

GRAVES OF GREEDINESS

– *OCTOBER 5. – NUMBERS 11:4-34. –*

"The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working." – James 5:16.

THE ISRAELITES remained at Mt. Sinai about a year. This was a time of preparation. The people were learning important lessons, as a result of their new conditions, so different from those of Egypt. The component parts of the Tabernacle were prepared, and it was set up as a meeting place between God and the people. God was represented in it by the pillar of cloud, which rested upon the top of the Tabernacle, and which at night had a flame like a torch at its top.

God's presence on the inside of the Tabernacle was seen only by Moses and Aaron, in conjunction with their privileged services. He was represented by the glorious Shekinah brightness, which rested upon the Mercy Seat. Thus the Tabernacle became the center of the nation's life and interest in relation to their God, who was their Captain and Leader, and who communicated to them through the mediator of the Law Covenant – Moses.

The people had flocks and herds; and these would necessitate their being at some distance from the Camp, but the pillar of cloud by day and its fiery torch at night would always indicate the center of the Camp, and always guide their minds to the thought that they were God's adopted people, to whom, by first right, belonged the gracious promises made to Abraham.

Similarly, antitypical Israelites may realize that God has called them from the world to be His peculiar people, and may well exclaim, "God is in the midst of her, she shall not be disturbed" – overthrown! The center of our interest is our great Advocate, who

on our behalf has entered into the Most Holy, and is proceeding with His great work of antitypical Atonement.

THE SIN OF MURMURING

Those who become the people of God, who accept Him as their Guide and Leader, should never murmur, never complain. To do so is to dispute the Divine Wisdom and the Divine promises, and to that extent to break their covenant of faith, obedience and loyalty. St. Paul reminds us that the murmuring of the Israelites on this occasion carries such a lesson to us (Hebrews 3:7-19; 4:1-11), which appears great or small to us, according to our standpoint and standard. The Lord's dealings with the Israelites show us that justice, love, mercy, loyalty to God and to principle are in the Divine estimation the highest qualities, and violations of these the most serious crimes. If this is not the way we have looked at matters, it behooves us to change our viewpoint and to take that of the Almighty.

This murmuring against the Lord was on the score of the manna, for which at first the people had been so thankful. They allowed their minds to grow so vexed that they wept like children as they thought of the meat and garlic and flesh pots of Egypt. They murmured against the Lord and against Moses in desiring that they might have back the conditions which they had left. Little did they comprehend the true situation. Had they been returned to the bondage in which they previously were, after even a year's experience in freedom, their lot would have seemed much more wretched than ever.

It was with Israel, however, as often with us, "Distance lends enchantment to the view." As they looked backward, they forgot the trials and difficulties of the bondage of Egypt. As they looked about them, they forgot their comforts, privileges, liberties under Divine leadership. Like peevish children, they reasoned not clearly.

MOSES TOO GREATLY BURDENED

The result of the murmuring was severe upon Moses. He was the people's representative before the Lord, and the Lord's representative before the people. Murmuring against the Lord in their experiences meant murmuring against Moses also. Heart-broken, that Prophet sought the Lord, pleading that his burden was too heavy, that the people cried to him as children to a father, and that he could endure it no longer. He rehearsed that the Lord had promised to take this people as His people and to bring them to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He urged, therefore, that if this burden must remain with him it would be better for him to die: "Kill me, I pray Thee, out of hand, if I have found favor in Thy sight; and let me not see my wretchedness."

Then it was that God directed the institution of the Jewish Sanhedrin – seventy of the heads or the Elders of the people, to be the court of judges, responsible to the people and to deal with them, to hear their murmurings and to counsel them properly. In this arrangement, while Moses was still the head of the nation, the seventy Elders shared his responsibility before the people, and would more or less, therefore, be his defenders with the people.

By Divine direction Moses made out the list of these Elders, and directed them to meet him at the Tabernacle. All but two of them came. There God manifested the honor he had bestowed upon Moses as the head of the **[R5306 : page 268]** people, by communion with him, and then, as foretold, placed a share of the responsibility of leadership upon the seventy. This was indicated by their miraculous prophesying. This prophesying became a sign to the Elders themselves and to all who heard it. Even the two who remained in the camp prophesied at the same time. The Lord thus indicated that they should be co-laborers with and under Moses in respect to the guidance and direction of the people.

QUAIL IN OVER-SUPPLY

God then sent word to the Israelites through Moses, the message probably being conveyed through the seventy Elders selected from all the different tribes, that He was about to send them flesh food, such as they had been murmuring for. He declared He would send a thirty-day's supply for the whole people. Even Moses was astonished, though he trustfully gave the message. Under the Lord's providence, a strong wind across the Red Sea drove thousands of small birds, quail, to the vicinity of Israel's Camp and for a considerable distance all around it. As a result, the people ate freely, and prepared dried quail for future use for a full thirty-days' supply, as the Lord had said. Two days and nights they ceased not to gather in the quail.

Some agnostics have questioned this statement, thinking it to be a declaration that the birds fell in a solid mass two cubits high. The proper thought is that the birds, driven by the wind across the sea, were so fatigued by their flight that they flew low down, about two cubits in height above the ground, where they were easily caught with the hand or hit with sticks and captured. A writer on conditions in that vicinity says:

"These quail cannot sustain themselves long on the wing when exhausted. They would be easily taken when they flew at a height of about two cubits (three feet) above the ground."

Those who had been murmuring discontentedly suddenly got their desire for flesh food; and they ate it so greedily and so much of it that an insidious pestilence broke out amongst them, a fever from over-eating, called "a fire from the Lord." Many died and were buried there, and thus the place was called "Kibroth-Hattaavah," which signifies "Graves of Greediness." Thus did the Lord permit the murmurers, the unthankful, to do themselves injury and to cut themselves off from further opportunities for murmuring.

The most happy condition of mind conceivable is the one of full rest and confidence in the Lord – satisfied with God's appointments and provisions. And this is especially appropriate to the Spiritual Israelites, and particularly the Royal Priesthood, who have made a full surrender to the Lord, a Covenant by sacrifice, which includes all earthly rights and interests. Happy is it for such if they can sing with the spirit and with the understanding also:

"Content whatever lot I see,
Since 'tis my God that leadeth Me."

The spirit of discontent looks away from the Heavenly Manna of Divine provision, longing for other food of their own provision or of other earthly supply. The Lord grants such an opportunity of feasting to the full on what they are desiring, and as a result, the murmurers **[R5307 : page 268]** cease from being members of the Lord's family and have no further opportunity of partaking of the Manna He provides in sufficient quantity.

To give an illustration: the Bible supplies the Manna of Divine Truth. The Truth needs to be gathered, and to be ground and to be baked, but it is God's provision. It is wholesome, it is nutritious, it is the very thing that we, as the people of God, need for our strengthening and perfecting. Yet some crave the flesh pots of Egypt – the world's theories. Then He allows these to come within their reach. They fill themselves with Higher Criticism and Evolutionary theories, and as a result perish as New Creatures, cease to be the people of God, cease to walk in the Master's footsteps. They are consumed by the fire, or fever, which the errors they crave produce.

GRAVES OF GREEDINESS

Greed, selfishness, stands connected with sin of every kind. It leads to every form of immorality, to satisfy its selfish propensities. It leads to injustice and untruthfulness in its endeavor to acquire a large share of the blessings of God. It leads to anger, malice, hatred,

envy, strife and murder in its endeavor to get and to hold a superabundant share of this world's goods. Selfishness is thus unrighteousness, and "all unrighteousness is sin."

As we think of the graves of greediness filled with the Israelites, we are reminded of how many Spiritual Israelites have made similar mistakes. Greedy for the things of this world, they have neglected their Covenant with the Lord and the higher interests of the life to come. Jesus said that the thorns that sprang up amongst the wheat and choked it were the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches; in other words, greediness.

Oh, how much all the followers of Jesus should be on guard against this spirit of the world! It is not our suggestion that none should look out properly to have a reasonable share of the blessings and comforts of the present life. The danger is that of setting our hearts upon these things, coveting them and serving them, in an idolatrous manner, and thus causing our spiritual interment, over which might well be inscribed "Graves of Greediness."

THE TEXT OF THIS STUDY

The text assigned evidently is meant to apply to the prayer of Moses for help and relief. "The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working." God granted the prayer of Moses, which was of a proper kind in that it was requesting help whereby the will of God might be fully submitted to, that the people might be rightly instructed to bow to the Divine arrangements. It availed much; it brought the desired result; it was in harmony with the Divine will.

On the other hand, the prayer of the unrighteous will avail much also in an opposite direction. The murmurings of the people were classed as their prayers. They got what they desired; but with it they got, not the Divine blessing, but a punishment. Let us take heed to how we pray, and that we pray for things in harmony with the Divine

will. Thus will our prayers bring blessings upon our heads, and not injury.

SELFISH PRAYERS ANSWERED

We know of many prayers answered; some of these were uttered selfishly, not with the desire to know and to do the Lord's will, but with the desire to have the Lord do according to the human will and its selfish desire. Such prayers are always dangerous. God sometimes answers them.

We note one instance told us by a mother. She was a true Christian woman and had given her son to the Lord; but when he fell seriously sick and lay at death's door and the physicians said that he could not recover, the mother went before the Lord in prayer and earnestly pleaded, not that God's will should be done, but that her will might be done – that her son's life might be spared. Almost miraculously, she says, her boy began to recover. For a time she rejoiced that she had had a triumph. **[R5307 : page 269]**

Later on, however, she learned a very bitter lesson. The son grew to manhood, but was far from a comfort to her. He had a vicious character, which often brought the mother pain and tears. She said afterwards, "I have rued that prayer, which was contrary to God's will, and which He answered according to my will. I see better now. I have learned my lesson. Henceforth I will seek to know and to do the Lord's will, and will pray that His will, not mine, be done in all my affairs. My selfishness brought me years of misery, which I had assumed would be years of pleasure and comfort." How careful we should be to "abide in Him and in His Word"!

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