

The Exodus - From Egypt to Canaan - Sermon 4 of 5

by Roy Hession

The greatest crisis that Israel faced in the wilderness was the incident in Numbers 13 and 14, where they refused to trust God and compare giants with themselves, rather than with God.

Duration: 52:17

Scripture: Exodus 34:6, Joel 2:25, Jonah 3:5, Matthew 6:33, Romans 5:20, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Exodus"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the story of the Israelites sending spies into the land that God had promised them. The majority of the spies saw themselves as grasshoppers compared to the giants they encountered, leading to a report of fear and unbelief. However, the minority report of two spies saw the giants as grasshoppers compared to God, demonstrating faith and trust in God's power. The speaker emphasizes the importance of not comparing ourselves to the challenges we face, but rather comparing them to the greatness of God.

Transcript

Yesterday we thought about the five things which Paul says overthrew Israel in the wilderness, because of which they never entered into that land of promise. This morning we're going to consider a further thing, a further event, which probably was much more crucial in their exclusion from the land than any of the five things that Paul mentions. This was the greatest crisis that Israel faced.

They little knew what was in the balance. And because of what happened in Numbers 13 and 14, it was because of what happened there that Israel had to wander for forty years, long years in the until that whole generation of doubters and murmurers had died out, and then God brought them in. So I would say this morning's subject is the biggest crisis event in the history of Israel at this point, other than the final one by which they ultimately did come in.

And the solemn thing is there may have been some such incident in your life way back, where you made a wrong choice, because of which you may have missed God's sweetest purpose for your life in some measure up to this day. But as someone said at Keswick last year, it is never too late to repent, because failure with God is never final. But this passage before us has deep solemn lessons for us, and we can only say to each one of us, to the speaker and to the hearer, let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed,

lest he fall.

Well now let's read it. I'm aware of the fact that there are a number of new Christians with us, and therefore I cannot presume on too great a familiarity with certain scriptures, which for others of us who've been in our Bibles for years, you know it so well. So I think it might be right to read much of this solemn and dramatic incident.

Numbers 13. And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Send thou men that they may search the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel. Of every tribe of their fathers shall ye send a man, every one a ruler among them.

And Moses, by the commandment of the Lord, sent them from the wilderness of Pera. All those men were heads of the children of Israel. And then their names are given.

Verse 17. And Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said unto them, Get you up this way southward, and go up into the mountain, and see the land, what it is, and the people that dwelleth therein, whether they be strong or weak, few or many, and what the land is that they dwell in, whether it be good or bad, and what cities they be that they dwell in, whether in tents or in strongholds, and what the land is, whether it be fat or lean, whether there be wood therein or not, and be ye of good courage, and bring of the fruit of the land. Now the time was the time of the first ripe grapes.

So they went up and searched the land from the wilderness of Zin, unto Rehob, as men come to Haman. And they ascended by the south, and came to Hebron. Verse 23.

And they came unto the brook of Eschon, and cut down from thence a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bared it between two upon a staff. What a cluster! What a bunch! What a land that could produce such wonderful grapes! And they brought of the pomegranates, and of the figs. Find a lot of green groceries they brought back that day.

And it was all good. And the place was called the brook Eschon, because of the cluster of grapes which the children of Israel cut down from thence. And they turned from searching of the land after forty days.

And they went and came to Moses, and to Aaron, and to all the congregation of the children of Israel, unto the wilderness of Teran, to Kadesh, and brought back word unto them, and unto all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told them and said, We came unto the land with a darcentist dust, and surely it floweth with milk and honey, and this is the fruit of it. Nevertheless, I've underlined that in my Bible.

Nevertheless, the people be strong that dwell in the land. And the cities are bold and very great. And moreover we saw the children of Anak there.

The Amalekites dwell in the land of the south, and the Hittites, and the Jebusites, and the Aborites dwell in the mountains, and the Canaanites dwell by the sea by the coast of Jordan. And of course they did. Didn't they know that beforehand? But oh, the way in which they talk, it's the most terrible discovery they made.

They thought it was going to be a walkover. There's people there. Of course there are.

They put up a resistance. Did you expect otherwise? And Caleb told the people before Moses and said, Let us go up at once and possess it, for we are well able to overcome it. But the men that went up with

them said, We be not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we.

And they brought up an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land through which we have gone to search it is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof. And all the people that we saw in it are men of great stature. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants.

And we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight. And all the congregation lifted up their voice and cried, and the people wept that night. And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron.

And the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt, or would God that we had died in this wilderness, wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children shall be a prey? Were it not better for us to return into Egypt? And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt. Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, which were of them that searched the land, rent their clothes, and they spake unto all the company of the children of Israel, saying, The land which we pass through to search is an exceeding good land.

If the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it to us, a land which floweth with milk and honey. Only rebel not he against the Lord. Never fear ye the people of the land, for their bread for us will happen for our breakfast.

Their defence is departed from us. And the Lord is with us. Fear them not.

But all the congregation bathed them, stoned them with stones. And the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation before all the children of Israel. And words died off on their lips when that happened.

And the Lord said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? And how long will it be ere they believe me? For all the signs which I have shown among them. Verse 22. Because all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles which I did in Egypt, and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice, surely they shall not see the land which I swear unto their fathers.

Neither shall they any of them that provoke me see it. Verse 29. Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness, and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and up, which have murmured against me, doubtless shall not come into the land concerning which I swear to make you dwell therein, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun, but your little ones, which he said should be a prey, them will I bring in, and they shall know the land which ye have despised.

Verse 40. And they rose up early in the morning, and get them up into the top of the mountain, saying, Lo, we be here, and we will go into the place which the Lord has promised, for we have sinned. And Moses said, Wherefore now do ye transgress the commandment of the Lord, but it shall not prosper.

Go not up, for the Lord is not among you, that ye be not smitten before your enemies. For the Amalekites and the Canaanites are there before you, and you shall fall by the sword, because you are turned away

from the Lord. Therefore the Lord will not be with you.

But they presumed to go up unto the hilltop. Nevertheless the ark of the covenant of the Lord and Moses departed not out of the camp. Then the Amalekites came down, and the Canaanites dwelt in that hill, and smote them, and discomfited them even unto Hormah.

Well, it makes good reading, doesn't it? It's a terrific story, especially when the Spirit is showing you its inner meaning and its application to our lives. Now, up to that time, everything had been going according to God's original timetable. There had been failure, there had been chastening, there'd been that terrible failure at Mount Sinai, but still, the plan was going forward.

They'd come out of Egypt, they'd spent that year at Sinai, and they'd taken that eleven days' journey right to the borders of the land which God had purpose for them. And here they are, right on the borders at a place called Kadesh Barnea. And it was obviously God's first purpose that they should go in and possess the land which He'd promised them.

He was well able to deal with anything in their way. But because of this incident that took place here, that people who were within an ace of entering into that good land and into a life of wonderful victory over their enemies, were shut out of that land, forbidden to enter it, until the whole of that generation had died out. And for forty years that people were encamped in various dry, miserable spots in the desert, where they could have been dwelling in the land.

That flows with milk and honey. Now, it may well be, as I've said, that there has been something happened way back that has drastically affected the whole course of our lives to this day. In some measure, you and I may have missed the first purpose of God.

And to this day, we may not be really living in the good of all that grace has got for us. In fact, I don't suppose any of us are living in the good of all that grace has got for us. But we're not living in what God expected us to enter into.

We're only enjoying a half salvation. We're not praising. We're not in touch.

We're not in the place where we've got something for others. Rivers of blessing for others have never, as far as we've known, ever flown out from our lives. May be.

Or they did once, but they aren't now. And it may all be because of something that happened some way back, or perhaps quite recently, because of which, to this day, we are overthrown in the wilderness, and we are not in the land of Canaan. Now, what went wrong in this incident to account for that long exclusion from the land of Canaan? Well, now, let's trace it step by step, what went wrong.

Now, in Numbers 13.1, it says, The Lord said unto Moses, Send thy men, that they may search the land of Egypt, send spies ahead of you. And it would seem that that suggestion came from God. But when you turn to Deuteronomy, the next book, chapter 1, verse 22, you see there was more in it than that.

Deuteronomy 1, 22. It says, And he came near unto me. This is Moses summarizing what's happened long after.

And he came near unto me, every one of you, and you said, We will send men before us, that they shall search up the land, and bring us word again by what way we must go up, and to what cities we shall

come. And the saying, Please be well, and I took twelve men of you, one of a tribe, and so on. So it would seem that the idea of sending spies ahead, in the first place, emanated from the people.

And the project appealed to Moses. And because this was something they really felt this was the right thing to do, and they were rather set on it, I could only assume the Lord said, All right, send spies. But I'm going to suggest to you that it wasn't God's first intention.

There was something wrong with the sending out of these spies. Well, look at verse 17. Does it sound quite right? And Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said, Get you up, see the land, what it is, the people to dwell therein, whether they be strong or weak, whether they be few or many, what the land is, whether it be good or bad.

As if it mattered whether they were few or many, whether they were strong or weak. They weren't going to fight this battle. Jehovah was.

And a strong army was just as easy for him as a weak one. And why either let's see if it's a good land or a bad land. They've been already told.

And I believe there was some unbelief in this idea of sending spies ahead of them. The fact is, that was where the trouble began. In ever sending spies at all, I would suggest to you.

And the sort of incident that can cause the breakdown that I've in mind, and we shall think about in our lives, which can have such long-standing result, often begins with us sending spies ahead into the future. I've done it, haven't you? Have you not lain awake at night and sent spies into the future? How's it going to turn out? How am I going to get by? How am I going to maintain a witness in that place? Or what about our family fortunes? What about my work? What about the responsibility? And all too many of us have spent all too long sending spies into the future. Whether we're going to measure up.

Whether it's going to be a good land or a bad land. Whether the people, those that oppose us, or what opposes us, is going to be strong or weak, as if it matters. And there's no question about whether it's going to be good or bad in the future.

The Bible says all things work together for inexpressible good, ultimately if not immediately, for them that love God. But we must have a look, and weigh it up ourselves. And weigh up the possibilities and the difficulties.

Weigh up our finances, though of course there's foresight in a proper way, but it isn't always the proper way with us. And we send spies into the future. Now that can lead to some of the most serious breakdowns in our whole Christian lives.

It can lead to the most serious withdrawing from the purpose that God has got for us. That was the first step. The second step was this.

When they sent the spies, whereas they had to admit that the land was indeed all that God said it was, they saw those giants. They saw those giants. And those giants were big.

And the cities they were living in were strong and walled up to heaven. They seemed impregnable. And then whereas they did see all the rest of the fruit, the thing that really impressed them was those giants and those cities.

And I can tell you that when I send spies into the future, that's about all I see. Oh, I know God says he's going to be with me. I know he says I will go before you into the land, and I suppose I believe it.

But that's not the thing that really impresses me when I send spies. I've taken my eyes off the Lord, I'm looking at things after my own reasoning, and you know invariably all you see are difficulties. Difficulties you never thought.

I mean, you might even lie awake at night and you count them up. Or supposing I fall sick, what's going to happen to the family? It could be things like that even. What about the children? Or that place where I've got a witness for the Lord, where everybody's so tough, and they all expect me to drink, and I know they'll offer me cigarettes, and they'll expect me to go in with this and go in with that.

And all you see is that as you look, send spies. It began with unbelief, and unbelief only sees difficulties. It never sees God, it sees giants.

Many a person is on the point of, shall I accept Jesus Christ? Maybe there were some last night in the young people's squash, and I have a real deep feeling that some of them sent spies. I'm leaving school, I'm getting a job. I couldn't keep it up.

Look what it'll mean. And when you send spies ahead and take your eye off the Lord Jesus as I'm going to go before you, all you see are difficulties. It's capable of infinite application.

It says in 1333, we saw the giants. And then the next thing that happened was this. There were two reports, of course.

There was the majority report of the ten, and the minority report of the two. And the majority report was this. They compared the giants which they saw with themselves.

And in their sight, and in their own sight, they were as grasshoppers compared with these great stragglers. The two, whose voices were not really heard, they reckoned differently. They compared the giants, not with themselves, but with God.

And to them it was the giants that were the grasshoppers. They said, there'll be breakfast. We'll have them for our breakfast.

Oh, wonderful. Joshua and Caleb. But not so the ten, and not so the people.

They only saw the giants. They didn't see God, their God, who'd done such great things in bringing them out through the Red Sea. They saw the giants, and they compared the giants with themselves, rather than with their God, and they saw themselves to be but grasshoppers.

And that's what you do. How many a person is held back from coming to Christ, because they see the giants, and say, I couldn't keep it up. Whoever said you had to keep it up, you hadn't got the first glimmer of the gospel.

You're to compare those giants with that Savior who died and rose again. They're grasshoppers to him. All those difficulties, when he raises his hand, they vanish away as you go forward, uncompromising.

If through unbelief you compromise, then the giants will overcome you. But if you go forward in complete faith, you'll find Jesus has already won the victory for you. And not only with regard to the one who's on the

verge of entering into salvation, but the one who's on the verge of entering into a real deeper life.

Someone says, well, if I started repenting and giving a sinner's testimony, I would lose my reputation. If I put things right at home, I will lose my authority. The children won't obey me.

If among my Christians, or in my Christian work, I'm prepared to come off my pedestal and be real, and give a sinner's testimony, and praise a sinner's Savior, well, what would they think? And you compare those giants with yourselves. I couldn't face it. Or it may be some other thing.

The ordinary problems and difficulties and worries that beset everybody when we send spies. They're bigger than me. It's very interesting to see that word, 28, verse 28, nevertheless.

We came into the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey, and this is the fruit of it, nevertheless, giants. Yes, we may say, oh yes, I believe in the promise, I believe in the promise, oh yes, Jesus is this. I know it says that, but.

And that but always cancels out for you all that you thought or said before. It's a very important thing, whether you put the nevertheless before giants or before God. Let me contrast that verse, 13, 28, with Ephesians 2. And you will see what I mean as to where you put the nevertheless in your thinking and in my thinking.

Ephesians 2, the first verse is Ephesians 2, described the terrible state of a world, men and women, away from God. Their moral state, a moral state that we ourselves shared along with them, we were by nature children of wrath, even as others. Nevertheless, here it is but, it's the same word, God.

I wonder what you say, nevertheless, giants. Or do you say, giants, yes, nevertheless God. So often I've said before, oh I know, yes, I suppose you're supposed to say it through, I suppose the promise is, nevertheless, but difficulties.

But Paul says, he piles up all that the world is away from God, and there's nevertheless God, who is rich in mercy, who is great in love, wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, that quickened us together with Christ Jesus. Oh I wonder where we put that but. I know where I put it.

So here it is, here are the principle steps. One, the sending of the spies, which I'm suggesting was done in unbelief in some real measure. The fact that doing it in unbelief, all they saw were the giants.

Thirdly, they did make the big mistake, instead of comparing the giants with God, they compared those giants with themselves, and they were but as grasshoppers in their sight. Fourthly, Paul is quite obviously, they said in verse 31, in view of all that, we be not able to go up against this people, we can't do it. And that's what happens, as a result of all the former.

You come to the place, I can't, I can't, I couldn't face it, I couldn't undertake that service, I couldn't respond to that call, look at the giants, and I'm only a grasshopper, I can't. Sometimes when God calls us to some service, you see only giants, you see your inadequacy. I say, I can't.

Will you look at Isaiah 55, 51 verse 12. Now here's a very interesting verse about this, I can't. Oh, this I can't.

The terrible sin of saying, I can't. Do you know that could exclude you from the land of promise, I can't. And do you know God deals, if you please, with this I can't, as a sin of pride, if you please.

At first, I can't, I couldn't see that that was pride, but here's a verse which treats it as pride. Isaiah 51, 12 says, I, even I, am he that comforteth you. Who art thou that thou shouldst be afraid of a man that shall die, and of a son of man which shall be made as grass, and forget is the Lord thy maker.

Now when in scripture you have that phrase, who art thou, you could always know it is a rebuke to pride. Who art thou that replies against God, and so on. What pride, who art thou, who art thou.

So here is pride being rebuked, but listen, who art thou that you should be afraid of a man. Can't quite see it as pride, listen, this is how I see it. Lord, I can't.

Lord, I can't. Stop asking me, don't press me, I can't. God says, who said you could? Who expected you to be able? What absolute pride on your part to think that you had to be able? I am the Lord that comforteth you.

I am the Lord that doth go before you. I am the Lord that fighteth your battles for you. I am the vine, you're only going to be the feeble branch in me.

You think you've got to be the vine. What absolute pride. You think I couldn't take that responsibility.

Who said you had to? The government's going to be on my shoulder. Who art thou? Oh, let's learn to spot this terrible sin of, I can't. And you're forgetting, Jehovah thy maker, Jehovah Jesus, your saviour, whenever you and I say, I can't.

Why? If we're born of his spirit. The one who triumphed over Satan dwells in us, and potentially everything that's possible to him, is possible to him in us. Please turn the cassette over now, do not fast wind it in either direction.

And potentially, everything that's possible to him, is possible to him in us. Oh, there's a great old Salvation Army hymn, and some of them are great hymns. By the way, that hymn, Calling, Calling, is a Salvation Army hymn.

There's another one I've heard them sing, can't remember the first line, but every line is punctuated with a hearty hallelujah. And you know there's a wonderful line that I've loved, God in man can never fail, hallelujah. You may well say, God in man, isn't God out there, but God in you.

But I can't. Apart from me, of course you can't, but you're not apart from me. You're joined to me.

As much as the branch is to the vine, you're joined to me. He's mine because he's in my heart, and never, never will we part, just as the branch is to the vine. I'm joined to Christ.

I know he's mine, I haven't got the power. Haven't you? Haven't you? Christ is the power, and Christ, we're told, is in you. What an absolute slur, on the one who's in us.

Of course you can't, it's unexpected you to be able. The glove can't do anything of itself, but the hand inside the glove, and everything that is possible to the hand, is then possible to the glove in which the hand lives. I can't.

And then there's the next step. Step four is I can't. The fifth step is I won't.

I won't. And that's what Israel said. They said, we can't.

And then they slipped over and said, we won't. We won't. We'll go back to Egypt.

And when Caleb and Joshua counseled the mother wise, they regarded those men as their enemies, and they bade stonemen with stones. And that's what happens. It all goes on, and it hardens into the most deliberate rebellion.

It's ball of unbelief in these successive stages, and you come to say, I can't, and then you go on to say, I won't. I won't. If anybody counters you, otherwise you resist them, and you hate them for it.

I won't. Now this is unbelief. Now it was for this reason, the unbelief that eventuated right into this absolute rebellion, for which God excluded them.

If you turn to Hebrews 3, you'll have it mentioned there. Hebrews 3, verse 19. So we see that they could not enter in, listen, because of unbelief.

Now this word, unbelief, in the New Testament is a very, very dark word. In other places, the same Greek word translated unbelief is translated disobedience. If you like, you can, you can put your finger in Hebrews 3, we'll finish that for the moment.

Turn to Ephesians 2 again, and you will see the same word in the Greek there translated unbelief, in Ephesians translated disobedience. Ephesians 2, verse 2, wherein in time past he walked according to the course of this world, etc., etc., the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience. It's exactly the same word, I hope.

Rather, Arthur will check on me, I haven't got a concordance with me here, but as a result of looking up in the past, I think I put it right. Unbelief in Hebrews 3 and disobedience in Ephesians 2 is the same. Now listen, in God's vocabulary, the opposite to faith is not doubt, it's something much worse, much more palpable, it's disobedience.

There's nothing between the two. If you're not believing, you are disobeying. That very act of not believing is itself an act of disobedience.

You are commanded to believe on the Lord Jesus. This is his command, that they believe on him, whom God has sent, not only for salvation, but for everything else. You are commanded to believe, and if you're not, you're disobeying, but more than that.

That failure to believe, as here, so with us, will embark us on courses of resistance to the purpose of God. It'll begin by making us say, I can't, and you'll get so scared and so unwilling, you'll say, I won't. I say again, the opposite to faith is something dark and deeply palpable, disobedience, and I've got to deal with my failures in faith as the sin of disobedience.

They have that all built into it, into the meaning. And here they are saying, I won't. And do you know what the true facts of the case were? The inhabitants of Canaan had conceded victory to Israel ever since they heard they'd come through the Red Sea.

Caleb and Joshua were dead right. Their defences had departed from them. They were ready to be red-footed.

Now that is proved by the fact that when they sent later those two men into Jericho, and they talked to Rahab the harlot, you listen to what she says, turn a book or two over to Joshua, and it's chapter six, and

those two spies go into Jericho, and they are entertained by that woman, and this is what she says. Let me find the verse for you. Perhaps you could find it for me.

The chapter where the spies go in. That's it, thank you. Now this is what Rahab says, for we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did unto those two kings of the Amorites on the other side of Jordan, and as soon as we'd heard these things our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any of us, for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath.

Do you know Rahab believed in Jehovah more than Jehovah's people did. He said as soon as we heard, we knew we were finished. They had conceded victory to Israel.

They were defeated foes, and here is Israel scared and panicked, before foes whose defence, did they but know it, had departed from them, and they could know it. Why Jehovah said, I have given you this land, I will go before you, I will fight your battles for you, but they didn't believe it. It was a literal fact.

And though there would appear, be a sort of appearance of battle in Israel, in Canaan, as they went forward, the issue in each case was death and doubt. And you know my dear friends, you've turned away, I've turned away from perhaps some wonderful sphere of service, or for some precious course, some path he had for us, because I saw giants, and I was a grasshopper in their sight, and I said I couldn't able, I wasn't able, when all the time, Jesus has defeated the whole lot of them. Back of every obstacle is Satan.

But at Calvary, the empty tomb, Jesus has won the victory over every foe. A hymn says, that great victory, or death and sin and woe, that needs no second fight, and leaves no second fight. We are said to be raised together with Christ, and made to sit with him in heavenly places, far above all principalities and powers.

As we saw the other day, and it says, and he has raised him and you from the dead, and set him and you in heavenly places, far above all the forces of Satan. My friend, if you've got Jesus, you share his position. They're under his feet, and because you're joined to him, they're under yours too.

But the devil's great thing is to obscure that fact. To make you regard yourself as Jesus one person, and you another. To obscure this blessed union with the one who's already won the victory.

And you say, I can't. And then you go on to say, I won't. And you've missed it, missed some blessed thing, some triumph, and you withdraw.

I haven't got the strength. Who said you have to have the strength? You'll only prove his when you're lost out on things which are beyond you. Now I said the other day, was it yesterday, about how they tempted God in the wilderness.

They tempted God to deal with them according to their unbelief. And I said too that mercifully, one can say that God resisted that temptation. This is the one case when he didn't.

He said, I'm going to deal with you according to your unbelief. And you're going to never see that land. But your children whom you said would be a prey, they shall go in.

And that people wandered all those years until bit by bit that whole generation had died out. My dear friends, there is a great discipline of God. He means what he says.

And there are times when he says, all right, because of your unbelief, which was really disobedience and rebellion, you shan't. You shan't. And you are out into the wilderness.

And you can stay there for years, missing it, missing it, missing it, missing it. So can I. But as I said, with this great God of ours, failure is never final. And it is never too late to repent.

Now you see, that doesn't come in the story. I think it's built into the story. As I've looked through the whole history of Israel in the wilderness, as they sinned, and then they were chastened, and their numbers were thinned, I don't see they ever repented.

Except over the last case of murmuring, when the serpents were sent amongst them, and when at last they did repent. And their leaders came to Moses and said, we have sinned. And I note that that was the last case of their murmuring recorded.

I note from that time, there was a new chapter. Oh, there were difficulties and they went astray somewhat. But that was the beginning of their real onward march into the promised land.

I think I'm right in saying, they never repented. They did wrong, they murmured, they did those other things. Many of their people died.

They never repented. Did they repent over the case of the golden calf? There were some tears. I don't think there was real repentance even there.

They were rather like schoolboys, who when they do wrong are punished. They may put something in their trousers, exercise book. We found that shabby leather was about the best.

And you'd bend over and you'd take it. I don't know whether it's done these days. I got through my exams because I was taught with a book in one hand and a stick in the other.

And homework had to be done. It kept us moving. And I think these Israelites were very much like schoolboys.

They're tough, they're brave, and they don't necessarily complain of the injustice. It isn't unjust, but they just take it. I know they deserved it and that's over and then they go on.

The schoolboys don't repent. I suppose they think, well this is punishment, it isn't meant for repentance. I'm not sure.

I think nothing would please a master more than if as a result of beating a boy, that boy came back and said, sir, I never should have done that. I tell you that man said, do you know, beating has really achieved its real object. I believe that would, he would like it to have that object, it doesn't often have it.

Now with God's chastenings, that is his object. They're not punitive. Save that last one, that last plague, that last final one, all of them are restorative.

They were designed to bring them to repentance. But they didn't see it and they never repented. And whereas there was alleviation of the chastening, grace has never really revealed to them as God would have it.

Except that last one, when there was that wonderful revelation of the brazen serpent. Here they did not repent. I know they did say, oh we've sinned, all right, we'll go out.

But it's quite obvious that that wasn't genuine, otherwise God would have accepted it. He said, you don't go out. If you do, you'll be discomfited.

Your real attitude was that which was expressed before. Why didn't they repent? Because they hadn't really got to know the God with whom they were dealing. Now it seems to me that in the Old Testament, Israel is given the knowledge of God that no other nation has.

Their God is shown to be utterly different. First, they slowly made aware that their God, unlike the tribal deities around them, was the Sovereign God. He was the God of these little temple gods, the God who created them.

And they slowly came to know that. Then they came to know a second thing about their God. It adorned them at first.

It was so unlike the tribal deities around that this God of theirs was not only sovereign, but he was moral. Theirs was a moral God. We heard the words of that moral God in Micah last night.

What did the Lord require of them? They thought that like the tribal deities, it was enough just to get along with the ritual. The tribal deities had their ritual. Their God had his ritual.

That's all they thought there was to it. No, no. Much more important was that.

It was morality, doing justly, loving mercy, walking humbly. This was utterly different from any other God. And they didn't realize it at first.

Bit by bit, God had to educate them as to where he was. But there was a third thing about their God that was utterly different from any other tribal deity, and it was this. He was a gracious God.

Grace. That was something unknown in tribal deities. God had told that to Moses in that most melting passage, that most important passage, in Exodus chapter 34, when Moses said, Show me thy glory.

And God made a great revelation of his character to Moses. Exodus 34, verse 6, And the Lord passed by before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and mercy, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin. My friends, you've taken that, I've taken that too much for granted.

It was astonishing. Even deities who were merciful didn't forgive sin. They rept as their devotees thought, those that offended them.

They were all trying to educate them. But here's a God who's a sovereign God, a moral God who loves righteousness and hates iniquity, a God who's supreme, is a God who has grace for the guilty, mercy for the miserable, who delights, who delights, who gets satisfaction from forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and whose forgiveness does not only extend to the sin itself, but to all the disciplines of that sin on their occasion. And they were only dimly understanding that.

Oh, had the people known that that was the God with whom they had to do, I know what they would have done. They would have taken off their robes, they would have ripped their clothes, the whole nation would

be down on their faces, knowing that theirs was a God merciful, slow to anger. You know, this passage in Exodus 32 is basic.

It's quoted or alluded to some 15 times, I think, whenever Israel's in pickle, in trouble. Later, they know the God with whom they have to do, and they know it's never with him too late to repent. With him, failure is never final.

And grace knows how to recover all the damage that sin does. And although maybe we've wasted years, grace knows how to restore the years of the locusts of Eden. What evidences have we all not seen? As a result of things happening in this room and wherever the gospel's preached, it seems to me that where sin abounds, every time grace is ready, much more to abound, and you never have any cause to mourn.

There's going to be no vain regrets in heaven. You say, oh, if only I'd come to Christ sooner, look at the mess I've made. You know, although you came to him so late, or you repented so late, grace made something so wonderful out of the mess, that you've got nothing but praise and worship to the Lamb that sits upon the throne.

I want to close with just two verses that tell us that this is God. Jeremiah 18, verse 8. 18, verse 7. All this was waiting for Israel. At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up and to pull down and to destroy it? If that nation against whom I pronounce turn from their evil, that is, repent of it, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.

I know that was a blame for Israel. God always says, if you'll repent, I'll repent. To repent means to change your mind.

He says, if you'll change your mind about sin, I'll change my mind about this hand that's heavy on you. And although you may have missed the purpose of God, you've finally got another purpose up my sleeve, ready to come into operation, just as good as the first one. Indeed, sometimes even better, because God's got shorter time in which to work it out, but He does it.

What a wonderful God He is. When we repent, God repents. He changes His mind concerning the evil that He thought to do unto us.

Get that. It says it. The evil that I thought to do unto you.

What evil did not God think to do unto them, to overthrow them in the wilderness? But I believe, had they repented, God would have changed His mind. It would have been consistent with Exodus 34. It wasn't only stubbornness that didn't make them repent.

It was not seeing grace. That's why I don't repent. That's why I just take it like a schoolboy in Britain, I'm going to bear it.

I don't see the glorious possibilities of grace, good news for bad people. All I know is this. I couldn't be speaking to you now but for the fact, grace there is my every debt to pay, and a grace that not only forgives sin but unmesses the mess, that on classic situations I've made, I've missed on two occasions at least, the whole purpose of God for my life.

I said I can't, and I said I won't, and I wouldn't. But I repented. I don't know what the purpose is but this is, I'm very happy about this one.

And it was the same with you. And you know even the Gentiles in Nineveh, when they heard of the coming judgment, and it's very touching, they didn't have the full revelation that Israel had, but just listen to it, and don't turn to it because it's always difficult to find. The king took off his robes and he proclaimed a fast.

He said, let neither man nor beast be covered with sackcloth, let man and beast be covered with sackcloth and cry mightily unto God, yea, let every man turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and repent and turn away from his fierce anger that we perish not? He could only say who can tell but Israel should have known. And Israel later did know.

And there were always those in Israel who knew how to repent when the because they knew that theirs was a God merciful, gracious, slow to anger, ready to repent, ready to forgive, ready to recover. And so dear ones that you may feel well I missed it. Failure with this wonderful Jesus, whose expression of this great God is never final.

It's never, never too late to turn back the page to where things went wrong and repent there. That will have all the influence of the world on the presence. Grace will come in, a new life will come in, come in and God's power will begin to be known in doing what you and I just cannot.

Let us pray. Dear Lord Jesus, we thank thee for all the deep things we have learned, above all for this melting revelation of grace. What a God thou art.

What a surprise it must have been to Israel slowly to realize that this was their God. And oh we thank thee for this revelation completed and made final in the face of Jesus Christ. May we be a people who know how to repent.

May we do so in great confidence in a gracious God. We ask this in thy dear name. Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.

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