

LIMITING GOD

Psalm 78:41

When the children of Israel reviewed the history of their country, they found much which filled them with gratitude to God. And the writer of this Psalm describes it in glowing terms. God had led them out of the land of Egypt. He had brought them into the promised land, but they had often been rebellious and disobedient children, and had done that which was right in their own eyes rather than in the eyes of God. The writer of this Psalm does not hesitate to point out this fact to them. He charged them with four grievous sins--provoking, grieving, tempting and limiting the Holy One of Israel.

There is an interesting story about the long war between Israel and Syria. The Syrians, stronger than the Israelites in numbers, in resources and in leadership, were again and again defeated. They could not understand it. So they took counsel and came to the conclusion that their reverses were due to the limitation of their idols. They said: "Their gods are gods of the hills; therefore they are stronger than we; but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they." When the Syrians were fighting Israel they were always beaten on the hills, from which they gathered that the God of Israel was a God of the hills and not of the valleys. It is not strange that they should have come to think thus of God. Palestine was a land of hills. Its cities and shrines were all associated with the hills. Even the Hebrews themselves had come to look upon the Lord as somehow connected with the mountains. David said, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." If the Hebrews could be enticed away from God's jurisdiction in the hills, the Syrians thought they could conquer them.

I. The Possibility Of Limiting God.

Isn't it a daring word which the Psalmist uses to describe the sin of these people, who had experienced the goodness of God as they journeyed through the wilderness? "They limited the Holy One of Israel." It is something mysterious and awful that man has the power to limit God. When we think of the greatness and power of God, it almost seems impossible that man could say to Him, "Thus far, but no farther." It is beyond human comprehension to realize that man has the power to circumscribe the activities of God in his life. We are amazed indeed when we are reminded as we are here in this old-time phrase, that the creature can circumvent the operations of the Creator; that man can draw a boundary line and then say to his Maker, "Thou shalt not pass over."

Undoubtedly man can limit God. Otherwise, he would be a mere machine and not a man; he would have no more volition than a tree or a bird. If man can say "Yes" to God, he must be able to say "No." And he can, and he does. God's Word states as much, as is proven by this Psalm. God stood ready to bless Israel, but she would have none of His counsel. Instead, she set at nought all of His reproof. God's Word, reason, and experience assert the possibility of man's limiting God.

When we consider the material and physical realms, we realize that the power of God is unlimited. Job learned that, and that was why he cried, "I know that Thou canst do everything." But when we come to the moral and spiritual realms, we realize that the power of God is conditional. Thus it was that God was limited by His people.

Of course, there is no limit to what God is able to do for people if He is only permitted to have undivided sway. But Israel set a limit to the power of God. "Can God?" That is one of the striking questions within this Psalm. And these people were limiting the very God who desired to help them as they journeyed through the wilderness. He could have taken that great host directly into the promised land, but they limited Him and had to spend forty years in the wilderness and die there. Only Caleb and Joshua, because of their unwillingness to limit God, were allowed to enter.

Moses limited God. When coming out of Egypt Israel arrived at the Red Sea and were cooped up between the Egyptian hosts and the sea, Moses spent his time calling to God. He did not trust that the sea would open up. God said, "Why cry? Go forward!" God

wanted him not only to ask, but also to act. Trust and go on! Do, and thou shalt know! As your trusting feet touch the waters, the waters will separate. As you meet the obstacles they will vanish. Faith and obedience will remove all obstacles.

Naaman limited God by his unbelief and pride. "Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage." II Kings 5:12. He wanted to be healed in his own way. Just like millions of people today! Luckily, Naaman had some believing servants who got him to go down to the Jordan waters to cool off his rebellious wrath, as well as to heal his leprosy.

Jonah limited God by his prejudice and rebellion. He refused to go and preach repentance and salvation to a heathen city because he was reluctant to believe that God's love and mercy could go out beyond the bounds of his own race. However, God put Jonah into such an uncomfortable position that he reluctantly came around to God's point of view. God's love and power and pity were not manifested to Nineveh alone, but they proved to all that He is the God of another chance, because he let Jonah try again. Let us not limit God to saving only our friends and people of our own nationality, but let us believe that He can save even to the uttermost.

This same selfish thought obsessed the mind of Peter as he lay down to sleep on the house-top in Joppa. But there God sent him a vision, and when he arose he said, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him." God is not the God of the hills alone. His love reaches out to the lowest valleys of human life and experience.

People in Christ's own home town limited Him. He could not do many mighty works there "because of their unbelief." When He visited His old home He had numerous blessings for His relatives and friends. His heart was full of love for them and His hands were full of gifts for them, but they threw them back into His face by their doubt and suspicion. But, after all, His home town people were not different from many of us. He has gifts for all of us, but we do not have faith enough to take them.

We are prone to limit God in regard to the compass of His power. When Jairus' daughter died, the servants went hurrying through the streets to Jairus. And when they found him, they cried: "Sir, she is dead. There is no use troubling Jesus any further." What they meant was that so long as she was living there always was the hope that He might cure her. Now that she was dead, they felt there was no hope. They limited the power of Christ. They thought there were certain things beyond Him.

It is a weakness of many today to limit God to certain spheres of life. Many think of Him as the God of the Lord's Day, but not of the week day; of the church, but not of the office, shop or factory; of spiritual matters, but not of business or social life.

II. The Practice Of Limiting God.

In what ways do people limit God?

1. By doubt.

(1) Doubting His power to save.

Some think there are those beyond His ability to save.

(2) Doubting His willingness to save.

Some think there are those who have gone so far and so long in sin that He will not save them. They doubt His love. Doubt is constantly taking the circumference of God with the compasses of men, and measuring His movements by earthly mathematics, and measuring His force by our mechanics.

(3) Doubting His faithfulness to us.

2. By distrust.

By our distrust and fear we have said in effect that His ear is heavy and cannot

hear, and His arm is shortened and cannot save. In our trials we have sometimes done this. We have looked upon our troubles and have seen them roll like waves; we have hearkened unto our fears and they have howled in our ears like tempestuous winds, and we have concluded that our bark would be shipwrecked. Thus we have judged the omnipotence of God to be finite; we have said that our troubles are greater than His power, and that our woes are more terrible than His might. "O thou of little faith!" In the light of His grace, power and faithfulness, how can we distrust Him?

3. By dictation.

Some insist too much upon definite blessings being given. They ask for some specific blessing, but they limit God as to the time, manner or means. When the blessing comes in a different form from the one for which they asked, then they complain about it. We dictate to God when we say, "Not Thy will, but mine be done."

4. By disobedience.

(1) Lack of love.

God is limited by the absence of love among His believing people. Lovelessness among professing Christians is to be deplored. Loveless hearts can never produce soul-winners. A baptism of divine love is greatly needed today. "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye love one another." One of the greatest stumbling-blocks in Christian service is the presence and manifestation of jealousy. God will never use a jealous worker, but He will use a zealous one.

(2) Lack of prayer.

Shallow and selfish prayers restrict Him. We often limit God by our neglect of prayer. There are some things which God leaves to our prayers, so, if we do not pray, they will not take place. Things that might have been done will not be accomplished because of our failure to pray. Too, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." James 4:3.

John Knox lived in Edinburgh, Scotland. One day he was invited to the house of a friend, and after a while they missed him from the company which had gathered. They sought for him and found him in the garden with his face buried in his hands, and in deep agony of soul, praying, "O God, give me Scotland or I die." And God heard his prayer. God was able to do something through a man like that, and Scotland has never lost the divine impact brought to bear upon it through the intercession of John Knox. No wonder that Bloody Mary said she feared the prayers of John Knox more than an army of soldiers.

(3) Lack of separation.

God is often limited in His operations by the lack of separation in the lives of His own. Oh, how worldliness hinders God from revealing His power! God cannot do much with a worldly-minded Christian. Such a person stands in the way of those whom God would bless. Separation from the world spells power for God.

(4) Lack of concern for the lost.

Our Lord wants us to prove the sincerity of our love for Him by witnessing to the lost about Him. Some will die without Christ unless we tell them about His power to save and introduce them to Him.