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THE PLAGUE STAYED.

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THERE are some difficult and perplexing questions lying at the threshold of this lesson. It is an account of a terrible judgment falling upon Israel by divine appointment in which seventy thousand men perished; and all this comes to pass because the king had taken a census of his people. What wrong was there in this act? Moses had twice numbered Israel without incurring God's displeasure; besides, what is more reasonable and proper than that a king, in order to rule wisely should know the exact number of his people and the resources of his kingdom? Again, if it was an offence against God, why should Israel be punished for that which was done at the command of the king and against the remonstrances of his advisers? Whatever may be said in answer, it must be remembered that facts like the one here recorded are to be found in history and daily experience as well as on the pages of the Bible. God's providential dealings with men often come to us in such a way as to suggest questions concerning his goodness and justice. We see the severity of his judgments, but we cannot trace directly their connection with the sins that called them down. Also, we see innocent men by the thousands involved in the dreadful consequences of

the pride, ambition or contentions of a few guilty ones, who often survive the ruin they bring upon others. If, then, objections are made to the incident here recorded as unjust, dishonoring to God, and so incredible, precisely the same objections must lie against many of the acts of his providence as they appear in history or under our own observation. Of this, however, we may be sure at the outstart: God's judgments are right, although the nature and heinousness of the sins judged may be unknown to us. He does not wait for us to see our sins before he reproveth us, but often reproveth that we may see our sins. It is written: "When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness." In this case there was some evil motive or purpose underlying an act that was innocent in itself. There has been much conjecture as to what it was, for the record does not reveal it in distinct terms. In all probability, David's course was prompted by pride and ambition. The fact that the numbering was done by the general of the army, and that the results told the number of fighting men, gives reason to suppose that David was contemplating foreign conquests and the invasion of surrounding nations, so as to bring them under his sceptre. With this design, so utterly contrary to the divinely-appointed destiny of Israel, the more warlike and ambitious spirits among the people probably sympathized. But, whatever was the purpose in view, it must have been manifestly dishonoring to God and contrary to his revealed will when a man like Joab was reluctant to execute it. David is surely blinded by kingly pride when his unscrupulous captain-general is moved to say, "Why doth my lord the king delight in this?" In the book of Chronicles it is written that "Satan provoked David to number Israel." David himself

had scarcely received the results of the census when he confessed his folly and wickedness in what he had done. Acts that appear to be harmless may be most hateful in God's sight on account of the secret motives that prompted them. We can also see from the record that David was not the only guilty one. In the opening of the chapter is this significant sentence: "And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go number Israel and Judah." God is not the author of sin, nor does he ever tempt men to sin (James 1 : 13), but often, in the language of Scripture, that is attributed to him which he permits to come to pass, and which also vindicates his wisdom and justice in the retributive punishment of sin. In this sense he is said to have hardened Pharaoh's heart. He often so arranges it that the sin of one man becomes the agent or the occasion of the punishment of the sins of others. The transgressions of a people are most frequently punished through the sins and follies of their rulers. The ambition, pride or drunkenness of a ruler may be made, in divine providence, the agent for punishing a people for their covetousness, their sensuality or their oppression of the poor. In this case we can only conjecture what was the sin of the people. It may have been pride and self-glorying, a disposition which fed the vanity of the king and led to the act which God so severely judged. Be this as it may, it was manifestly some sin that involved both the king and the people in common guilt, though David, as ruler and the persistent leader in the wickedness, is guiltiest of all. "The sins of the people all contributed to the deluge, but it was David's sin that immediately opened the sluice."

I. In this lesson we have, first, an account of the judg-

ment: "So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel; and there fell of Israel seventy thousand men." Here is judgment following repentance and confession. David had already said, "I have sinned greatly, because I have done this thing, but now, I beseech thee, do away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly." But this national sin, which had its manifestation in David's numbering the people, was too offensive in God's sight, and too dangerous to the life of the nation, to go unrebuked. There are some sins which, though truly repented of and forgiven, still bring retributive consequences from which the transgressor cannot escape in this life. He must wear them as brands of condemnation set upon sin by divine justice for his own and others' good. These consequences, while they come in just retribution, are also sent in mercy as God's barriers against the progress of sin. If in this case the sin of the people was pride and self-glorying, then the connection between it and the judgment is manifest. The plague withers their glory from Dan to Beersheba. It must have reminded them of the time when Egypt's pride and godlessness were rebuked in a single night. Their judgment answers to their sin as an echo to the sound. Pride and consequent godlessness are most offensive in the sight of God, and have brought about the downfall of many nations as well as of individuals. Especially are they offensive when found among the people of God. Boasting of numbers or of wealth is no evidence of spirituality, but, on the contrary, marks a base reliance on the flesh. "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord."

It is here affirmed that the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel. Plagues and pestilence have various national and physical causes. But it is equally plain that

they are connected with the sins and follies of men. They are the penalties of violated law. In other words, they have a place in the righteous government of God, and so come to execute his will. Here the pestilence is attributed, instrumentally, to angelic agency. So also in the case of the destruction of the army of Sennacherib. It is not incredible that natural laws and agencies should be placed under angelic control for the execution of the divine wrath or for the correction of the people of God. If man's intelligence can use natural forces and make the material world the instrument of his will, why cannot angels, who excel in wisdom and strength, do the same at God's command?

II. This lesson furnishes an example of true penitence. There is much sorrow in the world on account of sin, and many transgressors, especially when suffering from the consequences of their evil doings, bitterly reproach themselves and bewail their folly. But all this is only the sorrow of the world, "which worketh death," and not that "godly sorrow" which "worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of." Here is a case of genuine repentance which is accepted with God. It is best to study it in contrast with the conduct of a false penitent like Pharaoh or Saul when suffering under the divine judgments. David's confession was not extorted from him by the pressure of the divine judgment. Before it came he saw his sin, and said unto the Lord, "I have sinned greatly in that I have done." Pharaoh never admits his sin until he can no longer endure the plague that has come upon him, and no sooner is it taken away than he hardens his heart and goes back to sinning. Divine judgments are often, indeed, instrumental in arousing men to see the enormity of their guilt. They are

used as goads to prick a dull and sleeping conscience. But true penitence is not the result of fear. It springs from seeing the hatefulnes and wickedness of sin as done against the wisdom, justice, holiness and love of God. Sin is folly, and brings ruin to the transgressor, but its chief enormity lies in the fact that it is done against a God of holiness and love. So true confession is confession to God. As in another case David said, "Against thee, thee only (chiefly), have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight," so here he confesses his guilt to God. It is not the shame he had brought upon himself or the ruin he had caused to come upon others, though these were indeed to be deplored, but the wrong he had done against God that caused him his greatest sorrow and anguish. He is also ingenuous in his confession. He makes no reservation and pleads no palliation of his conduct: "Lo, I have sinned, and done wickedly." The spurious penitent is always bringing forward excuses for his sins: "I have sinned, but I was sorely tempted," or, "I have sinned, but not as greatly as others." David, on the contrary, sees his sin so clearly that he has no disposition to blame others, nor do we hear a single word from him about the sins of the people. His conduct also, while lying exposed to judgment, is characteristic of a truly penitent man. Pharaoh said, "I have sinned; entreat the Lord that there be no more mighty thunderings and hail." He is troubled about the judgment, but not about his sin; get him relief from the plague, and sin will be no grief to him. But David says not one word about the removal of the plague; on the contrary, feeling that he justly deserves it, he asks that it may fall upon him and his house instead of the people. Fully alive to his guilt, he has not one word to say against the divine judgments; he only asks that his iniquity may be taken away. Nor can

we fail to admire the admirable charity and unselfishness manifested in his prayer. He who in his pride was ready to lead the people forth to battle to be slaughtered like sheep for his glory is now in his humility ready to die for them. Since his folly has brought ruin to them, he is ready to make reparation though it cost him his life and that of his own house. What a contrast between him and Saul! The latter, while saying that he has sinned, blames the people for his disobedience, and then begs of the prophet that he will honor him before the people. He has no thought above self and his own glory.

III. This lesson also shows us how saving mercy was obtained for Israel. The judgment of God was righteously destroying the people, and his mercy, though free, sovereign and ready to save, could not ignore his righteousness. There must be a way opened for its manifestation if Jerusalem is saved. This is secured through the divine appointment. David is directed by Gad, a prophet of the Lord, to build an altar unto the Lord, that the plague might be stayed from the people. The place selected was the threshing-floor of Araunah, the Jebusite, where David and the elders of Israel saw the angel—the same place, as we may infer from 1 Chron. 22 : 1, on which the temple was subsequently built. There the sacrifice appointed by God was offered up for the sins of the people; the blood of the innocent flowed for the guilty, and “the plague was stayed from Israel.” Then, as we read in the book of Chronicles, at the altar of sacrifice the angel of justice sheathed his sword. In all this we can scarcely fail to see a foreshadowing of a more wonderful manifestation of grace to a lost and guilty world, obtained through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It was not by David’s tears of penitence and confession

of sin that the plague was stayed. It is written, "David built there an altar unto the Lord, and offered burnt-offerings and peace-offerings. So the Lord was entreated for the land, and the plague was stayed from Israel." In like manner, not our tears or prayers or confessions, but the blood of Christ shed for us, furnishes the only ground for the removal of the sentence of death which the broken law of God has passed upon us. He was made sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. By his glorious altar of sacrifice the once-outstretched sword of justice is sheathed, for "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." That which David and the elders of Israel saw long ago, through typical offerings on Mount Zion, is now ours in reality. "Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many," and his sacrifice was declared to be accepted of God—not, as was David's, by fire descending from heaven, but, more emphatically, by his glorious resurrection from the dead. So for us there is a most righteous as well as a most gracious escape from the death of sin through our Lord Jesus Christ. It must never be forgotten that it is through him alone that we may "come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

IV. This passage presents another feature of spiritual life worthy of attention. It is the spirit of generosity and unselfishness manifested by David in fulfilling the command of God. When he made known to Araunah his desire to purchase the threshing-floor, the latter, upon learning the purpose for which he desired it, not only offered to give the king the land, but also his oxen and the wooden implements of the threshing-floor for

the burnt-offering. Here was royal liberality; and it is set down to his everlasting honor in the word of God that he gave "like a king." It is certainly a striking testimony to his generosity and his piety that he so promptly offers all as a gift when he might, without wrong, have asked a full price. He stands before us as a noble representative of those large-hearted, generous men who are ever ready, when the occasion demands, to sacrifice their private interests for the public good. What a contrast between him and those ignoble, covetous souls so often found who are ever ready to take advantage of public calamities for their own profit! But his generosity is more than matched by David's. The king refuses to take his gift, saying, "Nay, but I will surely buy it of thee at a price: neither will I offer burnt-offerings unto the Lord my God of that which doth cost me nothing." Here was a temptation to which a selfish man would have yielded. David had been commanded by God to rear an altar on the threshing-floor of the Jebusite. He promptly started to execute this command, and in the way of obedience he is met with the proffer of the land as a gift. Was not this to be regarded as a providential help, and to be received accordingly? It certainly presented a way of easy compliance with the divine command. But David scorns to accept such a release. He would not be content to offer to God another man's gift as his own. Here, under the law, we find a "cheerful giver," such as the Lord loves. He is not one who would bring "the blind or the broken or maimed" to offer them to the Lord. His conduct, first of all, shows the sincerity of his faith in God. A burnt-offering was one entirely devoted to the Lord and consumed by fire on the altar. So far as sense could discern, there was no profit in it. It ended in smoke. It

was purely an investment of faith. But here is one ready to give of his substance unto the Lord, nor will he offer that which costs him nothing, for he is persuaded that it is not a vain thing thus to honor God.

And never did David make a better investment of his means than when he bought Araunah's threshing-floor. It was the building-lot for the temple which for a thousand years prefigured Christ, and so became a fountain of blessing to the nations. Money invested in such a cause is not lost, but laid up in store for the life to come.

David's conduct also testifies to his delight in serving God. He does not count it a happy providence that the generosity of another should save him from the cost of the sacrifice, nor is he willing to worship God at the expense of others when he is able to give of his own abundance. It is easy to give to God that which costs us nothing, or to be generous at the expense of others; but true devotion to God scorns such baseness, and delights most of all in self-sacrifice. There are men who take special delight in recalling David's infirmities and sins, and sneeringly ask, "Is this the man after God's own heart?" But until they can equal his royal generosity and unselfishness in giving for the honor of God, and his deep and humble penitence for sin, let them be silent.

In this passage there is an apparent contradiction with what is recorded in 1 Chron. 21:25 as to the price of the threshing-floor and the oxen. Here it is said that David bought the threshing-floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver (that is, about twenty-five dollars); there it is recorded that he gave for the "place" six hundred shekels of gold by weight (a sum amounting to forty-eight hundred and eighteen dollars). There

are two ways of reconciling the apparent contradiction. Some suppose that the fifty shekels was the price of the oxen and the wooden implements of the threshing-floor, which were immediately paid for, as the offering was to be made forthwith. But the "place," or the whole tract of ground referred to in Chronicles, was subsequently bought for the larger or "full price." This is reasonable, and can be justified by the text. Or it may be that Araunah proves the sincerity of his generosity by parting with his property at a nominal price, since the king will not take it unless he can buy it—just as with us property is transferred for a nominal consideration. David in turn proves the sincerity of his generosity by giving Araunah, after the property was his, a full price and more. Here were two liberal hearts matched against each other, and the result was the compromise of generosity in which each is victorious.