**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**NUMBERS-010. THE WATERS OF MERIBAH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Then came the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, into the desert of Zin in the first month: and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there. 2. And there was no water for the congregation: and they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3. And the people chode with Moses, and spake, saying, Would God that we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! 4. And why have ye brought up the congregation of the Lord into this wilderness, that we and our cattle should die there? 5. And wherefore have ye made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink. 6. And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and they fell upon their faces: and the glory of the Lord appeared unto them. 7. And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, 8. Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock: so thou shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink. 9. And Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He commanded him. 10. And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock? 11. And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also. 12. And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed Me not, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them. 13. This is the water of Meribah; because the children of Israel strove with the Lord, and He was sanctified in them."*

*Numbers 20:1-13*

Kadesh had witnessed the final trial and failure of the generation that came out of Egypt; now we see the first trial and failure of the new generation, thirty-seven years after, on the same spot. Deep silence shrouds the history of these dreary years; but, probably, the congregation was broken up, and small parties roamed over the country, without purpose or hope, while Moses and a few of the leaders kept by the tabernacle. There is a certain emphasis in the phrase of the first verse of this chapter, the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, which suggests that this was the first reassembling of the scattered units since the last act of the whole congregation. The first month was, then, the first of the fortieth year, and the gathering was either in obedience to the summons of Moses, who knew that the fixed time had now come, or was the result of common knowledge of the fact. In any case, we have here the first act of a new epoch, and the question to be tried is whether the new men are any better than the old. It is this which gives importance to the event, and explains the bitterness of Moses at finding the old spirit living in the children. It was his trial as well as theirs. He resumed the functions which had substantially been in abeyance for a generation, and by his conduct showed that he had become unfit for the new form which the leadership must take with the invasion of Canaan.

**I.** We note the old murmurings on the lips of the new generation. The lament of a later prophet fits these hereditary grumblers,--In vain have I smitten your children; they received no correction. The place where they reassembled might have taught them the sin of unbelief; their parents graves should have enforced the lesson. But the long years of wandering, and two millions of deaths, had been useless. The weather-beaten but sturdy strength of the four old men, the only survivors, might have preached the wisdom of trust in the God in whose favour is life. But the people had learned nothing and forgotten nothing. The old cuckoo-cry, which had become so monotonous from their fathers, is repeated, with differences, not in their favour. They do not, indeed, murmur directly against God, because they regard Moses and Aaron as responsible. Why, say they, have ye brought up the congregation of the Lord? They seem to use that name with a touch of pride in their relation to God, while destitute of any real obedience, and so they show the first traces of the later spirit of the nation. They have acquired cattle while living in the oases of the wilderness, and they are anxious about them. They acknowledge the continuity of national life in their question, Wherefore have ye made us to come up out of Egypt? though most of them had been born in the wilderness. The fear that moved their fathers to unbelief was more reasonable and less contemptible than this murmuring, which ignores God all but utterly, and is ready to throw up everything at the first taste of privation.

It is a signal instance of the solemn law by which the fathers sins are inherited by the children who prove themselves heirs to their ancestors by repeating their deeds. It is fashionable now to deny original sin, and equally fashionable to affirm heredity, which is the same thing, put into scientific language. There is such a thing as national character persistent through generations, each unit of which adds something to the force of the tendencies which he receives and transmits, but which never are so omnipotent as to destroy individual guilt, however they may lighten it.

Note, too, the awful power of resistance to God's educating possessed by our wills. The whole purpose of these men's lives, thus far, had been to fit them for being God's instruments, and for the reception of His blessing. The desert was His school for body and mind, where muscles and wills were to be braced, and solitude and expectation might be nurses of lofty thoughts, and in the silence God's voice might sound. What better preparation of a hardy race of God-trusting heroes could there have been, and what came of it all? Failure all but complete! The instrument tempered with so much care has its edge turned at the first stroke. The old sore breaks out at the old spot. Man's will has an awful power to thwart God's training; and of all the sad mysteries of this sad mysterious world, this is the saddest and most mysterious, and is the root of all other sadness and mystery,--that a man can set his pin-point of a will against that great Will which gives him all his power, and when God beckons can say, I will not, and can render His most sedulous discipline ineffectual.

Note, too, that trivial things are large enough to hide plain duties and bright possibilities. These men knew that they had come to Kadesh for the final assault, which was to recompense all their hardships. Their desert training should have made them less resourceless and desperate when water failed; but the hopes of conquest and the duty of trust cannot hold their own against present material inconvenience. They even seem to make bitter mockery of the promises, when they complain that Kadesh is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates, which were the fruits brought by the spies,--as if they had said, So this stretch of waterless sand is the fertile land you talked of, is it? This is all that we have got by reassembling here. Do we not often feel that the drought of Kadesh is more real than the grapes of Eshcol? Are we not sometimes tempted to bitter comparisons of the fair promises with the gloomy realities? Does our courage never flag, nor our faith falter, nor swirling clouds of doubt hide the inheritance from our weary and tear-filled eyes? He that is without sin may cast the first stone at these men; but whoever knows his own weak heart will confess that, if he had been among that thirsty crowd, he would, most likely, have made one of the murmurers.

**II.** Note God's repetition of His old gift to the new generation. Moses makes no attempt to argue with the people, but casts himself in entreaty before the door of the Tabernacle, as if crushed and helpless in face of this heart-breaking proof of the persistent obstinacy of the old faults. God's answer recalls the former miracle at Rephidim (Exodus xvii. 1-7) in the early days of the march, when the same cries had come from lips now silent, and the rock, smitten at God's command by the rod which had parted the sea, yielded water. The only differences are that here Moses is bid to speak, not to smite; and that the miracle is to be done before all the congregation, instead of before the elders only. Both variations seem to have the common purpose of enhancing the wonder, and confirming the authority of Moses, to a generation to whom the old deliverances were only hearsay, and many of whom were in contact with the leader for the first time. The fact that we have here the beginning of a new epoch, and a new set of people, goes far to explain the resemblance of the two incidents, without the need of supposing, with many critics, that they are but different versions of one legend. The repetition of scarcity of water is not wonderful; the recurrence of the murmurings is the sad proof of the unchanged temper of the people, and the repetition of the miracle is the merciful witness of the patience of God. His charity is not easily provoked, is not soon angry, but stoops to renew gifts which had been so little appreciated that the remembrance of them failed to cure distrust. Unbelief is obstinate, but His loving purpose is more persistent still. Rephidim should have made the murmuring at Kadesh impossible; but, if it does not, then He will renew the mercy, though it had been once wasted, and will so shape the second gift that it shall recall the first, if haply both may effect what one had failed to do. When need is repeated, the supply is forthcoming, even when it is demanded by sullen and forgetful distrust. We can wear out men's patience, but God's is inexhaustible. The same long-suffering Hand that poured water from the rock for two generations of distrustful murmurers still lavishes its misused gifts on us, to win us to late repentance, and upbraideth not for our slowness to learn the lessons of His mercies.

**III.** Note the breaking down at last of the long-tried leader's patience. It is in striking contrast with the patience of God. Psalm cvi. 32, 33, describes the sin of Moses as twofold; namely, anger and speaking unadvisedly. His harsh words, so unlike his pleadings on the former occasion of rebellion at Kadesh, have a worse thing than an outburst of temper in them. Must we fetch you water out of the rock? arrogates to himself the power of working miracles. He forgets that he was as much an instrument, and as little a force, as his own rod. His angry scolding betrays wounded personal importance, and annoyance at rebellion against his own authority, rather than grief at the people's distrust of God, and also a distinct clouding over of his own consciousness of dependence for all his power on God, and an impure mingling of thoughts of self. The same turbid blending of anger and self-regard impelled his arm to the passionately repeated strokes, which, in his heat, he substituted for the quiet words that he was bidden to speak. The Palestinian Tar gum says very significantly, that at the first stroke the rock dropped blood, thereby indicating the tragic sinfulness of the angry blow. How unworthy a representative of the long-suffering God was this angry man! The servant of the Lord must not strive, nor give the water with which he is entrusted, with contempt or anger in his heart. That gift requires meek compassion in its stewards.

But the failure of Moses patience was only too natural. The whole incident has to be studied as the first of a new era, in which both leader and led were on their trial. During the thirty-seven years of waiting, Moses had had but little exercise of that part of his functions, and little experience of the people's temper. He must have looked forward anxiously to the result of the desert hardening; he must have felt more remote from and above the children than he did to their parents, his contemporaries who had come with him from Egypt, and so his disappointment must have been proportionately keen, when the first difficulty that rose revealed the old spirit in undiminished force. For forty years he had been patient, and ready to swallow mortifications and ignore rebellion against himself, and to offer himself for his people; but now, when men whom he had seen in their swaddling-clothes showed the same stiff-necked distrust as had killed their fathers, the breaking-point of his patience was reached. That burst of anger is a grave symptom of lessened love for the sinful murmurers; and lessened love always means lessened power to guide and help. The people are not changed, but Moses is. He has no longer the invincible patience, the utter self-oblivion, the readiness for self-sacrifice, which had borne him up of old, and so he fails. We may learn from his failure that the prime requisite for doing God's work is love, which cannot be moved to anger nor stirred to self-assertion, but meets and conquers murmuring and rebellion by patient holding forth of God's gift, and is, in some faint degree, an echo of His endless long-suffering. He who would serve men must, sleeping or waking, carry them in his heart, and pity their sin. They who would represent God to men, and win men for God, must be imitators of God ...and walk in love. If the bearer of the water of life offers it with Hear, ye rebels, it will flow untasted.

**IV.** Note the sentence on the leader, and the sad memorial name. Moses is blamed for not believing nor sanctifying God. His self-assertion in his unadvised speech came from unbelief, or forgetfulness of his dependence. He who claims power to himself, denies it to God. Moses put himself between God and the people, not to show but to hide God; and, instead of exalting God's holiness before them by declaring Him to be the giver, he intercepted the thanks and diverted them to himself. But was his momentary failure not far too severely punished? To answer that question, we must recur to the thought of the importance of this event as beginning a new chapter, and as a test for both Moses and Israel. His failure was a comparatively small matter in itself; and if the sentence is regarded merely as the punishment of a sin, it appears sternly disproportionate to the offence. Were eighty years of faithful service not sufficient to procure the condonation of one moment's impatience? Is not that harsh treatment? But a tiny blade above-ground may indicate the presence of a poisonous root, needing drastic measures for its extirpation; and the sentence was not only punishment for sin, but kind, though punitive, relief from an office for which Moses had no longer, in full measure, his old qualifications. The subsequent history does not show any withdrawal of God's favour from him, and certainly it would be no very sore sorrow to be freed from the heavy load, carried so long. There is disapprobation, no doubt, in the sentence; but it treats the conduct of Moses rather as a symptom of lessened fitness for his heavy responsibility than as sin; and there is as much kindness as condemnation in saying to the wearied veteran, who has stood at his post so long and has taken up arms once more, You have done enough. You are not what you were. Other hands must hold the leader's staff. Enter into rest.

Note that Moses was condemned for doing what Jesus always did, asserting his power to work miracles. What was unbelief and a sinful obtrusion of himself in God's place when the great lawgiver did it, was right and endorsed by God when the Carpenter of Nazareth did it. Why the difference? A greater than Moses is here, when He says to us, What will ye that I should do unto you?'

The name of Meribah-Kadesh is given to suggest the parallel and difference with the other miraculous flow of water. The two incidents are thus brought into connection, and yet individualised. Meribah, which means strife, brands the murmuring as sinful antagonism to God: Kadesh, which means holy, brings both the miracle and the sentence under the common category of acts by which God manifested His holiness to the new generation; and so the double name is a reminder of sin that they may be humble, and of mingled mercy and judgment that they may trust and obey.