dared to say to God, "Remember thy covenant and turn from thy fierce anger, and repent of thy thoughts of evil against thy people"! O Lord, teach us also how to plead like this!

Nor was Moses without another argument, the most wonderful of all! If you read in the next chapter, at the sixteenth verse, you will notice how Moses says to God, in effect, "*I cannot be parted from these people*. With them I will live. With them I will die. If you blot their name out of Your Book, blot out my name also. If Your presence goes not with me, carry us not up hence. For wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in Your sight? Is it not in that thou goest with us?"

See how he puts it—"I and thy people...thou goest with us." "No," says Moses, "I will not be favored alone—I will sink or swim with these people." And I do think that this is how the Lord Jesus Christ pleads for His church when He is interceding with God. "My Father," says He, "I must have My people. My church is My bride, and I, the Bridegroom, cannot lose My spouse. I will die for her, and if I live, she must live also. And if I rise to glory, she must be brought to glory with Me."

You see, it is, "I and thy people." This is the glorious conjunction of Christ with us as it was of Moses with the children of Israel. And brethren, we never prevail in prayer so much as when we seem to link ourselves with the people for whom we pray. You cannot stand up above them, as though you were their superior, and then pray for them with any success—you must get down by the side of the sinner and say, "Let us plead with God."

Sometimes, when you are preaching to people or when you are praying for them, you must feel as if you could die for them, if they might be saved, and if they were lost it would seem as if you, too, had lost everything. Rutherford said that he should have two heavens if but one soul from Anwoth met him at God's right hand, and doubtless, we shall have the same, and we have sometimes felt as if we had a hell at the thought of any of our hearers being cast into hell.

When you can pray like that, when you put yourself side by side with the soul for which you are pleading, you will succeed. You will be like Elisha, when he stretched himself upon the Shunammite's

son and put his mouth upon the child's mouth, his eyes upon the child's eyes, his hands upon the child's hands and seemed to identify himself with the dead child. Then was he made the means of quickening to the lad. God help us to plead thus in our prayers for sinners!

There is one other thing which I think has hardly ever been noticed, and that is the way in which Moses finished his prayer by pleading *the sovereign mercy of the Lord*. When you are pleading with a man, it is sometimes a very wise thing to stop your own pleading and let the man himself speak, and then out of his own mouth get your argument.

When Moses pleaded with God for the people, he had at first only half an answer. And he turned round to the Lord and said, "Thou hast favored me, and promised to me great things; now I ask something more of Thee. 'I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.'" I do not think that was idle curiosity on the part of Moses, but that he meant to use it as the great master-plea in prayer.

When the Lord said to him, "I will make all my goodness pass before thee," I think I see the tears in the eyes of Moses and I seem to hear him say, "He cannot smite the people, He cannot destroy them! He is going to make all His goodness pass before me and I know what that is—infinite love, infinite mercy—mercy that endures forever."

And then, when the Lord said, "I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy," how the heart of Moses must have leaped within him as he said, "There it is, that glorious truth of divine sovereignty. The Lord will show mercy on whom He will show mercy. Why, then, He can have mercy on these wicked wretches who have been making a god out of a calf and bowing before it!"

I do delight, sometimes, to fall back upon the sovereignty of God and say, "Lord, here is a wicked wretch. I cannot see any reason why you should save him! I can see many reasons why you should damn him, but then You do as You will. Oh, magnify Your sovereign grace by saving this great sinner! Let men see what a mighty King You are and how royally You handle the silver scepter of Your pardoning mercy."

That is a grand argument, for it gives God all the glory. It puts Him upon the throne, it acknowledges that He is an absolute Sovereign who is not to be dictated to, or held in with bonds and cords. Shall He not do as He wills with His own? We need to often listen to the sublime truth that thunders out from the throne of God, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So, then, it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy."

Out of this truth comes the best plea that ever trembles on a pleader's lips. "Great King, eternal, immortal, invisible, have mercy upon us! Divine Sovereign, exercise Your gracious dispensing power and let the guilty rebels live!"

III. Now, in the third place, let me say that NOTHING CAN HINDER A PLEADING SPIRIT OF SUCCESS. The text says, "The Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people."

If you and I know how to plead for sinners, there is no reason why we should not succeed, for first, there is no reason *in the character of God*. Try, if you can, to get some idea of what God is, and though you tremble before His sovereignty, and adore His holiness, and magnify His justice, remember that He is still, first and foremost, love.

"God is love," and that love shines in all the divine attributes. It is undiminished in its glory by any one of them. All the attributes of God are harmonious with each other and love seems to be the very center of the circle.

Let us never be afraid of pleading with God! He will never take it ill on our part that we pray for sinners, for it is so much after His own mind. "As I live, saith the LORD God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way, and live." The character of God is infinitely gracious, even in its sovereignty. It is grace that reigns, therefore let us never be afraid of pleading with the Lord. We shall surely succeed, for there is nothing in God's character to hinder us.

And next, there is nothing *in God's thought to hinder the pleader's success*. Look at the text, "The Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people." I will therefore never be hindered in my pleading by any idea of the divine purpose, whatever that purpose may be.

There are some who have dreaded what they call, "the horrible decrees of God." No divine decree is horrible to me, and it shall never hinder me in pleading with the Lord for the salvation of men. He is God, therefore let Him do what seems Him good, absolute authority is safe enough in His hands. But even if He had thought to do evil to His people, there is no reason why we should cease from praying. We may yet succeed, for so the text has it, "JEHOVAH repented of the evil, which he thought to do unto his people."

I will go yet farther, and say that there is nothing, even, *in God's act* to hinder us from pleading with success. If God has begun to smite the sinner, as long as that sinner is in this world, I will still pray for him. Remember, how, when the fiery rain was falling upon Sodom and Gomorrah, and the vile cities of the plain were being covered with its bituminous sleet, Zoar was preserved in answer to the prayers of Lot?

Look at David—he was a great sinner, and he had brought upon his people a terrible plague, and the destroying angel stood with his drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem—but when David saw the angel, he said to the Lord, "Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done?" So the Lord was entreated for the land and the plague was stayed from Israel.

Why, if I saw you between the very jaws of hell, so long as they had not actually engulfed you, I would pray for you! God forbid that we should sin against any guilty ones by ceasing to pray for them, however desperate their case! My text seems to me to put this matter with astonishing force and power—the evil which God had thought to do was prevented by the intercession of His servant Moses.

IV. I had many more things to say to you, but I must leave them unsaid and conclude by reminding you, in only a sentence or two, that **NOTHING IN THE MEDIATION OF MOSES CAN MATCH OUR GREATER INTERCESSOR, THE LORD JESUS CHRIST.**

Remember, brethren, that He not only prayed and willingly offered Himself to die for us, but *He actually died for us*. His name was blotted from the book of the living—He died that we might live. He went not to God saying, "Peradventure, I may make atonement for the guilty," but *He made the atonement and His pleading for sinners is perpetually prevalent.*

God is hearing Christ at this moment as He makes intercession for the transgressors and He is giving Him to see of the travail of His soul. This being the case, nothing ought to prevent any sinner from pleading for himself through Jesus Christ. If you think that God means to destroy you, yet go and pray to Him, for "The LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people." Thus may He deal in mercy with you, for His dear Son's sake! Amen.

EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON

EXODUS 32

Verse 1. *And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.*

What a terrible speech to be made by the people whom God had chosen to be His own! "Make us gods. Make our Creator." How could that be?

2. *And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me.*

Poor Aaron! He never had the backbone of his brother Moses. He was a better speaker, but oh, the poverty of his heart! He yields to the will of these idolatrous people and bows to their wicked behests at once.

3. *And all the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron.*

Idolaters spare no expense. There is many a worshipper of a god of wood or mud who gives more to that idol than professing Christians give to the cause of the one living and true God. It is sad that it should be so.

4. *And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.*

This was an Egyptian idolatry, the worship of God under the fashion of an ox, the emblem of strength, but God is not to be worshipped under emblems at all. What a poor representation of God any emblem must be!

5. *And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, To morrow is a feast to the LORD.*

They were going to worship JEHOVAH under the emblem of an ox. This is what you will hear idolaters say—they do not worship the image, they say, but the true God under that image. Yet that is expressly forbidden under the second commandment.

6. *And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.*

Lascivious games were sure to accompany idolatrous worship, for idolatry always leads to filthiness in some form or other, as if it were inevitable.

7. *And the LORD said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves:*

How startled Moses must have been when JEHOVAH said this to him!

8-9. *They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto, and said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people.*

Moses perhaps begins to lift his voice in prayer, and God says—

10. *Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation.*

“I will keep my promise to Abraham by destroying these rebels, and taking thee, his true descendant, and fulfilling the covenant in thee.”

11-13. *And Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, LORD, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shalt inherit it for ever.*

What a brave prayer this was! Here is a wrestling Moses, true son of wrestling Israel, and he brings his arguments to bear upon JEHOVAH when He is angry, and he succeeds in turning aside the Lord's wrath.

14-15. *And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people. And Moses turned, and went down from the mount,*

An unhappy, broken-hearted man, going from the closest communion with God, down into the midst of a wicked people.

15-17. *And the two tables of the testimony were in his hand: the tables were written on both their sides; on the one side and on the other were they written. And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables. And when Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said unto Moses, There is a noise of war in the camp.*

Joshua had probably waited lower down, and he met Moses in his descent. He heard with the quick ears of a soldier and his thoughts went that way.

18-19. *And he said, It is not the voice of them that shout for mastery, neither is it the voice of them that cry for being overcome: but the noise of them that sing do I hear. And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount.*

This is he who had been praying to God, and saying, "Why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people?" Now he is in deep sympathy with God, and he is himself angry with the idolaters. He cannot help it when he begins to see their sin. Before, he had only thought of the people, but now he looks at their sin. When you see sin, if you are a man of God, your wrath waxes hot, and you get into sympathy with that holy God who cannot be otherwise than indignant at iniquity wherever it may be.

20. *And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and strawed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it.*

See the power of this one man who has God at his back, and God in him. While the people are dancing around their idol, he tears it down, grinds it to powder, and says, "You shall drink it every one of you." Why, there are millions to one, but what cares he about their millions? God is with him, and he is God's servant, and therefore, they all tremble before him.

21-24. *And Moses said unto Aaron, What did this people unto thee, that thou hast brought so great a sin upon them? And Aaron said, Let not the anger of my Lord wax hot: thou knowest the people, that they are set on mischief. For they said unto me, Make us gods, which shall go before us: for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. And I said unto them, Whosoever hath any gold, let them break it off so they gave it me: then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf.*

That was a lie, for he had made the calf, and shaped it himself. Aaron had not any backbone, nor any principle, he could not be stout-hearted for God. What a poor little man he seems by the side of his great brother! How he shrivels up under the rebuke of Moses!

25. *And when Moses saw that the people were naked; (for Aaron had made them naked unto their shame among their enemies:)*

Moses does not spare Aaron, he lays at his door the guilt of the great sin he had committed, "Aaron had made them naked unto their shame among their enemies."

26-27. *Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, Who is on the LORD'S side? let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him. And he said unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbour.*

This is the man who pleaded for them on the top of the mount. See how he acts in the sight of their sin. By divine authority, he smites them right and left. Possibly, those who were slain were the men who refused to drink the water on which the powder had been sprinkled or those who continued in rebellion against the Lord.

28-30. *And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses: and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men. For Moses had said, Consecrate yourselves to day to the LORD, even every man upon his son, and upon his brother; that he may bestow upon you a blessing this day. And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses said unto the people, Ye have sinned a great sin; and now I will go up unto the LORD; peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin.*

I will be bound to say that this was said after a sleepless night. The people's sin is now so vividly before him that he begins to feel that God will be just if He punishes them, and does not grant them any forgiveness, so he goes once more up that steep climb to the top of Sinai with a trembling heart, and with only a "peradventure" on his lip.

31-32. *And Moses returned unto the LORD, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin,*

There he broke down, he could not finish that sentence.

32. *And if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.*

"Let me die in their stead!" But God could not accept one man in the stead of another. There is a great Substitute, ordained of old, but He is more than man, and therefore He can stand in the sinner's stead.

33-36. *And the LORD said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book. Therefore now go, lead the people unto the place of which I have spoken unto thee: behold, mine Angel shall go before thee: nevertheless in the day when I visit I will visit their sin upon them. And the LORD plagued the people, because they made the calf, which Aaron made.*

Moses had only half success in pleading for the people. They were not to die as yet, but God declared that he would visit their sin upon them.

HYMNS FROM "OUR OWN HYMN BOOK"—440, 473, 957

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