

Lessons from the Book of Numbers

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[The Consecration and Rebellion of the Levites](#)

Reading: Numbers 7:84–88; 16:36–40; 8:1–4; 17:6–8; Jude 11; Hebrews 12:3

The book of Numbers is the story of Israel's journey across the wilderness from the land of Egypt until they arrived at their great inheritance. It was a long and eventful journey, and we Christians cannot help thinking of ourselves because it is common knowledge that we too are on a journey. Redeemed by the grace of God and by the blood of Christ, we are on a journey through life to an inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away. So it is easy for us to see the parallel between Israel's experience and ours.

I said that the book of Numbers is about the story of Israel's journey across the wilderness. It is in the most part: chapters 11–36 are indeed concerned with Israel's journey across the desert to their great inheritance; but the first ten chapters are not the journey itself—they are devoted to preparations for the journey. That is a very sensible arrangement. They were about to cross the Sinai Desert, and like any other desert it is not altogether a Sunday afternoon picnic. Even today, you wouldn't go in your slippers! It's not like going for a pleasant afternoon stroll. You'd need a little bit more preparation than that. Indeed, even if you were thinking of taking your jeep the authorities would still tell you to be sure you've got four-wheel drive, and you would have to give your name to the authorities so if you didn't turn up in forty-eight hours they could come and look for you. With all our sophisticated travel, some people still get lost in the Sinai Desert.

That reminds us that the journey we are on can be dangerous. But it's not all danger; there are a few oases here and there with palm trees and blue water. Now and again on the way home we are allowed to spend the odd month in an oasis. Thank God for all the oases that make life worth living—the nice warm sun and the beautiful water and the palm trees and the dates. I'd love to stay here forever, you say. Trouble is you can't, for the Christian life is a journey. Enjoy every bit of it you can, my dear young friend. There are some lovely things, but there are dangers. Friends I knew once journeyed with God's people, but I don't know where they are now. Wandering, lost, with a very big question mark as to whether they are true believers gone a-wandering, or whether they never were believers. No wonder then, if the journey can be so dangerous, that God spent ten whole chapters full of history preparing Israel for the dangers they would meet.

I'm not a grandfather, though I'm old enough to be one! I understand that this meeting was convened primarily for our younger Christians. If you're on your way to glory, do take God seriously and get hold of the provision he has made to get you across the wilderness and home safely. I remember when I was a nipper that it was a great treat for us to go to the

nearest seaside place, twelve miles away, on the 10.26 a.m. express train—as we thought it was! The trouble with mother was she would spend so much time doing the preparations. We were all fired up, ready to go at 7.30; but first she had to get the breakfast, and then make the lemonade, cook the buns, prepare the sandwiches, and just in case we fell in the sea and got wet, there were the towels! We used to stand around getting into mischief. It was so boring because we wanted to get going; but mother knew the dangers and perils of the seaside beach, and even when it was meant to be a holiday she felt it wise to spend some time on the preparations.

We should be wise to take God's preparations seriously, and in my four weeks with you I hope to take this angle upon the book. Each week we shall study one of the great preparations that God made, and I trust we shall see the sense of it when we look at what actually happened in the course of the wilderness. Then you will see it wasn't for nothing that God made them wait and prepare.

In our reading tonight we have had two views of God's altar. Before Israel started out on their journey God made them stand by the altar and watch the princes of the people come, laden with their gifts, as the altar was dedicated. They watched as those princes expressed their value of that altar. Someone may ask, 'why waste time with such a ritual, when there's a big and exciting journey in front of you?' It was meant to teach them lessons that they would sorely need when they got across that wilderness. They hadn't gone many miles when a vast rebellion broke out. God had to show his disapproval by two things: by opening the earth and swallowing up the tribe of Korah (16:32–33); and then taking the censers of the 250 apostates who had been consumed by fire (v. 35), and having them nailed on the altar, to remind Israel how seriously those men had gone wrong. So we have seen two views of the altar: one in the preparation, and one on the journey.

Tonight we shall be particularly interested in that part of Israel's nation called the Levites, so let me take a moment to tell you about the Levites and their duties. As the Israelites travelled across the Sinai Peninsula it was the Levites who had the responsibility for the transportation of the tabernacle and all the vessels of its ministry. Every morning when the camp moved, along came the Levites. When the priests had made the appropriate arrangements the Levites took the great altar, and with the bars upon their shoulders they heaved it steadily across the wilderness. They did the same thing with the heavy copper laver and with all the other sacred vessels, the boards, the coverings, and the skins. Day after day the Levites were responsible for transporting it across the Sinai Peninsula. What would have been the sense of making vast progress if, forty years later coming to the borders of the promised land, about to cross Jordan and go in, you were to find that you'd left God behind?

Believe me, it can happen. Men and women, redeemed by the blood of Christ, who started to journey toward God's heaven and ran well, somewhere and somehow they kind of left God behind. In the pressure of studies or business, by the sheer joys and sorrows of life, the worship of God got squeezed out of their lives. The things of God can take such a back seat that in the end they're left behind.

So God made provision for the Levites to see that these things weren't left behind. They had to be brought with them.

Here's an Israelite on the journey and he's fallen out with his brother. He goes to bed full of remorse: he's sinned against the Lord and against his brother and he wants to find forgiveness. So he comes to the priest to make an offering for his sin. Has anybody seen the altar? Oh, the Levites were playing football when the crowd moved and they left everything behind!

What about us? The great doctrines of our faith—the atonement, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, the intercession of Christ—they don't carry themselves, do they? What do I mean? Well, just pretend the impossible. Suppose one day a selective atom bomb came to Cloughfern; all the older brothers and sisters are taken home to glory all of a sudden and only you are left. Your next door neighbour who is not a believer comes to you, 'I need to find God,' she says. Could you explain to her the glorious fact of the atonement? You say, 'No I couldn't, but my elderly . . .', but he's gone to heaven. Could you explain how to be born again? Do you know what the intercessions of Christ are, how they function and why we need them? These doctrines don't exist in thin air; they are retained in the church as living people get hold of them and carry them. It requires a lot of devotion and hard work to know which way round the altar goes and that laver and what it does. I don't say it with a critical heart, but some churches have left the altar behind. You'll not hear the doctrine of the atonement preached nowadays. People profess to be Christians, and they've no idea of the great matter of regeneration or how it is effected. Why? Well they left it behind. The great fundamentals of the faith somehow get left behind. As you dear young folks travel from earth to glory across this dangerous desert land, God wants faithful men and women who shall be able to carry these things. As Paul said to Timothy:

And the things which you have heard from me among many witnesses, the same transmit to faithful men, who in their turn shall be able to teach others also. (2 Tim 2:2)

Transporting the tabernacle involved quite a lot of hard work and sweat. I suspect when it began, it was not a little romantic. It wasn't open to volunteers of course, but wouldn't you have volunteered to be a Levite? Those beautiful curtains and that incense altar, they were privileged to take it and they knew exactly where to put it. But when you've taken it down ten times and put it up ten times, would you still be thinking, yes it's marvellous? Wait until you've taken it down seventy-two times, and now you've got to put it up for the seventy-third time. We've done it all before—do we have to put it up every time? I mean, why can't we make do tonight? (You know—or perhaps you don't, it's a feeling that can come over you in middle age if you're not careful.) The sheer slog of carrying the great fundamentals of our doctrines is such a severe, rigorous duty.

God did not deceive the Levites. Before they started God made it very clear to them what was involved. He had the whole nation assemble together, and in their ritual they took the Levites and offered them as a wave offering before God—a living sacrifice to the Lord. The words of the New Testament from Paul, that great apostle and evangelist, ring in our ears:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. (Rom 12:1)

You'll scarce get through to the other end, and you certainly won't get through with credit, unless you are prepared to heed that exhortation and say, 'Be it hard work, enjoyable or difficult, here I am Lord, a living sacrifice.' It is difficult; as someone has said, living sacrifices are different from dead sacrifices. Dead sacrifices stay on the altar. Living sacrifices have the unfortunate habit of getting off again. So, just before the Levites presented themselves to God as a living sacrifice to do their arduous duties, God had them come and stand by the altar.

In your imagination stand along with me beside that altar. 'I thought we were meant to be on the journey', you say. Yes, so we are, but first let's take a minute. The journey will be rigorous, your duties unceasing. How will you sustain all the long years of the wilderness unless you listen to God's invitation and for a moment or two stand again by the altar?

There they stood, all solemn and expectant, with the sun glittering on the copper of the altar. Moses invites the princes of the tribes to come to the dedication of the altar. They bring their gifts and tell the nation how much they value the altar. I think some of the younger Levites must have looked with open mouths as they saw the beautiful and valuable things that they brought one after another. Large silver dishes, a mighty great ornamental golden spoon full of incense, bullocks and sheep and goats for the sacrifices. 'Where did you get all that gold and silver from?' one of the younger ones might ask. 'Why are you giving it away?' He was born since they came out of Egypt and wouldn't remember the bitter bondage when they were penniless slaves. 'We owe it to God, who redeemed us out of Egypt through the blood of the Passover lamb. Before we left, God had the Egyptians press this wealth upon us. By giving it away now, we acknowledge that we owe everything to the blood of the redeeming sacrifice.'

My dear young folks, will you not come with me to a bigger altar? Stand for just a moment by the cross of Christ. If I were to ask some of these senior Christians to tell you what the cross of Christ means to them they would all say the same thing:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.¹

They worship a Christ who loved them and redeemed them, in the sense that he redeemed them from the guilt of sin and one day he's going to redeem their bodies and make them like his glorious body (Phil 3:21).

It is by his perfect obedience unto death that any one of us is saved. His blood cleanses us from all sin. Stand by the altar, and as you think of the death of Jesus Christ, God's Son, for you, what would you give? If now his cross were erected, and you were asked to come and tell us what you would give, what would you say? 'I'd gladly give my heart, my soul, and all that I have', you say; 'but what I fear is that I can't keep it up.' God has already thought of that. When he had given those Levites a vision of that altar, then we read how he gave Moses a vision of the lampstand. I don't know how much the Levites understood about

¹ Isaac Watts, 'When I survey the wondrous cross' (1707).

its symbolism, but you are privileged to see things in it that they could not possibly have seen. You know the key to its symbolism is Christ our blessed Lord, and the Holy Spirit come down from heaven to glorify the Saviour. If the altar symbolises the wealth of his cross, that lovely golden lampstand symbolises how beautiful our blessed Lord is in his risen power. In him is every stage of life—life in the bud, life in the flower, and life in the fruit—he lives by the power of an endless life.

The lampstand had one trunk and six branches, and the branches could produce almonds just as the main trunk could. Because it was the trunk, they were in the trunk. Our blessed Lord is risen, and you are in him and his life in you. As spiritual Levites we haven't a hope of fulfilling the tasks that God will lay upon us, were it not for him who is risen in the power of an indefatigable life and never grows weary. He's in you, and is able to put forth the strength and beauty of his life through you. No wonder Paul prayed

that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, would give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him; having the eyes of your hearts being illuminated, to know what is the hope of his calling, what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what the exceeding greatness of his power towards us who believe, according to that working of the strength of his might. (Eph 1:17-19)

Does it sound all mystical to you and not very practical? If so, give God time to show you. Ask your elders, ask somebody what it means to have the living Christ in you. How else will you perform your duties all down the years of your journey home?

Let's see now what happened, as we come to the actual journey. We've been thinking of the vision of that altar that God gave to the Levites as well as to Israel, so that the Levites might willingly offer themselves as a living sacrifice to God. But it was among the Levites that a terrible rebellion took place. Korah, a Levite, was the ringleader. Helped on by other men from the tribe of Reuben, he rose up and rebelled against Moses and Aaron. I needn't tell you how serious it was. Moses was the one who came from God as Israel's prophet and apostle, Aaron was the high priest appointed by God. Korah's rebellion therefore was against both the apostle and the high priest of their profession. You may well ask, 'what's wrong with him?' Well, I suspect he hadn't been looking at the altar just recently. His charge to Moses and Aaron was as follows:

You take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the assembly of the Lord? (Num 16:3)

He was challenging the claims of Moses and Aaron to be apostle and high priest. 'We are all equal here, you no more than we are,' he said. 'We repudiate your claim. It's just you becoming arrogant and appropriating to yourself these astounding claims, Moses. You say that you come from God and that Aaron is the only one capable of entering before God for us as high priest. We are all holy—any one of us could be priest. You are constantly saying, "Thus said the Lord, thus said the Lord, thus said the Lord." It's all made up Moses. We can

say “Thus said the Lord” with equal authority as you. We’ve had enough of it. You don’t allow us to think for ourselves; this is nothing other than intellectual suicide.’

Is it a small thing that thou hast brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, but thou must needs make thyself also a prince over us? (Num 16:13)

‘We once lived in a land flowing with milk and honey; you’ve taken away all those innocent enjoyments from us and you haven’t brought us into your supposed paradise.’ That at least was true, because they were in the middle of the Sinai wilderness. ‘The whole thing doesn’t work’, they said. ‘You’re nothing but an old killjoy, Moses, with your Ten Commandments, narrow-minded laws, and all the rest of it.’ Eventually, when the earth opened and swallowed them up, the people said, ‘You have killed the people of the LORD’ (16:41). If they’d lived in our day they would have said they were just as good Christians as you are, and you’ve condemned them.

What happened there in the rebellion of Korah is not altogether an isolated event. It happened again centuries later when Jesus our blessed Lord, the apostle and high priest of our profession, came. The leaders of the Jewish nation who were priests and Levites—not so much the ordinary people—rose up and they contradicted the blessed Lord Jesus. As if that weren’t serious enough, years after Calvary the apostle Jude warns his fellow believers that there were certain people to be found in their churches who were guilty of the gainsaying of Korah (Jude 11).

If you haven’t come across it yet, you will. If you come across it without being forewarned, it can be a very bitter thing. There are those who rise up in the name of religion—sometimes in the name of the church and Christianity—and they deny the uniqueness of Jesus Christ our Lord. They deny his apostleship, his virgin birth, his high priesthood, his bodily resurrection and ascension. They say that these are exaggerated claims that he or subsequent Christians made.

I had a Jewish gentleman at lunch with me just the other day. Said he, ‘Why do you Christians always campaign against our institutions, our high priesthood? Your claims that Jesus is somehow special, the Son of God come down from heaven and gone back to heaven, you’ve made it up. If your Jesus taught it, then it was blasphemy—he took it upon himself.’

Some academics will tell you that if you’re going to believe the Christian message, you’ve got to commit intellectual suicide. Others are still to be heard saying you’re spoiling everybody’s fun. To follow Moses and Jesus is old fashioned stuff. ‘Where is this heaven that Jesus is supposed to have brought you to? You haven’t got it yet, have you? You’re ruining people’s lives, telling them to forego their pleasures here, and you don’t give them the pleasures that you promised in your gospel. Where are they? Where is this heaven?’

What do you say? What’s the evidence they’re wrong? The same criticism levelled against Moses and Aaron was levelled against our blessed Lord. ‘You take it upon yourselves’, said Korah. ‘You take too much upon yourself’, they said to Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews faces up to the criticism: ‘So Christ also did not glorify himself to become a high priest’ (Heb 5:5).

I took advantage of the argument to remind my Jewish friend that it wasn’t Christians that started it: ‘Your Old Testament says that Aaron’s priesthood would go and there would

come a priest after the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4). This is not something that Christians made up, or in that sense that Jesus of Nazareth made up, though it stood in his word: “Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:6). The pattern is in the Old Testament.’

Did he glorify himself? No he didn’t. Son though he was, he lived a life of perfect obedience and he allowed God to vindicate him:

Though he was a Son, yet learned obedience by the things which he suffered; And having been made perfect, he became unto all them that obey him the author of eternal salvation; Named of God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. (Heb 5:8–10)

Having come through all his tests and demonstrating his sinlessness, God exalted him by raising him from the dead. Our high priest did not take it upon himself. Let this ancient story help us to perceive once more what is involved in the cross of Jesus Christ our Lord. ‘Consider him who endured this great contradiction of sinners against himself’ (Heb 12:3 KJV)—such gainsaying as in the rebellion of Korah. When Korah sinned God told Moses to invite them to come with their censers, and as they came the earth opened and swallowed them up. Afterwards Moses was to tell Eleazar to take the censers of those men, beat them out into plates and nail them on the altar. They were to remain there as a testimony forever.

Come and stand by Calvary once more. What is its significance? Let me not be emotional for this is history. See what his cross says. It stands as the great exposure of the rebellion of the human heart, for the Jesus who died there rose from the dead—his deity and his claims vindicated by his resurrection.

Not only atheists and outlaws, but deeply religious people rebel against God’s incarnate Son. Thank God for all your brilliant perceptions and insights and philosophical discussions; but when God challenges you to come and stand by his Son, will you approach God on your own two feet? I’m not going to put out your philosophical arguments; I’m going to say to you, will you dare to come to God by your own way? When you’ve spun your last philosophical argument, the fact is that you are a mortal sinner like I am. If you come to God swinging your own censer, you’ll perish eternally.

Our problem is sin—dark rebellion of the human heart. It’s nothing less than a fallen race involved in a rebellion against God Almighty. It is true not merely of the man in the gutter; it’s true of Caiaphas in all his religious robes. Religion itself at the cross of Christ is a form of rebellion against God. We have no room to criticise our Jewish friends, either in the past or now, for we were just the same. How do I know Jesus Christ is true? See the wonder of it: consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners. Being God incarnate, how did he bring himself to put up with it? Why didn’t he screw us out, as a man will smash a little mosquito on a summer’s night because it has irritated him? Consider the amazing grace of it; he endured the rebellion of sinners against himself.

Then the story tells us that after the earth opened and swallowed them up God sent a plague among the people. Aaron, the very high priest whom Korah had denounced, took his censer and ran among the people to save them from the plague.

Christ endured our rebellion so that he might procure salvation for us. If people will not have Christ and his sacrifice and his intercession, there is nothing else but a certain fearful

looking for of judgment and fiery indignation that shall consume the adversaries (Heb 10:27). Christ has demonstrated this to be true by the fact that he's risen from the dead.

I'm not in heaven yet, and as a believer I have had to forego certain sinful things that the world counts pleasurable. Do you pity me? Korah said, 'You brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey' (Num 16:13), but he'd forgotten the other side of it, hadn't he? Egypt was a place of cruel bondage and serfdom. Thank God to be delivered from it.

Let me finally ask you to consider Aaron's rod with all its buds. Said God, 'I'll settle this forever and tell you who my high priest is. Lay up your rods in the tabernacle before me' (17:5). When they came in the morning Aaron's rod had budded and brought forth its almonds—the beauty of new life. So God will settle the question of Jesus Christ who endured the contradiction of sinners against himself and died at Calvary. He has entered in and I don't have to put out my eyes to believe him. I'll tell you why. When you've finished all your philosophy, which I do find it interesting—but when you're finished it all it still leaves me a sinner, and, what's more, a man journeying through life. I can see the beginnings of the end of the journey, you know, and what hope can you give me? As a human being going through a temporary world, living in a temporary universe that one day itself will come to an end, I want some solid hope. I want to know that there is a world out there, and how I can be sure of it. For if there isn't, then I'm just going round in circles getting nowhere, with no ultimate hope.

In Christ I have a Saviour who walked this earth, is risen from the dead, and he's already gone in! As sure as he's in that glorious eternity of God, he will bring me home at last. I have fellowship with him by God's Holy Spirit and the new and eternal life of God already within. He is the anchor that holds the rope that goes between me and the other shore where one day I shall be home at last.

Two views of the altar then. Looking upon the cross of Christ my Lord, may I at the beginning of the journey hear the call to duty and to work. Receiving the wealth of the cross of Christ, may I reply: 'Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small'. In the thick of the battle of life's journey, I give myself a view of that altar. In this godless, unbelieving world, how do we know Jesus Christ is true? God will point us once more to the death of Christ, and to his resurrection. He will bring us back ever and again to the cross of our Lord Jesus, to draw our strength, learn the very wisdom of God and the resources he has to bring us home to our eternal inheritance with our faith unbroken.

The Blessing of God

Reading: Numbers 6:22–27; 22:5–6, 12; 23:7–11, 18–20; 24:9; Ephesians 1:3–5

Last week we introduced ourselves to the study of some portions of the book of Numbers. We hazarded the guess that Numbers is one of the easier books of the Old Testament for us to interpret and to find practical lessons for our own good. It is the story of how Israel, being redeemed from bondage in Egypt, journeyed across the wilderness to their glorious inheritance that awaited them in the land of Canaan.

We immediately saw the connection of thought, because we too have been redeemed. We too have an inheritance, better than theirs, incorruptible and undefiled and that fades not away, reserved in heaven for us. We too have to journey from the one place to the other. We noticed secondly that the book is in two parts. The second part from chapter 11 onwards records the actual journeying of Israel, and some of the experiences that came their way in the course of that journey.

The first ten chapters, more than a quarter of the book, are devoted to the preparations that Israel had to make for that journey, and we saw at once the practical sense in that. Journeying across that particular wilderness in those days, and in some sense still today, could be a very dangerous thing. Granted that there were beautiful oases here and there, and now and again you would come across a caravan all laden with beautiful gifts and goods, yet other parts of that wilderness were wild indeed, and people could get lost and perish.

Our wilderness too is dangerous. Some of our travelling can be delightful and full of joy, tinged with the very glory that lies beyond, and God will give us as pleasant a time on the way home as he possibly can. Yet he tells us that the road can be difficult, and that we shall need to be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation that is ready to be revealed when the Lord Jesus comes (1 Pet 1:5).

When we looked at some of those preparations that Israel had to make, we were a little surprised. You can read about such practical things as ropes and carts and other such objects that would be very useful in crossing the Sinai Peninsula. Yet there were a lot of other things that at first sight didn't appear to be practical. They were the more spiritual things about the ritual of the tabernacle, and the worship, the praise, and the service of God.

One of the dangers and the tests of the journey would not be whether they'd remembered to bring enough grease to grease the wheels on the wagons; more dangerous was whether they might lose their faith in God as they came across the difficult parts of the journey. Losing their faith in God—in the whole enterprise and in the goal that lay before

them—and finding themselves in the wilderness going nowhere in particular, just going round in circles, lost. It can be a profoundly upsetting thing in middle life or before, when people who've set forth on the way to glory find they lose their grip upon their faith and wonder whether God's word is true—whether the Bible is God's word at all. Losing faith therein they find that life has become a wilderness with no particular goal, and they feel lost.

When we come to the actual journey, we notice time and time again how Israel discovered that the preparations God had made for his people weren't for nothing. God had foreseen their journey and all its eventualities, and in his wisdom had made them prepare the very things which, though they didn't see it at the time, would prove absolutely vital to keep them, and bring them to journey's end.

We saw therefore how God had them stage the dedication of the altar. Throughout the journey the Levites would be required to work diligently day after day, in hard and tedious work, to maintain the tabernacle services, and to carry the tabernacle with them. Before they began their journey and these tasks, God would prepare them to yield their bodies a living sacrifice. If they weren't prepared to do that, what would happen to them when they found the burden of their responsibilities along the journey? God called them to witness the dedication and the supreme worth of that altar, and its claim upon their lives.

It was no waste of time, but careful, divine wisdom that planned it so. As we discovered, they hadn't gone many miles into the wilderness when some of the Levites rebelled. Some of them came to utter disaster; the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up. The remainder had to be brought to stand once more beside the altar, as Moses and Aaron took up the burning censers, still smoking from the rebel Levites, beat them out into plates and put them on the altar as an everlasting memorial of what can happen in a wilderness.

Tonight we are to look at another provision that God made for his people, and we shall spend a while thinking about its implications, both for Israel and for us. Having thought about the preparation, we shall spend the rest of our time looking at the journey, to see once more the wisdom of God, why they needed that preparation, and what eventually it meant to them.

So we come to those delightful verses that are recorded at the end of chapter 6 of Numbers. God, so to speak, called his people aside and said, 'Put down your old grease cans and your oiling rags and let those wagons be for a minute. The journey will start quick enough; don't get too impatient to be on the move. Sit down a minute! Aaron', he says, 'you must learn how to bless my people in such a way that their hearts and imaginations will be engaged, and they will begin to sense what a glorious thing it is to be blessed by almighty God.' He was to it this way:

The LORD bless thee, and keep thee:

The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee:

The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. (vv. 24–26)

'The LORD bless thee': with that sense of my blessing on them that will induce in their hearts a tremendous sense of the security that they have in the living God.

'And keep thee': out there in the shimmering heat was a waste, howling wilderness, and an odd skeleton or two that the jackals had cleaned up and left, white in the sun. Fancy starting such a journey without the sense of the Lord's blessing in your heart, without the glorious sense of utter security through faith in the living God. Aaron, fill their hearts with a sense of security.

'The LORD make his face shine upon you': the people were Hebrews and God uses the sense of their language. Of course they knew that God didn't have a face with two eyes and a nose, but in his mercy he talks to them about his face. You know what it means, don't you, when you see that somebody's face has been a little bit dull, and then all of a sudden it lights up! You know ladies, when you're trying to get your husband to do the garden and he doesn't want to and he looks a little bit glum. Then you give him a box of his favourite mints or something, his face lights up, and you've scored a point there!

What a thing it is, to stand before almighty God and watch the face of God light up with pleasure. *'The LORD make his face shine upon you, and be gracious unto you'*—a sense of the superlative grace of almighty God. If only God's face shone towards me, how wealthy I should be. It wouldn't matter if I lived in an old tent in a barren wilderness with little but grains of sand round me. Let me see the face of God shine towards me, and I'm wealthy.

'The LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace': lift up his countenance—the idea is the opposite of putting his head down, or putting his head round. In the ancient world if somebody didn't look at you, you hadn't gained your point. It was when they lifted up their face and looked at you, that you got your request. It would be a sore trial to get across the wilderness, and to run into difficulty, thirst or hunger. It would be an infinitely sorer trial if in those moments you came to God, and you felt he was looking the other way. He wasn't listening to your prayers. Have you ever felt that you went to God, but he didn't look your way? You prayed but he seemed to take no notice; and then it wasn't merely the pain of outward circumstance, it was the puzzlement of heart that destroyed your peace. *'Why doesn't God hear me?'*

They were going across a desert that they had never travelled before. *'Sit them down Aaron, and bless them in my name. Say, "the Lord lift up his countenance upon you", so that they will know that they are accepted and that I am listening to them. I am taking an interest, I haven't forgotten them, nor shall I neglect them—and so give them peace.'*

'So you shall put my name on them' (v. 27): they wouldn't get lost, would they? Or if they happened to get lost you'd know whose they were, if God's name was on them.

'So shall I bless them': I wish I could do it, but I can't. I see you sitting here, pausing for a few moments on your journey. I don't know your circumstances, but how I wish I could bless you this evening.—The Lord bless you.

'And keep you': you've got that security my brother, my sister. Do you know you are saved? Do you know that, come what will, you shall never perish and none shall pluck you out of the hand of the Saviour, nor out of the hand of the Father? Oh that the Lord would bless you now, whatever your circumstance, and renew within your heart that sense that comes not from carelessness, self-confidence or circumstance, but from the sense of the reality of a God who is determined to bless you and keep you through to the end.—The Lord bless you.

Oh that the Lord would cause his face to shine on you: what matchless wealth is yours—the riches of his grace. I wish I could make them sparkle in your imagination now. If only I could tell you the endless glories to which you are heir, and the wealth that awaits you; and that you have it all now in God, for he is with you.

Life is rough sometimes, isn't it? It takes the glitter off things. The rigors of life hide our wealth from us, and it becomes a weary footslog. Oh that God would cause his blessing to rise in your heart and you should see his face shine. You prayed recently, you long over something, you would love some guidance as to what you're meant to be doing. 'Lord, which way is it—this way or that?' You're puzzled, underneath you are a little uncertain, disturbed. You've had a crisis in life; you wish you could have the answer and know exactly which way to go. It would be good to have that feeling of being settled down, and peace in your heart, but the days go by and the thing isn't settled and you're left wondering. You hear one or two missionaries say how marvellous the guidance of God is at every crossroads. If you're like me you say: God bless the missionaries, I wish I were one! The worst is the uncertainty: you pray and the Lord doesn't seem to give you the guidance you crave. You wonder if he's listening, or has he turned his face away from you. I wish I could do it—but surely God will do it for you this very moment. He hasn't turned his face from you, he watches you every tick of the clock. His very name is on you—when you were baptised were you not baptised into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Wherever you get to in this wide world, you are a part of the divine treasure of property. If you are a believer you shall never be lost. — The Lord bless you.

Let me not simply indulge in wishes or prayers; let me cease being a Hebrew and start being a Christian, and just tell you for five minutes the glory that we share as believers. God has blessed us—not will one day bless us, but has blessed us.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him. (Eph 1:3–4)

Mark the first basic point. It may be you've just started out on your journey home to glory and to God, or perhaps you've gone a long way. Here is God's word, informing you that he has blessed you. In what sense? Well, he chose you before the foundation of the world. So we'd better pause for a moment to work that out. Chosen in Christ—'chosen', says the Bible, 'that we might be before him; chosen that we should be his children' (v. 5). What a glorious destiny! Paul says that he chose us before the foundation of the world. That's a mighty long while ago, someone may say; but that isn't quite the point. Of course it's a long while ago, but the point is that, long before God made this little planet, logically he had you in mind, and he only went and invented the planet because he had you in mind. Did you not realise that?

This planet, going round our sun, up our corner of the Milky Way, and all the vast planets that float in space—do you know they were the second things that came into God's mind? The first was you—and he only made this planet because he had plans for you.

One of these days you go into the kitchen, and you see your mother engaged there with a remarkable array of things. There will be an oven that's got flashing lights on it and dials, and miles per hour! There are all kinds of wires, and it's very impressive.

You say, 'What are you doing?'

She says, 'I'm making a cake; it's going to be one of those four or five tiered affairs.'

'What are you doing that for?' you ask.

She says, 'It's Mary Ann's twenty-first birthday in six weeks.'

She has her mind on Mary Ann's birthday, so before the birthday comes there's all this gear—ovens and mixers and goodness knows what else!

'Oh I see it now—that's why we got the new oven!' Even before she got the oven, her mind was on Mary Ann and her birthday party and she was determined it should be a lovely party. Then mother's logical brain thought, 'what do I do for a birthday party? A cake! Now to get a cake, what do I have to do for that? I need an oven of course. Mine is worn out, so I'll persuade my husband to buy a new one'—you see how the logical thing goes! The first thing in her mind was the last thing that's going to happen—Mary Ann's birthday. But it was the first thing in her mind, and all the other business—lights, buzzers, ovens and everything else—came to be because of that idea.

One of these starlit nights go out and look at the universe; ask yourself why is it all there? Before it was made, God had you in mind. It's not going to be a birthday; it's going to be a wedding one of these days—the marriage supper of the Lamb. From all eternity God had the idea that he would have sons, not just creatures. What a blessing to be not merely creatures made by God, but sons of God, being born of God, begotten of God. Not bits of his handiwork like the sun, moon and stars are, but part of his own very life, generated from God himself.

That was God's idea for you. God's problem was how to get it, for God can't make sons just by saying, 'Sons: be!' Can he? If God wants a world, he says, 'Let there be a world!' and there it is. If he wants to make creatures, God says, 'Let us make man!' and there is man. Man has no choice in it. But God couldn't do that with sons. Why not? Well, a son of God is such a thing as can only come into being when God puts his proposal to a creature and the creature says yes. It's like getting married—you can't be born married. You have to be asked, and being asked means you have the choice to say yes or no, or it wouldn't be marriage, as we know it.

The fantastic thing is, God had a scheme to make sons. First of all he had to make you as a creature, and give you a free will, so that then he might approach you with this amazing offer to become a son of God, through faith in Christ. So that it could happen, that meant you had to have a world to live in. That was nothing for God. He made it; and the whole universe that spins in space he made it to get you.

The heart-stopping thing is that, when God had that scheme and made man upon the world as a creature of his, man turned round and trespassed against the plan of God. He said no to God: 'I'm going my own way'. Could you imagine the absurdity of it? Little six-foot man, on a little planet whirling in space somewhere or other. He hasn't a clue where it all came from or where it's going, and yet he turns round and rejects God's purpose and says, 'I'm going my own way'. If you want a guaranteed recipe for getting lost in this

universe, go your own way. I don't know how far you'll get, do you? It's dark a few miles off earth; who knows what lies beyond it, and you're going your own way!

Even so God's mercy was not yet exhausted, he was determined to put his plan into operation and have sons. Who shall explain it? God's own Son came to our planet to die for those that had trespassed against God's purpose. Listen to the spiritual excitement in the pen of Paul: the glory is that God has blessed us, even as he chose us. There were centuries where the blessing was all in the future. Now it's happened, says Paul—he has blessed us and seated us in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

'Well that may be so', you say, 'but at this very moment I feel myself very much seated in Cloughfern Gospel Hall on the outskirts of Belfast!' Yes, but isn't it true that, as a believer, you are in Christ? God has given you his life, and by his Spirit you are in Christ. If that is true, then tell me where is Christ? He's risen: he's already at the goal of the journey. He endured the race that was set before him, and he's now sat down (Heb 12:2).

You may be in Cloughfern surrounded by all kinds of difficulties that I cannot imagine. Do you want security on the road? If you are a believer, all the amazing blessings of God are yours. You are in Christ, you are seated with him in the heavenly places. From one point of view you are still trudging along the journey of this life. In another sense God has blessed you to this extent, that you are joined to Christ and seated with him in heavenly places. To be able to journey through life, come what may—fair weather or foul, friend or foe, joy or sorrow—to know that you are blessed, you are already a child of God, already a son of God, already God has blessed you. The scheme has happened, and you are linked with the Lord Jesus in heaven. That security will see you through all the happenings of the desert road.

As I say, I wish I could bless you like that. I wish I could not merely recite the facts, but that God by his Spirit would light up your heart to see that the face of God is shining upon you this very moment. He has lifted up his face to you and his name is on you.

You will need it one of these days. Some of you have already discovered it, and some maybe not yet, but you will. There are badlands ahead. They won't last the whole journey, but part of it goes through the badlands. What do I mean by the badlands? I am referring to that part of Israel's journey, beginning in Numbers chapter 20 through to the end of the Balaam story (ch. 24). Much of it was the badlands.

In their disobedience and wanderings Israel had been going through the wilderness now for many years. At last there came a new generation and the time was drawing near for them to enter into the Promised Land. They came up out of the wilderness towards what we call the southern Negev. Ahead were the foothills of the Judaeen Mountains, stretching all the way from the west, right down and over into the valley and to the Dead Sea. There were kings and lords up in those mountains—not just one but half a dozen of them. What our English translation in its quaint way calls the lords of the high places (21:28). When they saw Israel coming to invade their territory, I don't suppose they said, 'how very pleasant, we'll get the coffee cups ready!' These were powerful kings, strong lords, possessors of the high places, seated up there on those mountains that were the beginning of Israel's inheritance. They were Israel's sworn enemies, determined to keep them out as long as ever they could.

Sometimes, when you think about it, it seems fantastic. You, from Belfast, proposing to go into the heavenly places! Were you not aware that there are mights, dominions,

principalities and powers in those heavenly places? The world-rulers of this darkness, as Ephesians 6:12 calls them (RV). Do you not take that bit seriously? I tell you, they're real. Satan himself—who had the impertinence and yet the realism to tempt our blessed Lord and to try to stop his great work of redemption—won't leave you all the time just to wander into the heavenlies as you please without stirring up the opposition.

So Israel came towards those mountains, and as they came the situation was very bad. Miriam died (20:1). She could be a bit difficult at times, she got a little jealous of Moses and had to be dealt with, but on the whole she was a good soul. She couldn't half play the old tambourine! When they first started out, you should have heard them sing, Miriam with a timbrel in her hand: 'Sing ye to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider has he cast into the sea' (Exod 15:20–21). Nice, wasn't it, when they started. Miriam is dead now, and they weren't singing so much.

Some of you are smiling. There were times when you were young and redemption was new to you, and my how you sang. But you haven't been singing so much recently. How could you, as trial and tribulation, bereavement and sorrow, illness and pain have come your way?

So Miriam is dead, and then the water ran out. You can be as spiritual as you wish, but if you go for a week without water in the Sinai Peninsula, some of the spirituality is in danger of evaporating as well as the water. They came to Moses and what a poignant thing they said: 'Wherefore have you made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us into this evil place?' (v. 5). It was one of the badlands. They meant what they said: 'this evil place. It is no place of seed, or of figs.' No, it wasn't. If you've been in a bad land, you know it certainly isn't the place of figs, it's an evil place. Nobody said that the way home to their inheritance would always be marvellous and joyful. It's no good arguing with folks when they're going through such trials. They set off for heaven with singing; now they've hit a patch of the road and it's very different from heaven—of course it's not a place of figs. Many of you have already met it. Some of you will yet meet it, and perhaps more than once. If you manage to pray, you'll say: 'Oh God, this isn't a place of figs'—and it will seem like the biggest understatement of the year.

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying: 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 to drink. (Num 20:7–8)

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. 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. (vv. 11–12)

Poor old Moses, whatever had come over the man? He was called the meekest man in all the earth (12:3). He had put up with I don't know what from his fellow Israelites for years, but just now it got the better of him. Instead of speaking to the rock he took his rod and he smashed it twice. 'Rebels', he said, 'must we bring you water out of this rock?' The water

came out, but Moses and Aaron never got into the land. The Bible says that they rebelled against God. I tell you, it was some badlands. Fancy Moses, who had given them the Law, getting so fed up and so provoked that he disobeyed the Lord. You'd scarce have believed it of Moses would you? If you had heard it of me, you would have said, 'Well, I always had doubts about him—but Moses?'

But you see, the battle is real, and then as now there were principalities and powers interested in the thing. What was wrong in smiting the rock? Didn't God tell him on another occasion to smite the rock and the water came out? He did indeed, and we might make that the platform from which we now do three or four jumps and come to our Christian understandings of it.

There was an earlier occasion when Israel, running out of water, had rebelled against God, and God did a demonstration before them. God himself came and stood upon a rock, and he said, 'Moses, take your rod, and smite . . . '—and just as you thought he was going to say, 'smite the people', God said, 'I will stand before thee upon the rock, and thou shalt smite the rock' (17:6). The parable is not difficult to interpret, is it? What would you think if Her Majesty came here for a visit and they made a big platform in the centre of Cloughfern and Her Majesty stood on it; and while she stood on it some chap came out of the crowd with a mighty great stick and started to hit the platform upon which Her Majesty stood? 'That's nothing but rebellion', you'd say. And so God demonstrated to his people what was involved in their rebellion.

For us, God has demonstrated it once and for all at another mount, when his own Son was hung upon a cross at Calvary and the rod of God's wrath fell upon him. It ought to have smitten us, the sinners, while we were enemies. Oh the marvel of that story. It pleased the Lord to bruise him for the sake of us rebels. That earlier story is a vivid parable for us as Christians. It happened at the beginning of the journey, but now they were miles across the wilderness, almost at the Promised Land. Once more there was a rock, but this time God says, 'you don't have to smite it', Moses. We are on very firm ground for interpretation here: 'The rock that followed them: that Rock was Christ', says Paul (1 Cor 10:4). All the way, behind the various rocks of the wilderness was the great Rock, source of all their blessing and refreshment, the pre-incarnate Christ. Once more, this rock in the wilderness symbolises him, for there he was, even in those far off days, the Rock that followed them was Christ. When his people are parched with thirst, you don't have to beat him to get blessing out of him! How do you get on in your prayers? When life gets tough, and you feel you must have this answer to your prayers, how do you go about it? When you're in pain and difficulty and sorrow, when a loved one is ill, how do you go about getting up to God? You don't have to twist his arm, do you?

I fancy there is a very big practical point here. I remember hearing of a Christian couple, whose child had cancer. They pleaded with God to heal her, but she grew worse. They felt if they only prayed hard enough God must heal her, and when she died they were left with very severe doubts.

When days are difficult sometimes it appears to the believer that God has turned his face the other way and isn't looking, and he doesn't hear. The God that has blessed you with all spiritual blessings—can you not trust him? How often have I prayed, feeling that if I could

somehow prevail with God and, I say it reverently, twist his arm, he'd give me what I ask for. Do we have to do that with God?

So we come in the story to the kings. I haven't time now to point you to the multitude of references to the various kings of this country and that country that came out to meet Israel. One of them was Balak. He summoned Balaam: 'Come with your enchantments and with your divinations'. One of the words he uses is of course the word, Satan. Though king, Balak was not thinking now of physical arms. Balak of Moab was thinking somehow if he could tap the great spiritual powers of the heavens and bring them to bear against Israel then he might triumph; and foolish old Balaam came along thinking that the God of Israel was another great spirit being that he might coerce by his magical powers against Israel. The two of them were up to their nefarious tricks, using the very powers of heaven, if they could—the principalities, mights, powers and dominions—against Israel.

Israel were really in the battle, weren't they? Perhaps you'll have sympathy when you read that in the end they got tired, and the manna seemed to them to be light (21:5). In a moment of their weakness they murmured against God and God had to send serpents to teach his people a lesson. The serpents that bit them may well stand as a symbol for that old serpent, the devil (Rev 12:9). Even today he has bitten human beings and poisoned their minds against God. 'God could do better for you than this if he wanted to', he whispers. 'Where is your God now? Why doesn't he hear your prayers?'

God has an answer that will quell that feverish poison in your veins, my brother and my sister. It's easy for me to talk, but in the day of pain and difficulty, when Satan works his old virus in our system and causes us to doubt the love of God, there is a place where you can get a holy serum against that kind of snakebite. Where is it? Once more it is Calvary. Yes, 'Moses lifted up that serpent in the wilderness, that whoever believes may have eternal life' (John 3:14), so we too look to the Son of man lifted up, to hear again the pulse of eternal life, expelling the old poison. There on that cross is God's answer to Satan and all his poisonous slanders against God. 'He who spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?' (Rom 8:32)

The balm of life, the cure of woe,
The measure and the pledge of love,
The sinner's refuge here below,
The angels' theme in heaven above.²

So God brought his people through, healed their poison, and caused them to triumph. It will have to be by faith my brother, my sister. You've got to walk the journey. God can't put you into an interstellar spacecraft and whisk you off to heaven before you know where you are. Your faith will have to come under test, and there will be times when God can no longer featherbed you. He must let you, as he did to Job, be exposed to all the opposition of the enemy.

² Thomas Kelly, 'We sing the praise of Him who died' (1815).

If you've not gone that way, don't let it make you afraid. Sit down while the sun shines; while there's an oasis or two near at hand. Do please from time to time soak yourself in the sense of the blessing of God, so that when the bad days come it will carry you through. Only it doesn't depend on us in the end, does it? For let me tell you the last dramatic bit of the story. While Israel were encamped, had they been able to see it, Balak started his nefarious tricks way up in those hills. Balak and Balaam went to his high places, to try to engage in spirit warfare against Israel, to bring the very powers of the underworld down on Israel's head to curse them. If God had grown weary of Israel then, Israel would have perished forever in the wilderness.

Listen to the story. Here comes Balaam down the road on his donkey. Prophets and kings rode on donkeys; they were thought to be high status. He's coming to curse Israel, and he's going to earn a pocketful of money. The angel of the Lord, the second person of the Trinity, left his own seat in glory and came and stood in front of Balaam, defying him to go any further. For all I know, at this moment some dark power in those high places has got you in his sights, as one day Satan had Job in his, and will seek to curse you. If ever it happens, I tell you straight that no less than the second person of the Trinity will come and interpose himself between you and the enemy.

For all his endeavour Balaam found his work of cursing impossible, and was made to proclaim as follows: 'How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? How shall I defy whom the Lord has not defied?' (23:8). There is no answer to that question, any more than there is to that glorious passage that we take to our hearts time and time again from Romans 8:33–34: 'Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect, when it's God who justifies?' Think hard: when God has justified you, who in all God's vast universe will stand up and lay a charge against you? Suppose they did, who shall condemn us, when it is Christ, the blessed second person of the Trinity who died for us, rose again, and at this very moment intercedes for us?

Who shall condemn us now,
 Since Christ has died and risen, and gone above?
 For us to plead at the right hand of love?
 Who shall condemn us now?³

'How shall I curse whom God has not cursed?' asked Balaam. With that security comes the secret of present triumph. 'Do you know Israel's vigour?' says Balaam to Balak. 'He couched, he lay down as a lion, and as a great lion: who shall stir him up?' (24:9). They're like a lion crouched down, ready to spring. When did those weak pilgrims that we saw the other moment in their great distress, all of a sudden become like lions? 'Well you see', says Balaam, 'God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?' (23:19). If he started to work in them, he will finish that work and it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'What has God wrought?' (v. 23).

³ Horatius Bonar, 1808–89, 'Blessed be God, our God.'

Oh the marvel of it. As the weakest of you all, tell me, can you begin to see that God has begun a work in me?

You say, 'I see a little of it'.

I hope you do! I tell you this, that he who has begun the work shall continue it until the day of the Lord. And when glory dawns and I'm there by his grace, all the comment of angels and humans shall be this, 'David Gooding has just entered in. Well, well, what has God wrought!'

Says Balaam, 'you'll never defeat them, Balak. *The shout of a king is among them*' (v. 21). Ah yes, there was; and there is with you. There are lords of the high places, principalities and powers in heavenly places against whom we must wrestle and they seem to get advantage from time to time. Yet it still is true my brother—there's the shout of a king amongst us, because in actual fact the King is amongst us. Certain of his victory, he shouts the songs of triumph for us, even as we are on our way home to glory.

When Balaam prophesied, the first coming of Jesus Christ was still in the future and Balaam saw it from afar. 'There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel' (24:17), and when he does, that will be the end of their enemies. Our blessed Lord has come and gone; we're in him, seated in the heavenlies, and he with us. The shout of a king is among us, but oh for the day when that star shall arise, that Morning Star, and the sceptre is given to him eternally. If you are a believer you shall be there, because of the salvation and intercessions of Jesus Christ, your king. And by God's grace I shall be there too.

Loyalty and Breaches of Faith

*Reading: Numbers 5:29–30; 25:1–3, 10–13; 31:1–2;
1 Corinthians 10:14–22; 2 Corinthians 11:1–3; 7:9–11*

For this study you will find it helpful to keep a Bible open at Numbers 5, so that you can refer to it throughout.

Last week our study directed our thinking towards the blessings of God. In order to prepare Israel for their journey across the Sinai Peninsula, God instructed his priests how to bless his people. It was not merely to be with empty words and formulae, but by the power of the Spirit of God.

They were to make Israel aware of the blessings of God, the security that they bring, and the unbounded wealth and riches that there are in the sunshine of the face of God. Being full therefore of a sense of God's blessing, Israel would be strengthened in their journey; prepared for when the trials and tribulations came, and when they were called upon to pass through the badlands on the way to their inheritance. We saw that, when human and superhuman powers tried to prevent Israel entering into their inheritance, the blessed second person of the Trinity himself came bodily to oppose them. Faithful to his people, he saw them through.

Thinking about Israel's blessings presented us with an irresistible temptation. We didn't try to resist it actually! It set us thinking about God's blessings of us, and if God had blessed Israel how infinitely more he has blessed us.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ. (Eph 1:3)

Before we knew where we were, our imagination had carried us away, and we were seated with Christ in heavenly places. From that angle, the old badlands that may stretch ahead didn't look quite so dark. Though we may still have to go through them, we saw the marvel that God not merely will bless us but that he has blessed us. He has blessed us, even as he chose us. In Christ we are already seated in those heavenly places, to which in another sense we journey, and at last one day we shall be bodily. We went home exultant in the sense of God's blessing to empower us through the desert journey.

Tonight we shall not rise to such heights. God calls us now to consider very practical down to earth things; many of them sad and sorry. You will of course remember that I didn't write Numbers, and we shall go home sober, and perhaps very thoughtful. You see, it would have been highly unrealistic for God to allow his people to start out on the journey

with false ideas. Therefore we shall follow God tonight as we have done before, by studying first of all some of those provisions that he made for his people, and then the wisdom of God in the preparations he made for them.

So we begin at chapter 5, with God's command to Israel as he warns them about some of the things that can go wrong in the course of the journey. It isn't so much that a wagon might break down, which was to be expected. Going across the rocky, sandy desert in all the heat for all those years, I suspect a lot of wagons broke down. You can foresee that kind of eventuality and take a few spare wagon wheels with you and an odd bit of wood to put in when one of the spokes breaks. When an old ox gets tired and ill and falls down on the job, by wise husbandry you can see to it that there are young oxen coming along behind that can be put in a harness and take their turn at pulling the wagons. It is beyond no man's wit, nor God's either, to foresee the things that could go wrong in a practical, mechanical way across the wilderness, and make provision to overcome them.

But what do you do when the people of God themselves break down? That's another story, isn't it? How unrealistic it would have been of God to let them start out on that journey unaware of the possibility. So before they start God warns them of that fact, but in the kindness of his heart he instructs them what they can do about it.

Now please turn to Numbers chapter 5, where we will see two of the main considerations that lay in God's mind at this point. There would be two difficulties in the camp of Israel.

One of them would be the ever-present danger of uncleanness—people that are unclean for one reason or another (v. 2); and what is to be done if their uncleanness defiles the camp (v. 3). Similarly God talks about the possibility that a woman married to her husband might fall into unfaithfulness and thereby be defiled (from v. 11).

If we had followed on into chapter 6 we should have read the instructions for the Nazarite and his vow. God tells him what he must do to put it right, if suddenly something happens beyond his control in the middle of his period of vow and he is defiled. There would be ever-present danger of defilement.

Secondly: 'Speak unto the children of Israel, When a man or woman shall commit any sin that men commit (this next phrase is important) to do a trespass against the Lord . . .' (v. 6). The word translated trespass means really to commit an act of unfaithfulness to the Lord—a breach of faith, an act of treachery, to commit some kind of infidelity. As we shall see in a moment the kind of trespass envisaged here is when a man not only did something wrong but, when challenged about it, swore in the name of the Lord and swore to a lie in the name of the Lord, in order to try and get himself out of trouble. It was an act of very serious treachery against the Lord, and a very solemn breach of faith with his fellow Israelite.

Then look at v. 12: 'Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, "If any man's wife go aside, and commit a trespass against him . . ."' There's the idea again of infidelity, treachery, a breach of faith. You say, 'did that kind of thing happen amongst Israel? Were they that bad?' Before our meditation is over we shall have to examine our own hearts and say, 'Could I be guilty—if not of this particular sin—could I be guilty of disloyalty, of infidelity to the Lord, of acting a lie, and should it happen what would God do?' These are solemn things, but we must face them.

First of all therefore, 5:2–3: those two verses that deal with the question of uncleanness, and I hope you will begin to see the importance and the seriousness of uncleanness. There was a danger of defiling the camp. The problem wasn't how did you get one person or two across the Sinai Peninsula. That would have been comparatively easy—hire the local helicopter and you would have been there in no time. The journey would be so quick there wouldn't even have been time for anybody to cause an argument.

That wasn't the problem. The problem was how did you get a camp full of hundreds of thousands of people across without their tempers getting frayed and all sorts of funny things going on among them. They didn't live in comfortable homes but in tents cheek by jowl. The logistical problems would have been enormous. I suspect uncleanness terrified Moses night and day. Even if we start from the level of hygiene, think of those thousands of people under a blazing hot sun, and very often short of water. Anything less than the most scrupulous concern for cleanliness in their camp could have proved disastrous. It wasn't just that this one fellow over here was always a little bit careless about his toilet and didn't wash behind his ears every morning! But as he gets infected and infects the whole camp an epidemic could have gone through like grease lightning. That's the trouble when you move in a company of people in a camp (I nearly said in a church!). It isn't always what you do yourself; it's what the other chap does.

It wasn't simply a question of physical hygiene either. God lays down certain things they had to do to those that were defiled by the dead, for instance. Not so much on the ground of hygiene, but notice: 'that they defile not their camps, in the midst whereof I dwell' (v. 3). In the ancient laws about cleanness and uncleanness we shall observe that there are a lot of things that God commanded Israel for the sake of their symbolism. There were rules and regulations about what food they may and may not eat. Animals, birds and fish were classified: some were clean, some unclean. When he came to earth our blessed Lord abrogated those rules and regulations. By means of the sheet full of unclean beasts and creeping things God taught Peter the lesson that the days of those ancient symbolisms of distinctions between clean foods and unclean foods were now over (Acts 10:9–16). Many of them had only been symbols, teaching Israel that in their appetites and in their food they were to observe the difference between clean and unclean. They were meant to be the holy people of God, and not to walk as unclean Gentiles walked. In New Testament days the symbolism is gone and the reality remains. God is concerned with moral and spiritual cleanliness, because uncleanness does not merely offend my fellow Israelite or my brother in the Lord; if the living God dwells among his people, then to permit uncleanness in the camp is offensive to the Lord himself.

It is at that level that we shall want to apply this lesson to ourselves. We ought to be careful my brothers and sisters: 'Lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; Lest there be any fornicator among you, or profane person, like Esau' (Heb 12:15–16). The root of bitterness can be theological; it can also be behavioural. Ask yourself if it isn't a very vivid description of what has happened all too often amongst God's people. Here are two brethren and something arises. Before you know where you are the whole thing has blown up, and it's a powerful fountain that you can't stop. Like a noxious weed that grows, you think you'll get it out but it has spread its tentacles, the whole

church is involved and many are defiled. It can't be confined to the one or the two who are causing the trouble. While it's all going on there hangs a pall—a kind of an unclean atmosphere—over the congregation, even as they try to worship at the Lord's Supper. Paul had to talk quite strongly about these things to the Corinthians.

Don't you know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple you are. (1 Cor 3:16–17)

It was a solemn, glorious thing that God dwelt in the camp of Israel; and they had to be careful about this matter of uncleanness because God was there. So, says Paul, 'your assembly is a temple of God—the Holy Spirit of God dwells among you, and he who destroys the temple of God, him will God destroy'. I wouldn't want to be a troublemaker in a church of God, would you?

What is to be done? In extreme circumstances they had to put the unclean people outside the camp (Num 5:2–4). It would be improper of us to take these ancient passages dealing with health laws and apply them to the government of the church. However, there are blatant sins that if we continue in them the church would be under solemn responsibility to excommunicate us. It is very solemn, but here is the reality of what a church is. If the thrice-holy God dwells among us the honour and dignity of the Lord is preeminent in importance.

From talking about that, the Lord goes on to talk to Moses about what is to happen when a man or a woman shall commit any sin that men commit, 'to do a trespass against the Lord, and that person be guilty' (v. 6). These short verses seem to be a reference to the longer rules and regulations that are given in Leviticus 6, which talks about day-to-day life and in particular business life. It envisages somebody finding something that was lost and, being covetous of it, he takes it. A search is made and when people are asked if they've seen the thing that was lost, he says No, he hasn't seen it anywhere.

You mustn't imagine the desert to be just mere sand. There were some big trade routes criss-crossing it here and there, camels coming with merchandise and all sorts of spices. Let's imagine an Israelite looking at some things that he could profitably buy, but he hasn't got the money. He says to his neighbour, 'Lend me a fiver, I promise I'll give it back'. And he lends him a fiver, but he doesn't get it back. You smile because that kind of thing is so true to life. Believers wouldn't do it, would they? Have you never known an assembly nearly brought to disaster by business quarrels among the men?

God counted it not merely an offence between the odd Israelite and his fellow, to swear to a lie in business deals: 'it's an offence against the Lord', says God. It's a breach of faith, an act of treachery. Do these things matter? My brothers, my sisters, as believers we're like Israel, only we're not going to Palestine but to heaven. We're going as a company of people, not just as isolated individuals, and somehow or other we have to learn to go together. If we don't, what an impediment it is to the whole church. What's to be done? Well God tells them what to do. There must be restoration, of course, plus interest. There must be confession and seeking the forgiveness of God through the sacrifice of the atonement.

From those two things that we have discussed briefly, we come to this much more prominent thing. What is to happen if a man, for some reason or other, comes to suspect the fidelity of his wife? Does it matter? Of course it matters, it's one of life's most fundamental things! It matters to the man and his wife, but does it matter to the whole camp? Well of course it does. Could you imagine Israel setting forth, and what a high adventure it all is. It will need everybody working together. Presently some Amalekite comes round the corner and they have a battle on their hands. The men will be required to face the enemy, and death itself, to protect their wives and children. What about the man who's just discovered that his wife has been unfaithful to him—is he going to fight for her?

Could it happen amongst God's people? Yes it could. A breach of faith plus divorce, in some countries it's happening now more than ever it did. You can find ministers of the word of God preaching and writing books for the public, and they're now on their third wife. What a disaster. Marriage was built by God as a reflection at the human level of the relationship between Christ and the church. There's going to be a heaven presently. How are we to be sure of it? How can we be absolutely sure of salvation? I'll tell you how: 'Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it' (Eph 5:25). He has pledged his unbreakable faithfulness to that church. There will never be a divorce. We find a security in his love that spells heaven. How would you feel if you entered heaven and the niggling thought came into your heart, what if Christ should grow tired of me? If that were possible the very pleasure of heaven would turn into torture.

The marriage between a Christian man and a Christian woman is meant to be a reflection of the love of Christ for the church, and the love of the church for Christ. How cruel a thing sin can be, if the man or woman shatters that faithfulness. What a blow; what a scandal for the church itself to have to endure.

What's to be done about it? God tells Moses here what he is to do, and a very elaborate provision it is (5:11–31). You may wonder at first sight about the proportions of holy Scripture: why does God devote such a long, long thing to this? (And, as a bachelor, I wish that a more qualified elder were standing here instead of me.) Men can be horribly unreasonable and selfish. A man gets it into his head that his wife has not been faithful, yet she's been the most faithful woman under the sun. Life now becomes difficult because this is a relationship that depends on utter and complete trust in somebody else's loyalty. There's no closed circuit television or anything else that you can set up to check the other person's loyalty, and it would be a pretty poor job if you had to do it.

God gives us these lessons about what happens between man and wife, but they have a message even for us as the people of God. If you allow me into the fellowship of your church, don't you think you're taking a big risk? I am here, there, and all around the globe: how do you know what I'm doing when I'm in Paris? I'm preaching delightful sermons about the glories of the Lord, but the boys in the income tax office would have a slightly different story, and it reflects on the church. How shall we trust each other?

This was the big issue at stake. So for a while let's concentrate on this woman whose fidelity is in doubt. We'll come to the men presently. Guilty or not guilty, when the man becomes jealous (as he would rightly be if his wife were guilty) he is to bring her to the priest and give her some flour for a sin offering. The priest shall bring her before the Lord,

and then there begins a most elaborate ceremony. Standing there in the presence of God, she's to watch while the priest takes some of the dust from the floor of the dwelling place of God—that's very holy ground. He gets some holy water out of the laver and he mixes some of the dust in with this water. He lets her hair go loose (5:18 RV), and she has the sin offering in her hand. As they stand there solemnly in the presence of God, the priest administers to the woman an oath, a kind of a curse. Simplified it runs like this: If you have been guilty, may God's judgment rest on you. The priest pronounces the judgments that shall come and the woman is required to say, 'Amen, Amen' (v. 22): 'if I have been guilty I accept the consequence'. The priest writes the curse on a piece of paper in a book, and when the woman says Amen he gets a sponge, sponges it off and it goes into the water. Solemnly in the presence of God she's called upon to drink that water. If she's guilty God's discipline follows. If she's not guilty she comes through unscathed.

We must not think that this is magic mumbo-jumbo. It is called, the water that causes the curse and the bitterness. Actually of course it was not just the water, it was God who was controlling things. This vivid symbolism reminded that good woman and everybody else what was at stake. This was the way that the husband's confidence could be restored. Standing there in all her desolation—her hair let down and unkempt, undone before God so to speak—it would have been sad if she had committed unfaithfulness. It would have been even more sad and embarrassing if she hadn't—perhaps with a sense of wrong going through her heart. You'd almost like to join the woman, wouldn't you, and say, 'Where should I have been but for the grace of God? Who am I to boast about my loyalty to God? In other kinds of things I have been guilty. What if the Lord searched out my hidden sins, and his judgment and discipline fell upon me?' Isn't it what you expect of me as your fellow believer, that this is indeed what I am prepared to do so that you can trust me? Not when called and challenged because some doubt has been raised about my character, but quietly and constantly in my home and from time to time to come and stand before the Lord.

Before anything else was done the woman had to offer her sin offering—'an offering of memorial that brought sin to remembrance' (v. 15). What does it mean? You say to me, 'I've read in the New Testament that because Christ died for me at Calvary God will never remember my sins and iniquities any more. A sacrifice that brings my sins to remembrance—surely this can't apply to me?' When we come before the Lord at the Lord's Supper, we rejoice in the great sacrifice of Christ, and God as judge will not remember our sin anymore. There is no condemnation, no penalty. Oh the glory of it! God assures me that 'there is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1). Yet you would be a very strange Christian if, as you look upon those symbols, they don't remind you of your sin. Whenever I think about that sacrifice of Christ, I ask myself, 'Why was he there as a bearer of sin? Who broke his body? Who shed his blood?' It was my sin that did it, and I am reminded of my sin.

What should that lead me to do? Says Paul: 'let a man examine himself' (1 Cor 11:28). It should lead you to judge yourself responsibly in the presence of God, to examine your heart, and where you find things wrong to judge yourself. If we would judge ourselves we should not be judged (v. 31). But what if I'm living in the wrong? I'm a little bit brazen about it, or I haven't perceived it. I'm making all sorts of excuses for myself and saying it's okay and it

doesn't really matter, but you can see it's wrong and that it matters a lot. How will you trust me? Must I not be prepared to say, like that woman did, 'Lord, I am indeed sorry that my sin murdered your Son, and I have tried to judge myself? Lord, if there are things that I don't see, then correct me. I am prepared for you to discipline me.'

If I were prepared to take myself seriously before God as a member of a church, I should not on the one hand become weak in my faith or assurance; or live carelessly as if sin doesn't matter because there is no condemnation. God will never bring my sins up against me legally, but if I do not judge myself then the Lord will judge me. If I continue in unjudged sin, continue in that sin that murdered Jesus Christ, God's Son, then I am guilty of the body and blood of the Lord (1 Cor 11:27). That mustn't be allowed to happen. Let me therefore examine myself.

By God's grace we've been brought into the very holiest of all. As we stand on that holy ground, the dust beneath our feet is veritable gold dust. Standing there we must say: 'Lord if there is defilement in my life, if I have been disloyal, then God forgive me, and I'm prepared Lord if you need to discipline me. Amen, Amen.' If all of us were thus careful before God, you could trust me and I could trust you. I don't need to get a closed circuit television and watch your every move. You've learned to stand in the presence of almighty God.

Let's pass on now to Numbers 6, that brings before us another man or woman, likewise with their hair growing long, and they're Nazarites. In contrast to the suspected disloyalty in chapter 5, the loyalty to God here is altogether exceptional, beyond what you even might expect. We have the rules and regulations for anyone who was prepared to be a Nazarite, and devote himself or herself particularly and specially to the Lord. They were to let their hair grow long, abstain from wine or anything made of the vine, and from touching the dead. They were to devote themselves utterly entirely and completely to the Lord. If a relative died near them, they were not to mourn for them; they were to be utterly devoted to the Lord. It might be for a temporary period, they weren't necessarily required to do it for the whole of life; but God reckoned that there would be some amongst his people that were prepared for such extreme devotion to him.

They would be prepared to give up the legitimate joys of daily life for the sake of the Lord. Such men were Samson—though he went wrong, perhaps Samuel, and John the Baptist. Men who were honoured of God and by his people: leaders of revival, men and women of extreme loyalty and devotion.

I don't know if it would be altogether possible to get across the wilderness of life and through the journey that leads to heaven without some men and women being prepared sometimes to show God exceptional devotion. These Nazarites were not required to give up bad things. (They shouldn't have been enjoying bad things anyway!) They were asked to forego legitimate things for the sake of devotion to the Lord.

Will there not be periods in our lives when we should be prepared to do the same? It's sometimes difficult to keep the balance. We want our spiritual life to minister to our joy, of course we do. Perhaps after tonight someone will say, 'I shan't go to Cloughfern for a week or two—instead of enthusing me with joy it sent me home depressed. I don't want to go to meetings like that. I want to go to a meeting to enjoy myself, and then I want to go home,

put on a few records and enjoy myself again! Tomorrow I shall enjoy myself. I'm not going to put up with anything where I don't enjoy myself.'

Good for you! If you are a believer you'll be in heaven one day, and you'll enjoy yourself there immensely. There are others around you who have been prepared to deny themselves all sorts of legitimate pleasures. The elders in your church could enjoy themselves too; but on a Thursday night or a Friday night they're down on their knees praying for you. There's a good woman, she could be enjoying herself with her toes up by the fire, and she's off to hospital visiting somebody. They don't do it for the fun of it, you know. Life is slipping them by and it will never come again; but for the Lord's sake, for our sake, and for his people's sake they're prepared to forego legitimate pleasures. Here's a woman bringing up a family; she needs her husband but he's out preaching the gospel somewhere. Year after year, the sacrifice of legitimate joy is made. Does that sound to you a grim kind of a thing? God is heard talking through Amos the prophet, and he says:

I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and led you forty years through the wilderness. . .
And I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazarites. (Amos 2:10-11)

God thought it would be a marvellous career; he had his mind on Samson and Samuel and a few people like that, and Jeremiah and John the Baptist. Then he thought: 'Now, there's Mrs Smith over there, I'll take her son. She'll think it's marvellous to see her son raised up like a venerable John the Baptist. "What an honour God has placed upon me", she'll say. "My son, chosen to be a John the Baptist, devoted to the Lord like this."' God thought it was a glorious honour: 'I raised them up to be Nazarites' —

But you gave the Nazarites wine to drink; and commanded the prophets, saying, Prophecy not. (v. 12)

You can't put old heads on young shoulders; you can't expect young folks to sacrifice for the Lord! Well then, God will have to do without these Nazarites. Oh my dear young folk, let a grizzly old pensioner talk to you straight. Go in for all the joys you can get, all the superb joys that God can give you. But in the course of getting his people home to heaven across the wilderness, don't be surprised if there come periods in your life when he will say, 'Now look here, for my sake, and my people's sake, I would like you to surrender some of life's legitimate joys and pleasures, to show special devotion to me.' That is loyalty to the Lord. It is good that we don't merely dwell upon the negative side, of trying to avoid disloyalty, but that we seek from time to time to go over to the other side, and show our special loyalty to the Lord.

So there are solemn lessons in the preparation. Not without cause, for if God had to warn the women of what could happen if their husbands came to doubt their loyalty and became jealous, see what happened when they got on the journey.

They had just been through a spiritual high. Balaam and Balak had tried to curse them in the name of God, and God himself had personally come and stood in Balaam's way and defied the evil spirits in the heavenly places. He persisted in blessing his people, and

showing himself faithful to them. Israel fell, and coming to Moab they went and joined themselves to another Lord, Baal—which means Lord—Baal-peor. They went after a strange god, and committed not merely literal, but spiritual fornication. God was exceedingly jealous; he had a right to be. He had loved Israel, and had bought them when they were slaves in the brick kilns of Egypt. He expresses himself through his prophet: 'I went after Israel in the wilderness, like a young man goes out, down a country lane to court a girl. He finds her, and woos and wins her. I went after Israel in the wilderness and I courted her. I wanted her love for myself and for no other god. I blessed them with all spiritual blessings, but they proved unfaithful.' They were joined to another god, and God was jealous.

Could it happen to us? I close tonight, reminding you of two verses that we read. Writing to the Corinthians Paul says,

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: you cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils. Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? are we stronger than he? (1 Cor 10:21–22)

Physically you can partake of the two tables, but if you do, remember that it will provoke the Lord to jealousy. Oh, let's ponder how he feels. God Almighty sent his Son to die for us, to woo our hearts and have our undivided affection. How does he feel when we leave him and love the world, or get involved in idolatry? Then we provoke him to jealousy. Says Paul again to those Corinthians:

For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. (2 Cor 11:2)

My dear young folks, will you allow me to talk to you straight? The Lord that died for you wants your love. I'm not talking about sentiment; he wants your love, and that's the kind of Lord he is. He won't put up with half measures. He wants that love one hundred percent and entire: that you love him with all your heart and your mind and your physical strength. He wants your intellectual power, your brainpower; he wants you to think loyally to him. He is thinking of a whole life before you of love from your heart. Should the world or anybody else come and steal that love from him, Jesus Christ our Lord gets jealous. Let's finish by remembering this. Soon the journey will end, and we'll be summoned to meet the Lord. How shall we meet him, knowing that he knows everything about the journey? What a lovely thing it would be if we could say, 'Lord, forgive me that I wandered and my heart strayed. I did try and you know I can only say like Peter, "you know I love you", and I meant to love you. I tried to stand loyally for you in intellect, in heart and in body.'

What shall happen if I had to be summoned home in the middle of some disloyal behaviour to meet the Lord who died for me? That's solemn, isn't it, but let's trust the Lord that his word is good. He means it for our benefit. Even his severe and sober exhortations are meant at last to increase our joy, both here and eternally.

4

War, and the Danger of Settling Down Prematurely

Readings: Numbers 1:1–3, 44–46; 32:1–23; Philippians 3:10–16

In these past studies you may have noticed that we have been following the same plan throughout. We have begun each evening by taking a part of the instructions made for Israel by God to prepare them for crossing the wilderness and bring them at last to their great inheritance. Each night we have studied one or two of these provisions, and sought to understand why God held Israel up until they should have fulfilled that particular provision and preparation.

Then when we thought that we understood some at least of what lay behind the preparation, we turned to a part of the history that followed the record of the journey. And there, sure enough, we came across situations that threw a flood of light on the question, why did God make them take the trouble to do that particular preparation? Time and again we discovered that God, who foresaw the need of his people in the wilderness, asked them to make that particular preparation because he knew that some miles, some years out across the wilderness they would come into circumstances where that particular preparation would prove a Godsend and a lifesaver for his people.

Last week then, following our plan, we began by looking in chapter 5, and the preparations there that God made for his people. We found that they were concerned with very practical and somewhat serious matters: the need to keep the camp of Israel free from defilement; the need to insist on their faithfulness and loyalty to God as they journeyed, and to one another in their day-to-day living and in their business arrangements. Then we saw how God concentrated at great length on the provision so that husbands and wives should be able to have complete confidence in one another. So that if, for instance, a man grew jealous of his wife and suspicious whether she had in fact been loyal to him, then God made provision to settle his doubts so that he might go on happily with his wife as they journeyed through the difficult circumstances of the wilderness, heart to heart and shoulder to shoulder, in unquestioned trust each of the other's fidelity and loyalty.

As we thought about those things we thought about ourselves. Not just about husbands and wives or businessmen, but we thought about ourselves in general as members of the people of God, reminding ourselves that it is not merely a question of getting to heaven by our individual selves, but that we march in company, and should do nothing to disturb the health or disrupt the confidence of the people of God. We spoke about how to maintain that sense of confidence the one with the other, by each one being willing to be one hundred

percent honest with God, judging ourselves in the light of God and being prepared if need be to submit to his discipline in our daily lives.

Having learned our lessons there as best we could we turned to the history, and it dawned on us why God had spent so much time over that particular provision for the loyalty of his people. Because, lo and behold, we read of an occasion when Israel not only fell into disloyalty the one to the other, they fell into the most shocking and outrageous disloyalty to God himself. They went and followed other gods, and Israel was joined to Baal-peor, Baal of Peor. God was jealous, like a husband might be jealous over his wife who had broken faith with him. Then we began to see that the sacred institution of marriage, and husbands and wives being loyal to one another, is God's own invention and a model at our lowly level of higher things: the relationship that God seeks with his people. Time and time again in the Old Testament we read of God as husband and Israel as his wife. We read how God went a-courting. He wooed Israel in the wilderness to win her love and affection, and her faithfulness to himself (Exod 19:5-6).

Of course when we Christians come to the New Testament we find the same image used. Now it is a question of Christ the bridegroom and the church the bride, and the lovely story of how Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. Because of those grand and glorious and eternal realities, God devised the human institution of marriage, that at that level we might have an object lesson constantly before our eyes to remind us of the great, permanent and eternal thing.

What a sacred thing daily life is—ordinary human life, where the relationship of child to father can remind us of that eternal relationship that God seeks. He is the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named (Eph 3:15). Where the relationship in daily work of servant and master can remind us of that permanent and eternal relationship between us and the Lord: he the master and we his glad servants. Where the rough and tumble of life in the family between brother and sister, sister and sister, brother and brother, is given so that we might learn the greater relationship that shall exist eternally, of brothers and sisters in the Lord. That is why loyalty takes on a profounder significance for the Christian than even for men and women of the world.

In this sorry world human marriage is meant to reflect that lovely thing that is the love of Christ for his church. It was a sad day therefore, when out in the wilderness Israel compromised her loyalty to God, her husband, and was joined to another husband, a false god, Baal-peor. Serious and solemn though it is, to be faithful to the proportion of Scripture we ought to spend just a little more time on these things, and think together of how and in what practical sense it could happen to us who love the Lord. In the course of our wilderness journey it is a very real possibility that we can get tripped up by one thing and another, and become temporarily unfaithful to the Lord.

You will remember that in one of his letters to the seven churches the risen Lord saw fit to mention to one of them that they were to take great care because there were some people in their church like Balaam. He referred precisely to this historical incident:

Thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. (Rev 2:14)

I suspect as Christians, when we read of such unfaithfulness as fornication, our minds might first of all go to what the Bible calls spiritual adultery. James, for instance, says, 'You adulterers and adulteresses, do you not know that friendship of the world is enmity with God? Therefore he who deliberately determines to be a friend of the world is thereby constituted an enemy of God' (Jas 4:4). James is not telling us to live as hermits of course. He is not telling us to shut ourselves away from the world. We have a duty to mix with men and women, love them for Christ's sake, bring the gospel to them, and help them and bless them wherever we can. James is not thinking of the men and women of the world just as individuals. He is thinking of society as a Godless institution reigned over by Satan himself. Their hearts are away from God, their values are not based on God, their ambitions are idolatrous and they forget God.

For a believer to get caught up in that maelstrom and adopt the same standards, ambitions and goals that the world seeks, and so to forget God, is an example of infidelity that deserves to be equated with unfaithful husbands and wives. We are called upon to beware of spiritual adultery, but in this modern age I think we ought just for a moment to think of the other literal sin of fornication. What a different world it is for our young folks now than what it was in my youth. If you are not prepared to engage in premarital unchastity you're thought to be psychologically odd. The whole gamut of entertainment and a great deal of literature is geared to approve of all kinds of deviant sexual behaviour. It means that we live in an age that resembles more than ever it did, the ancient Greek and Roman world in which the gospel first appeared. In a sense therefore, there's nothing unusual about it. The question arises, how did the apostles train those young converts from Corinth and elsewhere to live in a wholesome, holy fashion that would be pleasing to the Lord?

Can you imagine some visiting preacher, writing to this church in Cloughfern to express his thanks for your hospitality, and adding a P.S.—Remember that you're not supposed to commit fornication! You'd say, who does he think we are? We don't have to be told that! But the Greeks in Corinth had to be told that it was wrong. Nowadays some worldly folk in our society might need to be told it's wrong too.

The point is how did he tell them? With tremendous tenderness, Paul wrote:

Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid.

What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is outside the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.

What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Cor 6:15–20)

That body of yours is not your own, you know. 'You were bought with a price. Meats are for the belly, and the belly for meats, but ultimately the body is for the Lord' (v. 13). 'Shall I take therefore the members of Christ . . . ?' (v. 15); 'he that is joined to a harlot becomes one flesh' (v. 16); 'he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit' (v. 17). Did you notice the verb, *joined*? How did I become a member of Christ? This is the superb wonder and mystery of salvation. You've been joined to the Lord; you've become one in spirit. This is no empty daydream; it is a profound spiritual reality that when you first trusted Christ and said I will to him, you were joined in spirit to the Lord. Therefore, shall I take the members of Christ and make them a member of a harlot? What kind of disloyalty to Christ would that be? Not that people set out to be evil, but we have a relentless foe and it is possible that it should happen.

Balaam knew far better, but he was up to his tricks as usual, and taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the people of God. We still have religious leaders who say that so long as it's a loving relationship we don't see there's anything wrong in fornication. But it isn't just that particular sin that's involved in this kind of disloyalty to the Lord Jesus.

Just for the sake of completion in preaching all the Scripture, let's return to Revelation chapter 2. Our Lord Jesus said to the church at Thyatira, 'you have a woman there called Jezebel, and she likewise teaches my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things offered to idols' (v. 20). A little thought will tell us what our Lord was referring to. In a Greek city anybody could buy meat from the temple authorities—meat that had been sacrificed to idols. If you wanted to put on a super duper dinner party, you could hire a room in the temple precincts, and the meal was already laid on. It wasn't merely that, for instance, if you were a goldsmith, to get going in business you had to belong to the guild of the goldsmiths, but you would have to attend their dinner parties. At the dinner party there would be a statue of the patron god or goddess of the goldsmiths, and before the assembled businessmen began to eat, the food would be offered to the patron god or goddess.

What should a Christian do? 'Wait a minute! It would cost me a lot; I can't afford to lose out on contracts and be boycotted if I don't go to those parties.' So what should you do, then? There was someone addressed under the sobriquet of Jezebel in that church in Thyatira, who was apparently saying it was okay for Christian businessmen to engage in such a ceremony.

I have no need to talk to you about these things perhaps. An early bank manager of mine was a believer. He once told me how in his younger days the principals of his bank brought pressure to bear upon him to become a Freemason.

They said, 'If you're not a member of the Freemasons you will lose us business.'

'For the Lord's sake I couldn't do it,' he said.

In the end he didn't, and I'm pleased to say that in God's goodness he became a manager after that. But what a pressure to be under! I have known commercial travellers who are believers to be in the same position. Their employers say, 'You're not getting the orders. If you were a member of that particular society of Freemasons you would get us more orders from the shops. You must become a member.' It is common knowledge that Freemasonry is

as idolatrous as Jezebel and Ahab were, and just as bad; reverencing the same old gods and goddesses of the ancient Middle East.

How real heaven is, and are we not journeying there? The issue at stake is loyalty, undivided loyalty to our blessed Lord. To compromise with idolatry in that fashion is to provoke him to jealousy. 'I wouldn't do it if I were you', said Paul to the Corinthians. 'Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?' (10:22). When a human husband is jealous over his wife, who knows what he'll do? If we provoke the Lord to jealousy it is because he loves us—not out of spite, that he will go to the most extreme measures to bring us back.

In what other spheres would this lesson be applicable? Let me talk once more to my younger brothers and sisters in Christ.

For I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy: for I espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. (2 Cor 11:2-3)

In modern English the word *simplicity* means something quite different from what it means here in Scripture. In the English of our Authorised Version, simplicity has its ancient meaning of something that is one-fold, instead of, say, two-fold. The other word for two-foldness in English is *duplicity*. We can illustrate this by the situation Paul mentions here. I've espoused you as a chaste virgin to Christ—engaged but not yet married. Paul says that he's afraid that Satan will get at—notice this—your minds. It's your thoughts, your intellectual life: he's trying to get at your undeviating, one-fold intellectual loyalty to the Lord Jesus. Is Satan interested in your studies? He is indeed. Is he interested in your thoughts? Supremely so! Satan isn't always to be found in Soho, he prowls around a good many universities that I know of, and he gets far more victims there. You see, it isn't merely bodily indiscretions. At the heart of things it is our loyalty to the Lord Jesus—that's what he's after.

I don't know much about these things, you'll have to help me; but after many years I've kind of gathered that before a young lady is engaged she's free to keep an open mind. Shall it be Tom? There's a lot to be said for Tom, but what about Bill? Then there's Robert: he has a beautiful personality. Now which shall it be? Some days she thinks Robert and some days she thinks Tom, and some days she thinks nobody at all! Why not keep an open mind on such things as long as you can? But once she becomes engaged and has given her word, that's the end of keeping an open mind. To continue to consider other possibilities is not being very clever and scientific, it's being disloyal and there are uglier words to describe it.

'I've espoused you to the blessed Lord Jesus', says Paul. He wants your intellectual loyalty, and in that sense to keep an open mind is not clever. You mustn't imagine that I'm arguing for intellectual obscurantism. I'm not telling you that you shouldn't go for advanced study because it might upset your faith, of course not. We are to love the Lord with all our mind.

But watch what Satan did with Eve. God has said, 'Of all the trees you may freely eat, but you mustn't eat of this particular tree, for in the day you eat of it, you shall surely die' (Gen 2:16-17). Along came Satan:

'I hear that you can't eat of any of these trees around here at all'.

'Oh, that's not right', she said. 'We can eat any of them, except this one here.'

'I thought so', said Satan; 'that's typically God. He could make you a lot happier but he loves to keep things from you. Actually it's a very nice tree; isn't it time you grew up Eve? Open your eyes; don't be narrow-minded. It's a beautiful tree; there's nothing wrong with it.'

She said, 'I don't know, I haven't looked at it'.

'Well, look at it! I told you, it's a beautiful tree, the leaves are beautiful to look at, the fruit is good to taste, and it will make you wise. What's the harm in it? You are in a very restricted atmosphere Eve.'

'No', said Eve. 'God has said if we eat of it we shall surely die.'

'Of course you won't die! The real explanation is that if you eat of it you shall be as God, knowing good and evil.'

That was true, when she ate it she would be as God. The cruelty was that this alternative explanation was coupled with the plain straightforward denial of God's word.

But Adam and she took the alternative explanation and lost their simple (one-fold) loyalty to God and his word. It was a disaster. They were indeed as God, knowing good and evil; but they had no power against the evil. Instead of rising in the universe, they found themselves sinking to the level of an animal and worse. They had always been naked. So are the animals of course, they don't bother. But when Adam and Eve discovered they were naked they were ashamed.

'I'm afraid for you', says Paul (1 Cor 11:3), 'lest Satan do that kind of thing with you.' He'll try to get you to accept explanations of life and the universe that destroy your intellectual loyalty to the Lord Jesus. It is a big battle, isn't it? You go to school or to college and they discover that you believe the Bible. 'Don't you know there are mistakes in the Bible?' they say. What's the issue at stake when people talk like that? Fundamentally it's what our Lord himself said about the Bible being God's holy word.

Let us investigate every branch of science or language and literature we possibly can. What fun they are! The only sure way to do it is in loyalty to the Creator himself. The study of the creation at any level that leads you to doubt the loyalty of the Creator and the truth about his character will prove an unqualified disaster. What are we going to do then, when we find a difficulty that we can't answer? The worldly man says to you, 'have you any answer for this apparent contradiction in Scripture?' You say: 'No, I don't know what the answer is'. There you are, you're not scientific! You're prepared to still go on believing, and you're not being scientific.

Let me use another example; forget the Bible for a moment. Here's Mr X, he's a brilliant scientist. He has a pet scientific theory and he labours long and hard in his laboratory to prove his theory. He nearly proved it, when some other scientist brings to light a whole lot of new facts that don't fit in with his theory. What is he going to do? If he's a good scientist he'll have to say, 'I must accept the new facts. This is the game, it destroys my original

theory but I can't help that, I'm a scientist.' (They don't all behave exactly like that. Sometimes they sit on the new facts, but they shouldn't if they're good scientists.) So he accepts the new facts just like that, and of course that's how he becomes a good scientist.

But one day some chap says, 'I'm sorry to hear about your wife'.

'What do you mean?' he says.

'Well they say that the other night she was at such and such a hotel. . . I'd better not say any more, but everybody knows it.'

Now what does the scientist say? 'More facts—I've got to accept facts, and therefore I think that she would do that.'

If he said that would you think: what a brilliant scientist, he's ready to believe anything that's said against his wife?

No, you'd say, 'this isn't dealing with atoms or something; it's dealing with human personality and character'. You would expect the man to say, 'what are you saying about my wife? I will not believe it; I don't care about the evidence. I know my wife, and though the evidence looks damning there'll be an explanation for it.'

Human wives can go wrong, can't they? But there's a vast difference between a scientist dealing with facts, and a scientist dealing with a question of the loyalty and character of his wife.

Behind holy Scripture stands the authority of Jesus Christ our Lord. Ultimately it's a question of what you think about his character. Suppose you can't answer all the difficulties, what are you to do? You do what the man did about his wife. You say, 'I can't answer the difficulties, but I know Christ, and he cannot lie. Somewhere there is an explanation that will explain that difficulty, I'm sure of it.' You're not being unscientific; you trust the final arbiter and the truth himself.

Oh young folks, do beware of doing the spiritual splits. Believing in Christ in the Sunday School, at the Breaking of Bread, at the Bible class, and then going out to your laboratory and holding theories that imply Jesus Christ is not true. You cannot solve every difficulty, but history would teach us a lesson.

Let me take an old chestnut out of the fire. In the last century there were people, for instance, that would say to believers, 'Fancy believing the Old Testament. It talks of a king called Sargon but there never was such a king called Sargon. There's no record of him anywhere in the ancient records. The Bible has got it wrong.' Believers who got overly impressed with that kind of thing and forgot their loyalty to the Lord would have said, 'the Bible's mistaken, how do I get over that? Jesus Christ said it's the word of God but perhaps he didn't know what he was talking about.' Some theologians go that far nowadays. They say that Jesus Christ was mistaken; 'you can't trust what he said because he just didn't know'.

The learned archaeologists got working, and one day they uncovered an inscription. There was King Sargon, large as life! It would have been a poor job if you had gone home to heaven in those days before the inscription had been found. 'I want a word with you', says the Lord. 'I see in your essay you wrote that the Bible is wrong because it talks about a Sargon and there's no historical evidence outside the Bible for Sargon. I've got the evidence', says the Lord. 'Here is the evidence in my book!' What will you say to Christ then?

In his wonderful essay on the obstinacy in belief⁴ C. S. Lewis talks of a man who's been prosecuted in the courts for very serious false dealings. Through all the lower courts and the appeal courts the evidence has been against him, and it looks massive. Everybody has come to the conclusion that the man is a twister and a rogue. At the last court, they find the extra evidence that acquits him, shows him to have been an honourable citizen all the way along. As he comes down the step of the court, a free and vindicated man, here comes his one solitary friend who all the time had said, 'I do not accept that he's dishonourable. I know him and I am sure that one day he'll be vindicated.' Now the man is vindicated, and the friend walks up to meet him and says, 'Well done, I always knew you were true'. Then come some of his other friends: 'Congratulations', they say; 'but the evidence did look very strong against you'. Yes, that would be a little bit embarrassing!

Let us live so that when we meet Christ the first five minutes won't be embarrassing. 'Lord, I doubted your word because the evidence went against you!' We are espoused to a husband, Jesus Christ. We hold to his utter truthfulness and veracity. On that we cannot keep an open mind, these things are so desperately important.

Let us turn now to other practical matters. If it is so important, what can be done to foster loyalty? There I simply call your attention to Numbers chapters 28 and 29, where God speaks to Israel. When you first read them, these chapters sound as boring as you can possibly imagine. They're all about feasts and festivals, and sacrifices that have to be offered, all in great detail, numerically spelt out time and time again with repetition. Where you might have thought an odd *etc.* would have saved you reading a lot of verses, there they are, all spelled out again!

These are in fact what we call the Feasts of the Lord, but the particular emphasis that Numbers has is this:

Command the children of Israel, and say unto them, My oblation, my food for my offerings made by fire, of a sweet savour unto me, shall ye observe to offer unto me in their due season.
(28:2)

My oblation; my food; my offerings. You say, 'that's a very curious concept. Does God have to be fed?' He does! The mystery is great, but the God who gives us all things, and in one sense needs nothing, comes to us asking to be fed. Shall we not remember that lovely verse where our Lord Jesus stands outside and knocks upon the door:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. (Rev 3:20)

Here lies the wonderful secret of maintaining loyalty to the Lord Jesus. How do you maintain loyalty in a family anyway? How do husband and wife maintain loyalty all down the years?

⁴ Essay originally delivered to the Oxford Socratic Club in 1953 under the title 'Faith and Evidence' and then republished in 1955 under the current title 'Obstinacy in Belief' (*The Sewanee Review* 63/4: 525-538). It was subsequently republished in *The World's Last Night' and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960).

They tell me that in the House of Commons the previous Speaker, who was a delightful believer, some of the MPs who were believers and their wives put on meetings particularly for the wives of the MPs. The MPs are so often away from home, and all night sittings, and when they come home they've got to attend their political surgeries, and therefore the wives see very little of them. It's remarkably difficult to go on year after year and not see much of each other, not able to do many things together. You might as well be separate individuals. The casualty rate in marriages in those circles is exceedingly high for that very reason. How do you maintain loyalty?

We are espoused to Christ, how are we going to keep loyalty going? Israel was espoused to God, how would they keep loyalty going? Well the simple answer is: they'll do things together. 'You will feed me', says God. That's the simplest of all things to do, isn't it? You get to know people when you feed them. So God instituted a whole range of festivals. There were the rhythms of nature: morning and night, the weekly Sabbath, and the new moon. 'You will mark all those occasions with offerings when you will come and feed me', said God.

We don't have to keep new moons and Sabbaths, but we have to feed the Lord. How do you propose to maintain loyalty to the Lord, if you don't go out of your way to entertain him morning and night; weekly at the Lord's Supper, as the month begins and as the year ends? You say, 'what do you mean, entertain the Lord? We've got nothing to talk about!' Day by day, week by week and month by month when we pause and think, shall we not sing:

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.⁵

As the recurrent pattern of daily life goes on, we find occasions to celebrate the Lord's faithfulness and our hearts go out to him. In Israel there was not only the rhythm of daily life, there was the rhythm of redemption. Passover, Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, Feast of Trumpets, Feast of the Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles—on each occasion Israel celebrated the great events of redemption, and as they did it they fed the heart of God. How wise God was to get those people together doing things with him, so that their loyalty might be deepened.

Passover. What do you talk about to the Lord? Why not talk to him about Passover. 'Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us' (1 Cor 5:7). As you begin to think, the old fire begins to burn. The wonderful loyalty of God that gave his Son so that we might be spared the judgement and be free: the sheer remembrance of it begins to deepen the bands of loyalty.

Pentecost. What's Pentecost all about? If the Lord were to turn up tonight at your table, like he had a habit of doing with Mary and Martha, and he started to talk about Pentecost, it would be a bit embarrassing if you didn't know what he was talking about. Pentecost is the Feast of Firstfruits. In the Old Testament it's a picture of the great day of Pentecost in the

⁵ Thomas Obadiah Chisholm (1866–1960).

New, when the Holy Spirit came down from heaven as the firstfruit. What a thing to talk about with the Lord. 'It's marvellous, Lord, to have the gift of the Holy Spirit, but what do you mean exactly when you say it's the firstfruits?' 'Of all those wonderful things that lie in the future, you already have the Holy Spirit by my grace' (Rom 8:23). And as we talk with him the loyalty gets deepened.

Tabernacles. At the end of the year, when they'd reaped the corn harvest and the grape harvest, they sat in booths that they made out of the leafy trees, kind of shelters, and looked back over the way that the Lord had led them. The prophets helped them to look forward to the great, ultimate Feast of Tabernacles when God would make unto all the nations a feast of fat things, of wines on the lees, when God would swallow up death in victory and wipe away all tears (Isa 25:6–8). Yes that was real: they had been redeemed out of Egypt. It is also true that there's a glorious future, and their loyalty to the Lord was deepened.

All those things are in the future for us when the Lord comes and wipes away all tears and swallows up death in victory. It's all about the future; isn't that a bit unreal for the average teenager to take in?

Have you never been on holiday—Malaga or somewhere? Half the fun of it is sitting at home in front of the fire on a cold February night with all the brochures. 'Look, that's the very hotel we're going to, and that's the blue, blue sea. I'm going there, you're coming with me, and what shall we do when we get there?' What fun it is, anticipating what you're going to do, and it binds the friendship together.

I tell you it's a sacred thing to sit by the fire on a cold February night with his book in your hand, and talk to the Lord about what he's going to do when we get home to glory. It would make your heart well up. What we're going to do with him, and he with us: it gets the loyalty going. This is a cruel world. If you don't entertain the Lord in your heart and home, and in your life—if you just meet him on special occasions—you're going to find it very difficult to remain loyal to him.

God says to Moses, 'There's one thing I'd like you to do before you die' (Num 31:2). 'I want you to avenge Israel of the Midianites, and then you must come home.' Here are two very poignant things: Moses had to go home; and it would be before Israel got into the Promised Land. It was because earlier he had rebelled against the Lord; it couldn't be undone and he reaped the consequences. There are sins that we shall never be able to undo which will have consequences for the rest of our lives. That's solemn, isn't it? 'Don't depress me further', you say. 'I have done such sins and I have to live with their consequences.' But there is hope.

Israel joined themselves to Baal-peor and were disloyal to the Lord and God had to discipline them. Then God said to Moses: 'I want you to give my people a chance to put it right'. So they went and fought the Midianites, won the victory, brought in the great spoil, gave part of it to the Lord and the rest they kept. There are some things we shall never be able to undo this side of glory, but we don't need to despair. We are sorry now, and we can make capital out of it. Having learned from our mistakes and now determined by God's grace never to do it again, to recover as far as it is possible what we've lost, what rich lessons can be learned from it. What spoil can be taken from it.

In your youth you went astray perhaps. The tears have been bitter, you can't undo it now; but you've come back to the Lord and you've brought some spoil. It has goaded you to go on with the Lord and keep things right. What advice you can give to the younger Christians, what victories over the enemy that you can now get because of your exercise about the mistake that you once made. Some of the riches in glory will be as a result of our exercise of soul to recover from the mistakes we've made in life. So we must keep on fighting right to the end of the journey.

With these final observations I must close and let you go. In the very first verses of the book of Numbers God reminded Israel that they must number the people: 'all that are ready to go forth to war' (v. 3). He made it very clear that getting through this wilderness would be a battle. Some of them fought very honourably, and when we come to the end of the book there is a serious but somewhat amusing incident (ch. 32). We are told that when at last they got near to the Promised Land they had quite a few battles, conquered quite a few kings, and got to themselves a large bit of territory on the eastern side of the Jordan. Reuben and some of the others saw that it was a place for cattle, and they said, 'why don't we settle down here? It would be just the place for our cattle, and all our goods and chattels. The Lord surely has given us this bit of land with all this grass.'

So they came to Moses with their proposal. He nearly flew off the handle (or whatever dignified people do in those circumstances!).

Shall your brethren go to war, and shall ye sit here? And wherefore discourage ye the heart of the children of Israel from going over into the land which the Lord hath given them? Thus did your fathers, when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to see the land. For when they went up unto the valley of Eshcol, and saw the land, they discouraged the heart of the children of Israel, that they should not go into the land which the Lord had given them. (32:6-9)

'You're doing the same thing as your fathers did. You're refusing to go in, and you're going to discourage the people. God will destroy us. You evil crowd!'

'Moses, calm down for just a minute. We're not as evil as you think. God himself has given us this grass and this land here. We're prepared to go and fight, Moses. We'll just leave our little ones and our wives here, and we will go in front of the whole of Israel, armed for the battle. We'll go over Jordan and not rest until every Israelite has come into his inheritance on the other side. When they've done that we'll come back here.'

'If you're prepared to do that', said Moses, 'that's all right. But remember, if you're not prepared to go on fighting until we all get into the inheritance, and you settle down here, then you won't be allowed even this bit of the inheritance.'

What kind of lesson is that for us? We haven't attained yet (Phil 3:12). We must fight and we must press on. I don't suppose I am talking to anybody like this tonight; but let's suppose some imaginary person. You know you're forgiven, justified by faith, you have eternal life, and you'll never perish.

You say, 'Yes my brother, and when I got converted my family didn't like it. I had to go through quite a lot of battles.'

'I know that, but I didn't see you at the prayer meeting or the Bible reading last week.'

'I don't come to those. Some folks take these things a lot further than others, but I'm content to know I'm born again. I have eternal life, I shall never perish, and one of these days I shall be in heaven. All the other things—church truth, prophecy and all those things they go in for, I'm not interested in that.'

'What about sanctification and getting more like the Lord?'

'Well no, I'm content to be just like I am!'

But wait a minute, who gave you permission to settle down like that? Was salvation your idea? Wasn't it the Lord's idea? 'It's Christ who took hold of us', says Paul; and when he took hold of us he had a goal in view. You're not allowed to settle down until you've reached that goal. We're not to say, 'I'm sure I'm saved and I've got eternal life, so I don't go in for these other things'. But my brother, you have no choice. We have to follow on so that we might at last attain to the goal that Christ has in view.

What happens if you don't? Well you'll discourage all the others, as Moses said the Reubenites would do. If I don't go on with the Lord, I'm discouraging others of the Lord's people. If heaven is real then I must not stop my progress, I must not stop fighting, I must stand solidly with the people of God until at last we 'attain unto the resurrection from the dead' (v. 11). We are to enjoy all God's blessings that he gives us now, but do you not see that the extent to which we shall enjoy heaven and the inheritance when we get there will in part depend on the progress we have made in divine things in this life.

These things are real, and we need to help each other. In the days when I would lose heart, fail to press on and be too soon content—when I see you enjoying the Lord that will be a great encouragement to me. But in another sense too, in refusing to be content, always pressing forward so that you might grasp ever more fully the purpose and the goal for which Christ saved you. When I see your zeal in the vanguard—leading the hosts of God's people, fighting the enemy, urging us on to bigger exploits, further attacks and greater possessions—you'll rouse the courage of a laggard even like me, and encourage me too, to press on to glory.

The Lord help us thus to learn the lessons of his word for our eternal benediction.

About the Author

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