

in a majestic, unseen world around us, where the purposes are shaped and the forces quickened which rule this earth? In some startling event of war or pestilence or personal distress, men believe for a moment that there is a God, but the wonder passes, and they go back to their merchandise, their politics, their gold, saying, These be thy gods. Worldliness seems less ridiculous than bowing to a graven image, but it is just as faithless, only less honest in its idolatry.

II. *The Punishment.* Idolatry may be delightful and natural. But God condemns it. Out from the cloud Moses comes striding down the mount into the midst of the revelry, his eyes hot and blazing with holy wrath. The tables written with the writing of God he casts out of his hands and breaks before the people, as they had broken the covenant. The calf he flings into the fire, and grinding the gold to dust strews it upon the water, as if to make them taste the bitterness of their sin. At the gate of the camp he calls, Who is on Jehovah's side let him come unto me. His own tribe, the sons of Levi, come over to him, and are sent sword in hand to slay even companions and brothers, for the righteousness of God is more sacred than human ties. The record does not tell whether those slain were known to the Levites as leaders in the crime, or represented the whole nation, as a mutinous army is sometimes decimated instead of being wholly destroyed. If the latter was the case, the penalty was comparatively light for only three thousand perished for the sin of six hundred thousand. We cannot wonder at the promptness or the severity of the punishment. It was necessary. The people could never have any true idea of God or be faithful in his service, if allowed to believe him absent because out of sight or not working wonders. Religion, manhood, decency, were impossible, if they were suffered to think that a lustful orgy was fit worship for Deity. What would have become of them, what of the lesson of divine unity and holiness which they were to teach the ages, if the sin was not rebuked? This was no time for gentle remonstrances and kind wishes, but for sharp chastisement.

They were to find that the unseen Jehovah had a very terrible part in their life; that this Moses, as for whom they wot not what was become of him, was single-handed, mightier than the nation, because God and their consciences were with him. So did the Lord vindicate himself and his prophets through all the peoples' history; so did the stone which the builders rejected fall on and crush them when Jerusalem was destroyed. So have unbelieving men and unbelieving nations been made to see that there is a God; that his laws are holy and his wrath fearful. Mercy cannot let sin go free. Until all evil is done away, the God who is love must also be a consuming fire.

III. *The Reconciliation.* Immediately after this vindication of the Divine honor and the repentance of the people, Moses undertook to recover for them Jehovah's favor. Again he ascended into the mount. Forty days and forty nights, he tells them later, (Deut. 9: 18,) he prayed, for the Lord was wroth against them and against Aaron, to destroy them. This was the greatest hour in Moses' life. It was noble for him to stand out, one man against a nation; it was nobler to plead their cause with an offended God; but grandest of all was his self-forgetfulness. The Lord had said in the simple and bold language of the text, Let me alone that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation. No offer could have been more splendid. To accept it would avenge Moses for all he had suffered from the people, and save from certain distress in the future; would display divine holiness, and be a perpetual warning to sinners. The covenant with the patriarchs would be fulfilled, yet his name stand above theirs as the real father of the nation. Was it not right, best, to take the offer? But the man had not forsaken the riches of Egypt for this. As he will not go forward without the divine presence, neither will he be made great without the people. Hope, ambition, life, heaven itself he almost says, all that God can do for him is bound up with their fate. If thou wilt forgive their sin—he begins trembling; then his words break down at the possibility of rejection, and he cries out, "And