

## Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War



## *PATRIOTIC RECOLLECTIONS*

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### **The Desert and the Promised Land**

A sermon by

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And Caleb stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once and possess the land; for we are well able to overcome it. But the men that went up with him 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 people of Israel, saying, The land through which we have gone up to search it, is a land which eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it are of a 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 we had died in this wilderness! And wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt? And the Lord spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, How long shall I bear with this evil congregation, which murmur against me? I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel, which they murmur against me. Say unto them, As truly as I live, saith the Lord, as ye have spoken in mine ears, so will I do to you: Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against me, doubtless ye 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 ye said should be a prey, them will I bring in, and they shall know the land which ye have despised. NUMBERS, CHAPS. XIII-XIV.

The whole history of the cowardice of Israel on this occasion, and of God's dealings with them, is an illustration of His course in all history. His purposes must be accomplished. But He often permits men to say how long or how short shall be the preliminary struggle. It is thus far that men are permitted to work with Him. None the less must the purpose of God be fulfilled. If the fathers shrink from it in their youth, they have to fulfill it in their age; or, if they turn away cowards then, they do but leave it as a heritage of struggle, effort, victory for their children. No shrinking of men holds back finally the work which God must have done.

In this case of Moses and the children of Israel, the results involved, as we know, were of the first importance to the world. The establishment of Israel as an independent power, involved, as it has proved, the existence of the only altar where one God was worshipped rather than a thousand phantoms. It involved the maintenance of a religious system comparatively simple, pure and grand, and always growing simpler, purer, and grander. It involved the existence, in the very center of the movement, commerce and war of the world, of a little nation, related and connected with all nations, to be the medium of Divine truth to all. It involved the providential preparation of a fit cradle for the Son of God, when His time should come; and of a fit fulcrum for His lever, when He should move the world. And, as it has proved, everything of worth and of beauty which has come to the world from His treasury of blessing, and every thing which is yet to come, depends on that desert march of Israel, - carrying the pure blood of Asia, and its pure faith, with the intellectual life of Egypt, and the results of its civilization, into the little center whence Israel was to drive out the beastly Canaanite, and take up his possession. If Israel succeeded, light was to triumph over darkness, not only for that generation, but for all time. So long as Israel shrank, darkness was to triumph over light, and this not for that time only, but indefinitely.

Such was the issue, as the Almighty saw it, when the twelve Jewish spies went up into Canaan and returned with their narration. The Israelites had left Egypt the year before, (it was in the middle of April that they left it,) in great exultation. Of a sudden they had defied their task-masters of the last fifty years, and formed themselves a nation. Of a sudden it proved that six hundred thousand bricklayers and brick-makers, artisans, shepherds, became six hundred thousand soldiers, when they had a good cause and the Lord for a leader. Their time of triumph lasted as the year went by, and until the second year came in. It was in the second year of this new military and independent life, it was when the power of Egypt was really crushed, that the faintness of Israel came also. They had made a beginning, but they did not see the end. They had left the old, but they had not come into the new. Such was their condition when Moses sent forward these twelve men to report on the future, and on the way to it. These twelve men returned agreeing that the land was good, but ten of them were faint hearted, and talked of giants and armies and fortresses, and said, "we cannot take it;" and on their report, this homesick people were at once discouraged. "They lifted up their voice and cried. They wept that night, they murmured against Moses and against Aaron, and said, would God that we had died in the land of Egypt; wherefore hath the Lord brought us into this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should 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." That was the Peace Policy of those times. For one wretched and eventful day, it controlled the popular counsels of the people of Israel.

The value of the history for us is, that in circumstances very similar we can follow out the tale and see what came of that fatal policy. That people could not see it. They could not understand that the destinies of a world hinged on their faith and courage in that hour. This was what followed. Moses and Aaron were directed to accede to the hasty demand of the mutinous people. And when, only the next day, the people arose from their cowardice and shifted back from their mutiny, they were taught that no dependence could be placed on such as they. To work the works of God, God needs men as steady in their little way as He is in His great way; as constant, as fearless, as unswerving. His children, if they are to work with Him must be indifferent to apparent failure, as the sun in His heavens is indifferent to apparent eclipse. These men who had come out of Egypt had said they did not choose to go into Canaan. Then they should not go in. There should be no changing of minds. But that was all they could decide. Their children should go in; or, the children of their children, if they flinched. And for these cowards, all that they gained by their cowardice should be a desert life. They should stray to and fro for forty years, without a country and without a home, because, at the appointed moment, they had refused to take the country and the home their God had provided.

And this was just what happened. Their mad dream of returning to Egypt vanished, of course, when the morning came. Revolutions never go backwards, cannot go backwards. This people might have gone forward into a land flowing with milk and honey. They refused to do that. They must then stay in the wilderness. With the sky for the roof, and the stones for their bed, with the manna which they grew to hate so,

for their only food, with the scorpions and serpents for their punishment, with the Bedouins of Bashan, and Ammon, and Amalek for their daily enemies and their nightly robbers; with these surroundings, it is desert marches and years of wretchedness and unbroken war, which they choose in their cowardice on that mad day when they shrink from the one final effort which the Lord demands; will not array themselves every man, and march as one host resistless into Canaan.

Forty years of such wretchedness passed, and their children were wiser than their fathers. A race grew up of men who knew not Egypt nor its flesh-pots; whose hearts were made bold by war; whose feet were hardened by desert marches, and whose souls were alive to the promises of God. The policy of cowardice died out; or I should rather say, the hallucination of irresolution died out. A race of men came in, afraid of nobody but God, and willing to put through what they began upon. That race of men crossed Jordan, drove out the human beasts who lived there, established in their place, God's kingdom as far as they knew what it was, and thus was the first line written of the introduction to the history of the perfect world.

I do not suggest this parallel between that familiar history, and our history of today, as if there were anything singular in the close similarity of the two cases. There is nothing singular about it. Each of them springs even in its details, from essential principles of human nature which have become fundamental principles in history, and I could select a hundred parallels where I do select two. For, wherever God has a great design to accomplish, it is easy at the outset to excite for it men's enthusiasm; - men being God's children. This enthusiasm will be unanimous, if the issues are simple and clearly seen. The danger and the difficulty are not at the beginning, as the French proverb falsely supposes, but they come when the reaction comes. The reaction comes as soon as the earthly elements in man can get a chance to assert themselves. When men's laziness begins to speak, or their old habits, or their avarice, or their hunger or thirst, then is the danger of the reaction; of the cry "Who is this Moses?" and "Why did we not stay in Egypt?" The writers of history recognize this reaction after enthusiasm, as something which is as certain as headache after intoxication. And this principle gives to us such phenomena in history as the cowardice of the Israelites related here, as the coronation of Augustus after the murder of Julius Caesar, as the welcome of Charles II by the nation which had driven him from England. The story of all of them is written alike in these ancient books of Moses.

But in our case, the parallel, thank God! has not come so far. We have only reached the moment when we can say that it never shall come. That moment we have reached. It is undoubtedly a moment more critical than any of the last two years. But it is in proportion more enlivening and more glorious. It is the moment in which we are asked whether we will now put through God's great purposes in this affair, or whether we had rather stay in a desert for some forty years and leave the accomplishment of his designs to our children.

These have been the rapid stages of this history. The cannon-shot of Sumter gave us the great celebration of Passover with which it began. With that we broke loose from the silken and the iron chains, which, for more than a generation, had held us in vassalage to rulers who did not know Joseph. They did not know us at all; we scarcely knew ourselves. In that passion for peace which makes a part of a high Christian civilization, we had attempted every conciliation, which might keep the peace between us and them. So we did not dream how strong we were. But that great Passover-day came, a day to be remembered as the Easter-day of our political resurrection. And the nation which they had thought dead was alive again. Its shepherds and its bricklayers, artisans as we called them yesterday, proved to be armed men; and God Almighty revealed himself, now in cloud and now in fire, as our leader into the promised land of a higher social life. It is a life which is to compare with that weary past, of eighty years of concession, compromise, anxiety and fear, as the land flowing with milk and honey compared with this tame Goshen of the flocks of Israel. The pillar of cloud and of fire leads the way for us to an established constitutional system in which every man shall be born free; in which the decision of the majority shall never be contested; in which every man shall have a voice if he have only courage to bear arms; in which an equal chance for promotion shall be given to each child of God, of whatever birth, and in which the inequalities of life shall not spring from law or accident, but be the earthly insignia of the distinctions of capacity with which the Creator has marked His every child.

There never has been such a nation till now. But such a nation God now means that there shall be. That is the Promised Land, flowing with such milk and such honey, to which now in cloud and now in fire He is guiding us. And we have come to the moment, that inevitable moment of the second year, when He asks us whether we choose to enter it now.

Here is the critical point for us of the parallel between our history, and all similar epochs in all time. We are not asked whether we would like to go back into the past; into 1853, or 1843, or 1823. God never asks that question. He never gives that privilege. There is no more Egypt for us, even if we wanted it. We are asked, simply, whether we will go now into the promised land, by one vigorous effort, which will need money, labor, hard marches, night watches and bitter tears; or whether we will take instead a desert life, with its scorpions and serpents, its starvations and its mutinies, its attacks from without, and its heartburnings within; a life which shall train our children for the heritage which we are too timid, too softhearted, too soft-handed to take for our own?

First - will we choose the Promised Land and make freely the sacrifices it requires, or will we linger in the desert longer?

The issue is not an issue between war and peace. It is an issue between a short war against an enemy, and a perpetual war against no man knows how many enemies. No man in his senses supposes, that our receding from this contest of today would give us peace for an hour. We might surrender our capitol, we might abandon our fleets, we might give up our arms. But what we should find the next day would not be peace. For thirty states, like these states, there is no peace except under a strong constitution enforced upon their people. Witness ancient Greece, witness the British Heptarchy, witness South America today. Our eighty years of peace among ourselves, to which, of course, we look back so fondly, are the exception and not the rule in the affairs of such states. It is an exception induced by the success, the preternatural and Divine success of the Constitution; an exception to be renewed and forever when that constitution is restored with the improvements which this crisis demands. But the general rule, among such states as all history teaches us, is War, pitiless war. It is war where your allies of today are your enemies tomorrow. Bavaria and Prussia fight against Austria one week, and the next week Bavaria joins Austria and fights against Prussia. The history of Israel describes it for us precisely; and I did not strain my metaphor, when I spoke of serpents and guiding scorpions within, and Amalekites, and Bashanites and other Bedouins of the desert without, as sucking out the life-blood of states thus tumbled together. The six years which passed here between 1783 and 1789 tell the story as well. Insurrection within, - the state of Massachusetts unable to raise 10,000 hard dollars to suppress an armed riot, which was threatening her courts, and offering to hang her judges! Mutual discord, - every state line the haunt of smugglers destroying the petty revenue! Insult from savages, - the scalping knife unchecked over the whole frontier! Insult from Europe, - a line of English forts running through the wilderness, their garrisons watches held there in face of treaty! Such are little illustrations of the scorpions and the servants, to whose care you commend yourselves, the moment it is proved that there is no constitution strong enough to hold these states together.

Will you live in that desert? this is the question of the Lord; or will you make the sacrifice of the hour, whatever it may be, and march into the Promised Land? Somebody must march there! That is the only thing certain. Somebody will! The question is whether it shall be you or your children? That is for YOU to say - that is the part of the transaction, which in this mysterious interworking of God and man, God leaves in your hands. But, as God lives, that future is to be accomplished by someone. God does not lay the foundations of his cathedrals and span their gigantic arches, and lift their rows of columns, and call from every land the wood and the iron, the silver and the gold, with which he is to crown their beauty and make them monuments to an admiring world, - God does not make all this preparation for His work and then leave it all forgotten and neglect to build the dome.

God has created here a country of lakes and rivers, and gulfs and bays, of mountain ranges, parting oceans, and of valleys uniting them, which, when it first rose from the subsiding seas, purpled, wet, and sedgy, the

angels saw was one land and could not be made two. God has planted in this land the chosen races of His old world, just in the crisis moments of their history. He sent His Huguenots fresh from persecution. He sent His Englishmen from talk with Eliot and Hampden. God planted here His religion of the purest, and gave its stream the chance to run purer and clearer. God created here a Government on a new idea; an idea for which Europe gave no pattern, and of which to this hour Europe cannot understand the law. God has done all this as His preparation for the future. Thus he has brought together His materials. He has built His foundation arches, and set up His columns, and now he is ready to hang His dome in the skies. It is to be brilliant with silver within, and without it is to blaze with gold. He is going to complete here His idea of a Christian nation, in which His every child shall have right and opportunity to live to His glory, to His highest glory, - the most utter right, and the fullest opportunity. No child of His, born here, is to be forced to be content with the condition to which he is born. Each child is to be promoted to the height of his capacity, and his aspirations. The accident of wealth in one generation is not to influence, by a hair's breadth, the fortunes of the next; nor the accidents of birthplace, nor the accidents of family. An open field, a fair chance, the best culture which art can contrive, and love can compel, are to be open to the backwoodsman of the wilderness in Maine, to the baby of the beggar in crowded Boston, to the first families in Virginia, and to her blackest child. God means to show that there can be a truly catholic church, thus educating universally His every child, and that there can be a truly catholic nation, loved with the love of all its citizens, wise with the wit of all, and strong with their strength. He means to show thus the highest civilization, waiting on the triumphs of mutual confidence in government, and of universal love.

It is to that Promised Land, that for two centuries and a half His finger has been pointing. The promise is more distinct than that made to Israel; for here he has spoken constantly to millions, while there he spoke but once or twice, and to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, and to Moses alone. It is certain that these centuries are flowing into that future, as that in the rapids above Niagara, the waters are flowing to the falls. Still, there, you see a little eddy working back for a minute against the stream, and here, it is possible for us to stay out in the desert a year or two, or perhaps twenty years. It may even be possible for us to leave to our children the legacy of marching into His kingdom.

Possible! but we are not such cowards or such fools! Almost the first word I heard spoken in the rebellion struck the keynote on which I hope we may ring together, till it is done. The man who had most to risk in it, of all men whom I know, said to me, "I do not choose to have my son grow up to ask me why we left the settling of this thing to his time." We have something better to do with out forty years of life than these beggardly marches in the desert. We are as good men as our sons will be, and we can gird up our own loins and shoulder our own muskets, and fight today's giants, and storm today's fortresses, and enter, without loitering, into our own Promised Land.

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