

Apostasy and Intercession

Sabbath Afternoon, September 6

It was the mixed multitude who came from Egypt with the Israelites that were the principal movers in this dreadful departure from God. They were called a mixed multitude, because the Hebrews had intermarried with the Egyptians.

The children of Israel had seen Moses ascend up into the mount, and enter into the cloud while the top of the mountain was all in flames. They waited for his return every day, and as he did not come from the mount as soon as they expected he would, they became impatient. Especially were the believing Egyptians, who left Egypt with the Hebrew host, impatient and rebellious.

A large company assembled around the tent of Aaron, and told him that Moses would never return—that the cloud which had hitherto led them now rested upon the mount, and would no longer direct their route through the wilderness. They desired something which they could look upon to resemble God. The gods of the Egyptians were in their minds, and Satan was improving this opportunity, in the absence of their appointed leader, to tempt them to imitate the Egyptians in their idolatry. They suggested that if Moses should never return to them, they could return into Egypt, and find favor with the Egyptians, by bearing this image before them, acknowledging it as their god.

Aaron remonstrated against their plans, until he thought the people were determined to carry out their purpose, and he ceased his reasoning with them. The clamors of the people made Aaron afraid of his life. And instead of standing up nobly for the honor of God, and trusting his life in his hands who had wrought wonders for his people, he lost his courage, his trust in God, and cowardly yielded to the wishes of an impatient people, and this, too, in direct opposition to the commands of God. He made an idol, and built an altar whereon they offered sacrifice to this idol. And Aaron submitted to hear the people proclaim, "These be thy gods, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." What an insult to Jehovah! They had recently listened to the proclamation of the law of God from Sinai, amid the most sublime demonstrations of divine power, and when their faith was tested, by Moses' being from them for a few weeks, they engaged in idolatry which had been so recently specified, and expressly forbidden by Jehovah. By so doing they transgressed the first and second commandments. God's anger was kindled against them. —*Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3, pp. 274, 275.

Failed Leadership

Aaron endeavored to shield himself by relating the clamors of the people. . . . But his excuses and prevarications were of no avail. . . .

The fact that Aaron had been blessed and honored so far above the people was what made his sin so heinous. It was Aaron “the saint of the Lord” (Psalm 106:16), that had made the idol and announced the feast. It was he who had been appointed as spokesman for Moses, and concerning whom God Himself had testified, “I know that he can speak well” (Exodus 4:14), that had failed to check the idolaters in their heaven-daring purpose. He by whom God had wrought in bringing judgments both upon the Egyptians and upon their gods, had heard unmoved the proclamation before the molten image, “These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.” It was he who had been with Moses on the mount, and had there beheld the glory of the Lord, who had seen that in the manifestation of that glory there was nothing of which an image could be made—it was he who had changed that glory into the similitude of an ox. He to whom God had committed the government of the people in the absence of Moses, was found sanctioning their rebellion. “The Lord was very angry with Aaron to have destroyed him” (Deuteronomy 9:20). But in answer to the earnest intercession of Moses, his life was spared: and in penitence and humiliation for his great sin, he was restored to the favor of God.

If Aaron had had courage to stand for the right, irrespective of consequences, he could have prevented that apostasy. If he had unswervingly maintained his own allegiance to God, if he had cited the people to the perils of Sinai, and had reminded them of their solemn covenant with God to obey His law, the evil would have been checked. But his compliance with the desires of the people and the calm assurance with which he proceeded to carry out their plans, emboldened them to go to greater lengths in sin than had before entered their minds. . . .

Of all the sins that God will punish, none are more grievous in His sight than those that encourage others to do evil.—Conflict and Courage, p. 98.

Here Aaron’s deficiency as a leader or governor of Israel is seen. The people beset him to make them gods to go before them into Egypt. Here was an opportunity for Aaron to show his faith and unwavering confidence in God, and with firmness and decision to meet the proposition of the people. But his natural desire to please and to yield to the people led him to sacrifice the honor of God. He requested them to bring their ornaments to him, and he wrought out for them a golden calf and proclaimed before the people: “These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.” And to this senseless god he made an altar and proclaimed on the morrow a feast to the Lord. All restraint seemed to be removed from the people. They offered burnt offerings to the golden calf, and a spirit of levity took possession of them. They indulged in shameful rioting and drunkenness; they ate, they drank, and rose up to play. —*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 296.

Monday, September 8

Idolatry and Evil

During this period of waiting, there was time for them to meditate upon the law of God which they had heard, and to prepare their hearts to receive the further revelations that He might make to them. They had none too much time for this work; and had they been thus seeking a clearer understanding of God's requirements, and humbling their hearts before Him, they would have been shielded from temptation. But they did not do this, and they soon became careless, inattentive, and lawless. Especially was this the case with the mixed multitude. They were impatient to be on their way to the Land of Promise—the land flowing with milk and honey. It was only on condition of obedience that the goodly land was promised them, but they had lost sight of this. There were some who suggested a return to Egypt, but whether forward to Canaan or backward to Egypt, the masses of the people were determined to wait no longer for Moses.

Feeling their helplessness in the absence of their leader, they returned to their old superstitions. The "mixed multitude" had been the first to indulge murmuring and impatience, and they were the leaders in the apostasy that followed. Among the objects regarded by the Egyptians as symbols of deity was the ox or calf; and it was at the suggestion of those who had practiced this form of idolatry in Egypt that a calf was now made and worshiped. The people desired some image to represent God, and to go before them in the place of Moses. God had given no manner of similitude of Himself, and He had prohibited any material representation for such a purpose. The mighty miracles in Egypt and at the Red Sea were designed to establish faith in Him as the invisible, all-powerful Helper of Israel, the only true God. And the desire for some visible manifestation of His presence had been granted in the pillar of cloud and of fire that guided their hosts, and in the revealing of His glory upon Mount Sinai. But with the cloud of the Presence still before them, they turned back in their hearts to the idolatry of Egypt, and represented the glory of the invisible God by the similitude of an ox! —*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 315.

Only a few days before, the presence of the Lord was manifest in such power that they were terribly afraid and asked that Moses might hear the words of God, and then speak the same to them. But now they wanted something present that they could depend upon.

They might, at this time, have been learning precious lessons, which the Lord was ready to give them, if they had trusted fully in him. But the result of their murmurings and unbelief was that Aaron made them a golden calf to represent God. He proclaimed this idol to be God, and a great deal of enthusiasm was created over this false god. If instead of doing this, he had called to mind the wonderful deliverance which God had wrought for them, and every mind had been drawn upon to express gratitude to God for all his rich mercies in delivering his people from Egyptian bondage, they might have been placed on vantage-ground, to glorify the Lord God who had wrought such wonderful deliverance from degradation and slavery. —"Correct Views Concerning the Testimonies," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 6, 1906, par. 12, 13.

Corrupting Themselves

In the absence of Moses, the judicial authority had been delegated to Aaron, and a vast crowd gathered about his tent, with the demand, "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." The cloud, they said, that had heretofore led them, now rested permanently upon the mount; it would no longer direct their travels. They must have an image in its place; and if, as had been suggested, they should decide to return to Egypt, they would find favor with the Egyptians by bearing this image before them and acknowledging it as their god.

Such a crisis demanded a man of firmness, decision, and unflinching courage; one who held the honor of God above popular favor, personal safety, or life itself. But the present leader of Israel was not of this character. Aaron feebly remonstrated with the people, but his wavering and timidity at the critical moment only rendered them the more determined. The tumult increased. A blind, unreasoning frenzy seemed to take possession of the multitude. There were some who remained true to their covenant with God, but the greater part of the people joined in the apostasy. A few who ventured to denounce the proposed image making as idolatry, were set upon and roughly treated, and in the confusion and excitement they finally lost their lives.

Aaron feared for his own safety; and instead of nobly standing up for the honor of God, he yielded to the demands of the multitude. His first act was to direct that the golden earrings be collected from all the people and brought to him, hoping that pride would lead them to refuse such a sacrifice. But they willingly yielded up their ornaments; and from these he made a molten calf, in imitation of the gods of Egypt. The people proclaimed, "These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." And Aaron basely permitted this insult to Jehovah. He did more. Seeing with what satisfaction the golden god was received, he built an altar before it, and made proclamation, "Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord." The announcement was heralded by trumpeters from company to company throughout the camp. "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." Under the pretense of holding "a feast to the Lord," they gave themselves up to gluttony and licentious reveling. —*Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 316, 317.

God's Righteous Wrath

God saw that the children of Israel, especially the mixed multitude, were continually disposed to rebel, and, by their works, provoke him to destroy them. He knew that they would murmur against Moses when in difficulty, and grieve him by their continual rebellion. He proposed to Moses to consume them, and make of him a great nation. Here the Lord proved Moses. He knew that it was a laborious and soul-trying work to lead that rebellious people through to the promised land. He would test the perseverance, faithfulness and love of Moses, for such an erring and ungrateful people. But Moses would not consent to have Israel destroyed. He showed by his intercessions with God that he valued more highly the prosperity of God's chosen people than a great name, or to be called the father of a greater nation than was Israel.

"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 shall inherit it forever."

The thought that the heathen nations, and especially the Egyptians, would triumph over Israel, and reproach God, was overwhelming to Moses. He could not let Israel go, notwithstanding all their rebellion, and their repeated murmurings against him. How could he give up a people for whom so much had been done, and who had in so wonderful a manner been brought out of Egypt. The news of their deliverance had been spread among all nations, and all people were anxiously watching to see what God would do for them. And Moses remembered well the words of the Egyptians, that he was leading them into the wilderness that they might perish, and he receive their possessions. And now if God should destroy his people, and exalt him to be a greater nation than Israel, would not the heathen triumph, and deride the God of the Hebrews, and say that he was not able to lead them to the land he had promised them? As Moses interceded for Israel before God, his timidity was lost in his deep interest and love for that people for whom he had, in the hands of God, been the means of doing so much. He presented before God his promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He prayed to God with firm faith and determined purpose. The Lord listened to his pleadings and regarded his unselfish prayer, and promised Moses that he would spare Israel. —*Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3, pp. 276, 277.

Intercession

After the transgression of Israel in making the golden calf, Moses again goes to plead with God in behalf of his people. . . . He has learned from experience that in order to have an influence with the people he must first have power with God. The Lord reads the sincerity and unselfish purpose of the heart of His servant and condescends to commune with this feeble mortal, face to face, as a man speaks with a friend. Moses casts himself and all his burdens fully upon God and freely pours out his soul before Him. The Lord does not reprove His servant, but stoops to listen to his supplications. .

.. The answer comes: "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest." But Moses does not feel that he can stop here. He has gained much, but he longs to come still nearer to God, to obtain a stronger assurance of His abiding presence. He has carried the burden of Israel; he has borne an overwhelming weight of responsibility; when the people sinned, he suffered keen remorse, as though he himself were guilty; and now there presses upon his soul a sense of the terrible results should God leave Israel to hardness and impenitence of heart. . . . Moses presses his petition with such earnestness and fervency that the answer comes: I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken: for thou hast found grace in my sight, and I know thee by name."

Now, indeed, we would expect the prophet to cease pleading; but no, emboldened by his success, he ventures to come still nearer to God, with a holy familiarity which is almost beyond our comprehension. He now makes a request which no human being ever made before: "I beseech thee, show me thy glory." What a petition to come from finite, mortal man! But is he repulsed? Does God reprove him for presumption? No; we hear the gracious words: "I will make all my goodness pass before thee." . . .

In the history of Moses we may see what intimate communion with God it is man's privilege to enjoy. —*Conflict and Courage*, p. 99.

Nobly did Moses stand the test, and show that his interest in Israel was not to obtain a great name, nor to exalt himself. The burden of God's people was upon him. God had proved him, and was pleased with his faithfulness, his simplicity of heart, and integrity before him, and he committed to him, as to a faithful shepherd, the great charge of leading his people through to the promised land. —*Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3, p. 278.

Friday, September 12

For Further Reading

"Strength in Self-Sacrifice," *Youth's Instructor*, February 12, 1903, par. 1–14.
"A Crisis in Israel," *Conflict and Courage*, April 1, p. 97.