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Our Pulpit.

The Story of Moses.

No. 12

HIS SIN.

SERMON PREACHED BY
 REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Paul's Church, Fredericton, Sunday evening March 24th. 1889.

"Also the Lord was angry with me for your sakes, saying, Thou also shalt not go in thither."—DEUT. I. 37.

We are to speak tonight of a dark spot in Moses' life, the one sin that is recorded against him. Not that he never sinned excepting this once. He was one of the purest and best public men who ever lived, a man who walked among the people and before them with a faithfulness that wins our admiration, and yet he was not without the infirmities, and mistakes, and faults, that belong to men. I think we may find not a few things about him that we must condemn.

For instance, early in his life he drew his sword and slew an Egyptian because he was ill-using and oppressing a Hebrew. It was a rash act, one we cannot justify. He did it, I suppose, because, as he understood it, it was his duty, the working out of his mission, as Israel's deliverer. But he was mistaken. It was not in this sharp short way he was to save the people. There is this to be said, however, in extenuation of his rash act, that there was probably great provocation, and possibly also he may have deemed it necessary in self-defence. We are not perhaps in a position to judge fairly, but so far as we are able to judge, we cannot justify him in it. He did very wrong; he committed a crime.

Then he made a serious mistake for himself when he refused to accept the sole responsibility of the leadership. It was from a sense of his unfitness for the position, his humility and modesty perhaps. Still, it was a mistake, a serious mistake, and cost him dearly. Aaron's help was not always help, and his being coadjutor weakened Moses' influence for good, and was both a temptation and irritation to him, a thorn in his side.

And then, it must be said, that notwithstanding all the meekness for which he was so eminent, he was sometimes petulant, irritable, impatient, and weak in faith. The disappointments that fell to his lot he felt keenly, and he gave way to fretfulness and vexation. And it would appear, that with age his fretfulness and irritability grew, until he was led, in an unguarded moment, into the commission of the sin of his life.

I. THE OCCASION OF HIS SIN.

For many months the people had been sojourning in the neighborhood of Kadesh. There Miriam had died, and was buried on an eminence named Zin. Tradition tells us that Moses and the people granted her a costly public funeral, and mourned a month for her. Her death was felt to be a public loss. The thirty-ninth of the forty years is slowly passing. Only another year and some months and then Canaan, and hope is rising in the leader's breast. But again he is doomed to disappointment, the bitterest of all the disappointments he has yet experienced.

The thirty-ninth summer in the wilderness seems to have been an unusually dry one, and the springs and streams of Kadesh failed. This was a serious calamity, and it led to a loud and clamorous outbreak against Moses. For years and years perhaps there had been peace. The new generation growing up had shown more docility hitherto, and Moses perhaps was beginning to feel as it the worst was now over with him. But, as it proved, the new generation were more docile than their fathers had been, simply because they had not yet been tried. There had been no occasion for an outbreak, nothing to test the stuff they were made of.

Ah! my hearers, we are all good till we are tried. We flatter ourselves that we are better than our fathers were. We think, and others think, that we are getting on finely, making rapid progress in learning to be good, growing day by day in meekness for Heaven. We are even proud perhaps of our spiritual attainments, and others congratulate us on what we are, and say pleasing things about us. But we are good only because the devil is letting us alone, and there has been nothing to stir up the bad in us. Let temptation come. Let calamity fall upon us. Let hunger and thirst prey upon us. Let the trials of life in the many hideous shapes they assume break in upon our peace and comfort, and all our fair promise will fade as the flower fades, and our goodness will not be much, if any, better, than that of the new generation of Israel at Kadesh yonder in straits for want of water. True goodness will be goodness in any and all circumstances, but there is a goodness that is only good when the sun shines, that has to be well fed if it is to be much good.

Now, it would appear, that this water-riot was too much for Moses. It swept him off his feet. It caused him to lose his head, and he fell. It was a surprise. It was the unexpectedness of the thing that did it. He had made up his mind that when the last of the old rebels was dead it would be all right. That was his mistake perhaps, and so he was off his guard, and he lost his temper, and gave way to unguarded words, and down he went prone to his great fall.

II. HIS SIN

At first we almost wonder where and what his sin is. The general reader skims over the story of his life as we have it here, and he hardly notices it. Moses' sin is not a beam in the eye that everybody can see without their looking for it, but it is a mote, an insignificant speck, an indiscretion rather than a sin. It is not like David's sin, so hideous in its enormity, so loathsome in its vileness, so black and awful. And yet, in God's estimation it was a great sin, one He could not overlook, one that was hard to pardon, one so hard to pardon that in some features of it He could not pardon at all.

It makes a difference who sins a sin and what the sin is that is sinned. Some are beaten with few stripes, others with many, and you and I looking on in our poor blind way would say, that the sin of the one beaten with the few stripes is greater than the sin of him who is beaten with the many. There is a gradation in the scale both of rewards and punishments. The Heaven of one is higher than that of another, and the hell of one is deeper than that of another, and yet, let us not be too fast in leaping to a judgment in the matter. It will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for Capernaum and Chorazin. And so with you and me.

Moses was an old saint, a full-developed christian. At the time he sinned his sin he was in his one hundred and nineteenth year, and throughout all those long years he had walked with God. It was not because he was inexperienced in years, and did not know any better, that he sinned. The best of bringing up had been his. A special providence had been around his tender years. A praying mother who had the highest ideas of what his future was to be had watched over his infancy. And when he had grown up, he had not drifted away from the right, as many another has, and fallen into bad habits, and so had to be snatched as a brand from the burning, and was ever after in danger of falling into the old temptations. No. Humanly speaking Moses never knew what it was to be a sinner, a bad man.

And then he had been very specially honored of God, exalted to great privileges. He had been up on the Mount with God till his face was radiant with glory. To him the Lord had revealed Himself, not in dreams and visions, not in dark sayings and obscure parables, but in words such as one man speaks to another, and face to face, and in gleaming glory. It was therefore worse for Moses to sin than it was for Aaron, and worse for Aaron than it was for Israel. What was a great sin for Moses would hardly be sin at all for ordinary christian people. In others, speaking in the language of men, God would have winked at such a sin, but in His own servant He could not wink at it.

But let us see what his sin was, the elements of evil that entered into it, and made it the sin it was. And observe this, as one element of evil in it, he failed to carry out the Lord's instructions; there was a lack of obedience on his part.

The Lord had told him what to do to supply the people with water. He was particular in the instructions He gave him, and He gave him full instructions. He left him nothing to supply out of his own head or heart. He told him to take the rod, and assemble the people. Aaron was to be with him, and to assist in the assembling of the people. The people were to be assembled before the rock. Then he was to speak to the rock, and command it to give forth its wealth of waters.

Such were his instructions. Now, let us note wherein he followed his instructions and wherein he departed from them. He took the rod from before the Lord, that is out of the tabernacle where it was laid up. That was all right. That was as he was commanded. Then he and Aaron gathered the people before the rock. So far all was right.

But now he departed from his instructions. Instead of speaking to the rock and commanding it to pour out its waters, as he was told to do, he turned to the people, and spoke to them, addressing them in these ill-chosen words: "Hear now, ye rebels; shall we bring you forth water out of this rock?"

You see he had lost his temper, and so forgot himself. There was a time in his history when he strongly declined to speak to the people when the Lord wanted him, on the ground that he could not. But now he speaks when he is not told to speak, and says what he is not told to say. This was, for him, you see, a most serious departure from his instructions. Again and again we read continually, all through the chapters that detail his work in tabernacle-build-

ing and law-giving, until we are ready to think it comes in a little too often: "According as the Lord commanded Moses." Even in such matters as the pins and loops, it was "as the Lord commanded Moses." But now the man who had been so particular to do just as he had been commanded all along, turns round and recklessly departs from his instructions.

There is a wide wide difference between speaking to the people and speaking to the rock, and between calling the people rebels and telling the rock to give forth its waters. And we can easily understand, I think, why the Lord did not command him to speak to the people. He was in a pet, fuming with vexation and disappointment and rage. In such a state of mind he was sure to say unwise things, and thus do harm. So the Lord sealed his lips, put a bridle on his tongue, towards the people. But he broke through the restraint laid upon him, and fumed and scolded.

And then one mistake led to another. His speaking to the people made him forget to speak to the rock. Instead of speaking to the rock, he stepped forward with the rod in his hand, and he struck the rock, not once, but twice, and he was not told to do, and he neglected to do what he was told to do.

Again, a psalmist describes his sin as speaking unadvisedly with his lips. His words are: "They angered him also at the waters of Minbah, so that it went ill with Moses for their sakes; because they were rebellious against his spirit, and he spake unadvisedly with his lips."

The Lord had told him when He called him out of the burning bush, that He would be with his mouth if he would go to Israel with His message. But he said he could not speak, and so he lost the special blessing of the Lord's being with his mouth. And now he sees his mistake. Because the Lord is not with his mouth, he is left to say very unadvised things, and so sins.

He was sure he would not sin in word, however else he might sin. But he did sin in word. He uttered but one brief sentence, but he said enough in that one sentence to do a world of evil. One sentence from his lips cut into a thousand thousand hearts, and was thus indefinitely multiplied for evil.

Ah! you think, it is only a word written or spoken, a brief sentence, but so much may be said in a word. It is not only your saying; it is other people's hearing. Your slanderous word, your lie, your doubt, your cruel mistake, goes from lip to lip, from ear to ear, from page to page, from heart to heart, and it grows as it goes, and the result is a wide woe. Beware lest, like Moses, you may say in the ears of the people, in the ears of the streets, in the ears of society, in the ears of your children, what should not be said at all. It is easy enough to put into words, and wing them with your breath, but once said they cannot be unsaid, and the day may come when you would give a good deal to unsay what you thoughtlessly and unadvisedly said. Unadvisedly spoken words was thus one element in Moses' sin, and it is the sin of many still—the sin of men in public positions, the sin of pulpits and platforms and professional desks, the sin of society, the sin of tattling cliques.

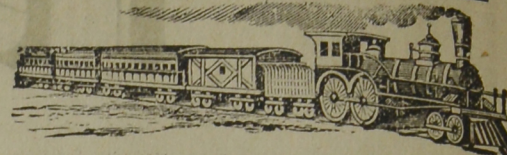
Again, want of faith was an element in his sin. "Ye believed not in me."

The Lord told Moses to speak to the rock, and there would be water. But he did not speak to it. He seemed to think that was not enough. It was moreover a senseless sort of thing to speak to a rock. So, not having faith in God's way, he had recourse to a way of his own, and he struck the rock with his rod, struck it hard, struck it twice. And his method was successful. The water gushed, and the people drank, and their cattle. And some would say, it matters not how the blessing is obtained so long as it is obtained, whether by the word or the rod. But it does matter. It was in the one case righteousness, in the other sin; in the one case it was simple faith, in the other it was rather works; in the one case it was to God's glory, in the other it was rather to the glory of Moses. "Because ye believed not in me, I sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel."

The rod did not bring the water; it was in the word of the Lord. But Moses struck the rock as if it was all in his doing. I can see him with his hot heart and strong arm fetching the granite cliff such a blow, and repeating it. And the people looking on, of course, gave Moses the credit of it. He struck so hard that he split the rock, struck so hard that he opened a way for the waters embosomed within the mountain to flow out. That is the way they would account for it, and they would praise the strength of his right hand. Ah! instead of being a grand success by that double blow of his, it was not far from being a great failure.

And want of faith is still in the way of the Lord's work, still in the way of the people's drinking of the living water. It is in the word of the Lord where the efficacy is, but we must thrust in so much of our effort. We swing

Continued on third page.



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