

# **Studies in Numbers**

*David Gooding*

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## Introduction

Welcome to this, the first of our series of studies in the book of Numbers. If the Lord so will, we may be given the opportunity to take our studies further after necessary interludes of one kind and another. So let's begin our study by reading an actual portion from the book of Numbers.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.'  
(6:22–27)

May the Spirit who inspired these words use our studies together today and in the coming weeks, that we too may feel and know and experience the blessing of God.

### **Introduction to the chart**

Now a few words to begin with about the chart that you see in front of you.<sup>1</sup> The material in the chart is aimed at bringing out some of the dominant themes of the book of Numbers as a way to get them into our heads. I do not claim that this is a full account of all the most important things in the book of Numbers. I do not even claim that the various sections that I have outlined would be agreed by all biblical students. This is just one attempt to get some of the dominant themes of the book of Numbers. As you know, I have lived in Belfast for over forty years, and I have to confess to you that I have never sat down and tried to memorize the names of all the streets in Belfast. Yet in spite of that, I can more or less find my way around Belfast, and I've got to know which of the surrounding towns lie on the north side of Belfast Lough and which on the south. Why do I mention that? Well because getting to know the broad areas in Belfast and how they lie compared with one another is one way of getting yourself about the city. And if we are to get a whole book like Numbers into our heads—and God help us to get it into our heads: some of us know more about the rules of golf than we do about Numbers!—one of the ways to do it is to map out some of the dominant themes and then to study how, if at all, they relate to one another.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix, p78–79. This chart will be mentioned frequently in subsequent sections. The reader may find it convenient to print these two pages for ease of reference. In the text, the columns in the charts will be marked [1.A], etc. for those on the first page; and [2.A], etc. for the second page.

## **Why should we know about Numbers?**

So now, let us think why we should be interested in the book of Numbers anyway. It is a fact that you can get to heaven without knowing anything about the book of Numbers. I doubt very much whether the dying thief knew anything about Numbers whatsoever. He was a kind of a terrorist bandit, but when he confessed his sin to the Lord at Calvary, the Lord assured him, that day he would be in paradise with the Lord. As the Lord has saved us and we honestly do believe that the whole Bible is inspired by God, then the implication of that belief is that we should take God's word seriously and try to understand it, for which purpose he has given us his Holy Spirit.

So why should we be interested in Numbers? Because it is the inspired word of God. Although it is a very old book—written, or began to be written, some three thousand years ago—yet it speaks directly to our needs, for this simple reason: it is an account of the epic journey of a nation across a desert towards their promised land, and all the things that happened to them on that epic journey. That speaks to us immediately, because having been redeemed by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we too are on a journey. For that chapter which reminds us that we have been redeemed by the blood of Christ as of the Passover lamb, holds out before us this glorious hope:

He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. (1 Pet 1:3–4)

And since we got converted, our life is a journey towards that inheritance.

## **An analogy for us**

That simple analogy between our journey and Israel's experience after they were redeemed and their journey across the desert towards their promised land, will raise a number of very big and practical points. Let's begin by considering the nature of Israel's journey. What was the nature of it? Well, you can say it was a physical journey—geographical, if you like. When they left Egypt, all they had to do was point their noses roughly north-north-east, start walking and carry on walking; and if they carried on walking, in a comparatively short time they would reach their promised land. That was the nature of the journey, a bit rough maybe across the desert, but it was a physical journey. Of course it was chronological as well, because it took up a certain amount of time, though had things gone well, they could have been there within a month or two. Things didn't go well, and they weren't there for over forty years.

But it wasn't just a physical journey. What Israel discovered was that it proved to be a journey into the discovery of God, a discovery of what God is really like. Sometimes that was enjoyable, and sometimes it was decidedly not so. When they first came out of Egypt they thought their God was superb. God had done that stupendous miracle and parted the waters of the Red Sea. As they stood on the other side and saw pharaoh's chariots drowned, so there was no danger of their being recaptured, they sang, 'The Lord is my salvation, the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea' (see Exod 15:1–2). They thought he was wonderful.

A few weeks down the road they ran out of water, and they promptly changed their minds about God, and they told him so in no uncertain terms. They said, 'God, you'll have to do better for us than this, for if you don't, we won't go on believing in you.' They tempted the Lord God saying, 'Is the Lord really among us?' (see Exod 17:3-7). I've known Christians who, when they got converted, were full of joy and thought God was wonderful; and then things happened in life and they weren't so sure. Some of them have ceased to believe in God altogether. It was a journey then into the discovery of what God is really like. There were times of tremendous blessing; there were times of severe testing.

It was another journey as well, for it had another dimension. It was a journey into the discovery of themselves. When they stood on the banks of the Red Sea and sang their hearts out in praise to God, I think they felt so good that if they only jumped up a bit higher their head would go through into heaven and they'd be there already! In fact, they talked at the end of that song, 'Oh Lord, you're going to bring us in' (see Exod 15:17). Heaven seemed very near and they felt very good.

There came, in the course of their journey, some great temptations. Now God doesn't tempt anybody with evil, but God sometimes allows us to come into temptations put in our way by the master tempter himself. And sometimes God lets us find out that we're not, through and through, the very nice people we thought we were. That can be a shock to the system, but how will we advance in holiness unless God graciously allows us to discover false attitudes that we haven't even realized are there, so that we can then repent of them and be delivered from them.

It was not only a physical journey, therefore, but a journey into the discovery of what the God of their redemption was really like, and a journey into the discovery of themselves. The book of Numbers will tell us how they got on, and how God first of all prepared them for what lay ahead.

## Preparation for the Journey

Let us notice first where the history of Numbers begins. It begins after the giving of the law at Sinai. This wasn't the beginning of their journey, which began when they came out of Egypt, redeemed and delivered by the blood of the Passover lamb, and then delivered by the power of God at the Red Sea. As I said earlier, things seemed to be going well. Then God allowed them to run out of water and they turned around and tempted God, told God straight if he didn't do better than this, they were doing to ditch him altogether. God in his mercy brought them to repentance over it, and they proceeded and came at length to Mount Sinai.

There they had what must have been an indescribably awesome experience, as the living God descended on Mount Sinai in flame and in tempest, until the very earth shook under the feet of its creator. As Moses was never tired of reminding them, they didn't see any form but they heard the voice. Standing at the foot of that mountain, they clearly, distinctly, powerfully, heard the very voice of God speaking to them, and enunciating the ten laws that were the basis of his covenant. 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods but me; you shall not make a carved image or bow down to it,' and so forth and so on (see Exod 20:1–17). And the covenant was put to them, and they said, 'Yes, all that the Lord has commanded we will do' (see Exod 24:3).

And so Moses went up the mountain, the covenant was sealed, and God invited Moses to go again up the mountain where he would give Moses the specifications for building a tabernacle where God might graciously come down and dwell among them. That was magnificent wasn't it? A race of ex-slaves they were, now not only redeemed, but the living God was going to dwell among them in the tabernacle they would be allowed to make for him.

### **A faltering start**

So Moses had gone up the mountain to get the instructions for the tabernacle, but when he was a little bit longer up there than they had expected, they lost faith in him completely. They said, 'As for this Moses, we don't know what's become of him, and here we are sitting at the bottom of this mountain in the wilderness. He said he was coming back again but that's what he said last Tuesday and he isn't back yet' (see Exod 32:1). And so they compelled Aaron to make them a god to go before them. They surrendered their earrings, strange things to make gods out of, but in those days people carried their excess wealth not in a bank deposit—there weren't any!—but on their persons. They stripped off their ornaments, worth an awful lot of money, and gave them to Aaron to make a god that would go before them on their desert way.

You've got to have something to aim at in life haven't you? And sometimes it can happen that people who start towards their inheritance as redeemed people following the Lord, get so embroiled in business that their money becomes their goal in life. Well if God had destroyed them there and then, they couldn't have complained—so soon after hearing the voice of God at Sinai. But in his mercy, and as a result of Moses' intercessions, God pardoned the nation and allowed them to continue on with the journey.

## Preparations

'But now,' says God, 'before you move another inch, we better make some preparations and provisions for you, and lay down certain directions, and certain commandments and rules for you on the journey.' And so the first ten chapters are preparation for the journey (see first page of chart in Appendix). They're not moving now: they're still stuck at Sinai, but they will not be allowed to move until God has laid down the provisions, the rules, the regulations, the directions which, if they would adhere to them, would keep them safe on their journey towards their inheritance. So let's briefly have a look at what some of those provisions were. We will not have time to begin to study the detail of them, but let's try and get the book in our minds. What provisions would he make?

## Numbering

Well first of all, there was the numbering for the journey [[1.A](#)], which was not just to find out how many there were. In the ancient world, numbering was a way of organizing a people, so you read that generals before a battle would number the troops. That is a way of organizing them into their various sections and so forth. So the people had to be numbered. There were two lots of numbering, the first was the numbering of the twelve tribes. And right from the word go, the point of the numbering is made clear. 'You are to number everybody from twenty years old in every one of the tribes who are able to go to war' (see Num 1:2-3). You say, 'Why was it important that they should be numbered for war? When they got to the promised land, there were battles enough, but were there many battles in the desert?' But you know, there's more than one kind of war, and God was making it very clear that their journey through the desert wouldn't be a comfortable Sunday afternoon stroll. They had to go across the Sinai desert and, even to this day, if you're living in that part of the world and going across the Sinai Desert, you have to give your name in to the authorities who will try to make sure that you've got enough water to survive, and so that they know where you're meant to be going. And if you don't arrive they can send out a rescue team before the carrion crows and the vultures get you. It's a dangerous business.

I don't want to be melancholy lest you never come again, but you will remember that Paul, writing to Timothy, speaks of the need to 'fight the good fight of the faith' (1 Tim 6:12). My dear brothers and sisters, the way home to glory can be marked with much joy and celebration and thanksgiving to God. There were marvellous times on the road, and sometimes at the oases, like Kadesh-barnea, it was delightful. But there is no disguising the fact that very often it was a fight just to keep going. And what is interesting is that—just as for war—they're told how they are to camp and what order they are to march in. And then

another big secret comes out. They were to camp on four sides of a square with the tabernacle in the middle of them, which was the dwelling place of God; and when they went on the road, they were to see to it that the tabernacle was in the middle. If you know anything about ancient warfare, you know that an army would put at the very middle the thing that they counted most valuable: this they would fight to the death for. And here, they were to get ready to fight for the presence of God among them and for their fellowship with God.

You may think that I've got it the wrong way around. Surely, it isn't us who fight to protect the Lord, it's the Lord who fights to protect us. That is perfectly true. What could we do, veritable pygmies that we are, unless the Lord fought for us! And yet as we walk across our wilderness, life gets very busy. Am I exaggerating when I say that one of the things you'll have to fight for is to maintain the time for fellowship with God, and for the worship and service of God? Life will get so hectic, it will be a fight. It can be a fight just to get the time to read holy Scripture. In the modern world husband and wife both have to work long hours, and can never get away from the boss because they have these mobile phones and can't ever get away from the thing. I tell you straight now, my younger colleagues in the Lord, you have to fight to maintain both the time and the energies for fellowship with God, and to maintain at the very heart of your life the reality of the presence of God, and the worship and the service of God.

Then there were the Levites, they had to be numbered too. When the tabernacle had to move, the Levites had to come and take it down. And then there were the various pieces of furniture inside—the ark, the mercy seat, the lampstand, the table of showbread and the altar of incense. And outside there was the laver, and there was the big altar, and all that they stood for. But now there was a practical job to do. They were on a journey, so when it was time to go, the priests went in and they put curtains and coverings over the holy pieces of furniture that none might see except the priests—they were exceedingly holy. But when that was done, the Levites were called in. Some had carts that they put the big side frames of the tabernacle on, and the heavy ingots of silver and the bases of the pillars and things. They could put them on carts, but the others had to carry the bits of furniture. The ark had poles in it at the side and had to be carried on people's shoulders, and likewise the little incense altar. And the lampstand was put in a frame and had to be carried, and the table had poles through it, and the big altar outside and so on. They had to be carried on their shoulders. That's why they were numbered: that was their job.

I think when they first did it, they thought it was marvellous. Fancy being allowed to carry the ark or the little incense altar. But when you've taken the tabernacle down a thousand times, and then you have put it up again, it gets a little bit monotonous. You just imagine one night, they've been trudging through the wilderness, and now it's getting late towards the evening, and they've stopped. The cloud has descended and the tabernacle is there, and they're putting the things in place. And somebody shouts, 'Bring in the big altar. Oh where is it? Whose turn was it to carry the altar? Has it been left behind?' Well that's imagination run riot isn't it! Those pieces of furniture in the tabernacle were only symbols, but they were symbols of very important things. The big altar standing for atonement, and forgiveness through the blood of the sacrifice, and the laver for regeneration and the work of the Holy Spirit. They were symbols of beautiful spiritual truths.



Tell me, is there anybody in your assembly who carries the truth of the Lord's second coming? The truth is in the Bible, as you know, but the truth of justification by faith was in the Bible for centuries, almost completely forgotten, nobody understood it, nobody personally carried it, until God raised up a chap like Martin Luther who rediscovered it. Truths, ladies and gentlemen, do not carry themselves. Truths have to be carried by people. If we're going to carry the basic doctrine of atonement, it stands to reason we shall not carry it unless we have first of all understood it, and we ourselves have been forgiven and saved, so that now we could explain to the non-Christians what the doctrine of atonement is about. Sometimes it happens that folks are saved but then not really taught thoroughly, and you produce a third generation who don't really know the basic doctrines of the faith. The truths have, so to speak, been left behind: they're in the Scriptures of course, but they're not being carried by people on two legs. I have stopped on that at some length just to show that these provisions in the book of Numbers were not only practical for the Israelites, they are pointing to exceedingly practical lessons for us. How you persuaded the Levites to take on this onerous job, we shall have to consider on another occasion. What right God had to call on them, we will find God explaining when we read the details of the text.

### **Cleanliness**

But look at this next column [\[1.B\]](#). This is all about the hygiene of the camp. They had to keep the camp clean, and of course there were very practical reasons for that. If you have several thousand people living in tents, going across a desert where water is scarce, if you weren't absolutely rigorous on insisting on personal and public cleanliness and hygiene, you'd lose most of the folks by a plague. The Roman army was very efficient but they lost more men because of the desperate lack of hygiene in the camps than they did in the battles. That's going to talk to us about keeping the camp clean in all sorts of areas. Look at that one about jealousy between man and wife. They're living in hundreds of tents, cheek by jowl. Very easy for mix-ups to occur, and for a man to become jealous. God instituted a system that would clear the wife if she were innocent, because some men can be unreasonable. It would be a sad thing that people who have been redeemed out of Egypt happily married, stood together hand in hand at the Red Sea, and ended up separated. Don't say it couldn't happen to believers. You can see why it is important to keep the camp clean.

### **Aaronic blessing**

I'm just going to mention practical things now, the Aaronic blessing. I put it down as a separate column [\[1.C\]](#). I'm not saying my chart is inspired! It is only an attempt to isolate some of the main themes. You may not think it a main theme but at this point God says to Moses,

Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them. (6:23–27)

Delightful prayer. Why have it? Well they won't get far in the wilderness before his satanic majesty will go at them and the one fundamental thing that Satan will do with them, and with us if he can, is to undermine our faith in the love and grace and mercy of God. And if Satan can break that, and make us feel aggrieved against God, he's won a very big battle. In the face of the trials that were going to come, he wanted to prepare the people. Says God, 'Aaron, do prepare the people, and constantly prepare them, put my name on them.'

The first thing they would need going through a waste, howling wilderness was to be kept. 'The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you'. What a delightful idea. I'm glad the Bible is written in simple terms, it appeals to my simple heart, and you're allowed to have imagination! God doesn't have a face like we have, but he has a face in Jesus Christ. What would it be to look up in the face of God, and see the face of God shine? I've known it to happen that mum has had a birthday and dad has got the little girl, aged four, and he's taken her to buy mum a present for her birthday. There comes the moment when the four year old is going to give this present to mum: it's all done up in ribbons and she's going to present it to mum. But the thing to look at is not the mum's face but the little girl's face: how she's enjoying this! When was the last time we looked up into the face of God, and saw God's face shining with the indescribable grace that he has brought us in salvation, through his Son, and the wealth of it grips our hearts? It's good preparation for the journey. 'The LORD make his face to shine upon you.'

Then it says, 'The LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.' That goes back to the old system among the ancients. If you went to some important man and asked a request of him, he might say no. And in the ancient world, he would just turn his face away from you. And so the technique was that, if you went with a big request to somebody like that and were afraid he might turn his face from you, you got hold of him by the beard so he had to look you in the eye. Sometimes you'll hear people say, and maybe you've said it yourself, 'My prayers these days just seem to go no further than the ceiling: it is as though God isn't hearing them.' That can be a disorientating thing in the wilderness journey if we get the impression that God just isn't listening to us. 'The LORD lift up his countenance upon you,' so that you have the sense that he is listening, even if his answer is no, or not yet, or not at all. Here's a young woman who has an incurable cancer, and knows it. Think of the parents in that situation, and of the girl herself, all the great need. It would be the sense that the Lord is listening, even if he says no to their request for healing, that will give them peace. 'The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Put my name upon them.'

### **Further preparations**

The next column in the chart [\[1.D\]](#) has to do with the dedication of the altar, and then the Levites were offered as a wave offering to God, and yielded their bodies a living sacrifice — to borrow a phrase from Romans. And finally there were the regulations for the journey [\[1.E\]](#), how they would get guidance for the journey. One of the major things that the passage begins with is the regulations for Passover. God insists, now to get it into their heads, that they must keep the Passover. They were to keep it in the first month, but if they can't for any reason — maybe because they are sick or they're on a journey — yet keep it they must. They'll have to keep it in the second month that's all, but they must keep the Passover. Why is that, and what

had that got to do with the journey? Well, the Passover is the story of how and why they came out of Egypt. If ever they were to forget why they came out of Egypt, and how they came out of Egypt, they might even be tempted to go back. So God says, 'Tell them they must keep the Passover.'

### Relevance of the preparations

How do all these preparations relate to the journey? I just want to skim through what follows with the merest indication of how these sections are related to the ones on page two of the chart. So look at the chart [\[2.A\]](#); there came a rebellion. They had got to the edge of the promised land, sent the spies in to reconnoitre it, and ten out of the twelve spies said it was a rotten old country anyway, and there were too many giants. So the people refused to go in and they talked about choosing a leader and going back to Egypt. Incredible, isn't it? No wonder that God says they must keep the Passover. They forgot why they came out of Egypt. They said, 'We remember the cucumbers and the garlic and the onions.' They didn't say, 'We remember the slave camps, and what it was to feel the lash of an Egyptian taskmaster on your back.' It's not for nothing that the Lord, at the last Passover he attended, instituted the Lord's Supper—lest we forget why we came out of *our* Egypt, and at what cost *we* came out of our Egypt. So yes, they are related.

Then we have the rebellion of Korah against Moses and Aaron [\[2.B\]](#). Korah was a Levite, and in chapter 8 we read of the dedication of the Levites and the dedication of the land, and the offering of the Levites as a living sacrifice to God. It's a pity that Korah didn't remember it. He was a Levite yet it was he who led a whole array of people in rebellion against the apostle and high priest of their confession.

And what shall we say of this next column [\[2.C\]](#)? It was the responsibility of Aaron to bless the people in the name of God. He was given a chance to do it at the rock, in Numbers 20, as God told them to take Aaron's staff, symbol of his priesthood, and he and Moses were to speak to the rock a prayer of intercession, and God would make the water come out. Instead of doing that, with the staff in his hand, Moses lost his temper and belaboured the rock, and denounced the Israelites as rebels, whereas at that moment it was Moses who was rebelling. He was misrepresenting God, who was wanting to be merciful to the people and supply their need. They utterly misrepresented God to the people, and as a result Aaron and Moses were not allowed to lead them into the promised land.

You say that ruined the blessing—if a high priest who was meant to bless them, so messes it up, then they weren't blessed. But yes they were blessed, for look at this curious character, Balaam, in the lower part of that column. He set out to curse them but in spite of all his intentions to curse Israel, and persuading God to curse Israel, he couldn't manage it. He had to tell Balak, the king of Moab, 'Sorry sir, I would like your money but I can't do it, for God has given commandment to bless and I can't reverse it.'

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it? (23:19)

God was determined to bless his people, and he had them blessed, even if that meant he had to bypass Moses and Aaron and get a rotten old prophet like Balaam to bless them. Interesting, isn't it?

Then we mentioned earlier about the trial of jealousy between a man and his wife, and we notice the parallel with what happened. After that spectacular blessing of God through Balaam the prophet, Israel turned aside and joined themselves to the old pagan god, Baal-peor, [2.D] and committed fornication and adultery with the women of Moab, and entered into their religious rites, and God was jealous. And the New Testament reminds us that that is true still. Talking to the Corinthians, Paul says, 'You'd better not go into an idol temple and eat the flesh of bulls and goats that have just been offered on the altar and brought to your table by the priest. You'd better not do it, for that is to partake in idolatry. Don't provoke the Lord to jealousy, for he is stronger than we are, and if we provoke the Lord to jealousy, he will deal with us (see 1 Cor 10:20–22). Our blessed redeemer will not stand by and see our love and affection taken from him and squandered on unlawful objects. God is jealous, but with the true kind of jealousy.

Then look at the final thing [2.E]. Moses thought it was a rebellion: it turned out not to be a rebellion, mercifully. The generation that refused to go into the land [2.A] had by this time died off. So the people that this column applies to are the new generation, and they *are* going into the land. These are some of the experiences that they would be brought through to prepare them for their actual going into the land.

## Summary

That's a rough and ready account of Numbers. I hope it hasn't put you off. But when we note the flow of the book, it looks to be deliberately written. The preparations, when we understand them, will evidently be both practical and necessary, and we shall be able to relate them to what happened. We will see how, when the people took advantage of the preparations they were blessed; and how, when they disregarded the preparations, they brought themselves into suffering, if not disaster.

Let us pray.

Lord, we thank thee for thy word. We thank thee that it carries the ring of truth. We bless thee for its self-evident practical implications, we bless thee for it expresses thy kindness, thy covenant love. And we pray tonight, Lord, in the middle of our journey, some of us nearer its end, we pray that by thy grace, our blessed high priest in glory may speak the words of blessing to our hearts and make them real that we might find grace and help in the pathway ahead. Fill our hearts with a sense of thy wealth, and the rejoicing in thyself and in thy salvation. Help us to walk circumspectly, and to come through our trials to thy glory, and for the sake of our blessed Lord Jesus. Bless us now, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## On the Journey – The First Rebellion

The book of Numbers appeals to us because, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, we have been redeemed by the blood of our Passover Lamb, that is our Lord Jesus Christ, and we are journeying on towards our inheritance, incorruptible, and untainted, and that fades not away, reserved in heaven for us. Therefore the account of Israel's journey and what happened on it will immediately speak to us, and its relevance will be obvious. One possible analysis of the book is to read it as the first ten chapters are God's preparation, his rules, his regulations, his guidance, his provision for the people. It begins after they had arrived at Sinai; and at Sinai, not only were they given the law, but they came perilously near to complete apostasy. Only by the mercy of God was the nation allowed to continue its journey on towards their promised land. So before they marched on from Sinai, and began to resume their journey, God laid down a number of rules, regulations and provisions for them, to prepare them for the rigours of the journey that lay ahead.

Then we notice that when it comes to the actual journey itself, there's a recurrent theme of rebellions, which makes it, as some have observed, a melancholy analysis (see second page of Appendix). And so we need to do a little homework for our subsequent studies because, God willing, we will consider each of those rebellions. The question will arise whether they are all the same or whether they are different. We shall ask what the rebellion is about on each occasion. Secondly, we're going to ask how many of these rebellions are mentioned in the New Testament. I can think of one at least, and when the New Testament quotes the rebellions from Numbers to us as Christians, that is evidence that we ought to take these rebellions seriously, and not to suppose that we are completely safeguarded against any rebellion. The New Testament itself mentions some of these rebellions, so one bit of homework for next week and the ensuing weeks, is to ask how many of these rebellions are mentioned in the New Testament, where are they mentioned, and what does the New Testament say about them? Beginning next week, the teacher might ask how many you have found, and how they relate to us and what they signify. And then we shall ask about how these sacrifices in each column relate to the rebellions.

### **Parallels and differences**

So now as we continue our studies of the book of Numbers and its record of the nation's epic journey across the desert to their promised inheritance, we notice that we, as believers, having been born again and redeemed by the blood of our Passover lamb, are on a journey likewise towards our inheritance, reserved in heaven for us. The analogy between the two, therefore, is very helpful, and the Old Testament story helps us because it illustrates the corresponding

element in our Christian salvation. But at the beginning of our study tonight, I would like to emphasize the importance of noticing the differences between Israel's experience and ours, otherwise we might fall into the mistake of thinking that our experience is exactly the same as theirs, and theirs exactly the same as ours.

So take the beginning of it all. Israel were redeemed and delivered from the tyranny of pharaoh, and from the wrath of God by the blood of their Passover lamb. We too have been delivered from the wrath of God by the blood of our Passover Lamb, namely Jesus Christ our Lord. But notice the very big difference between the wrath of God from which the Israelites were delivered, and the wrath of God from which we are delivered. The wrath of God fell upon only the first born in the families of Egypt; and had it fallen upon the Israelites, it would only have fallen on the first born in each family. So their being delivered by the blood of the Passover lamb from the wrath of God meant deliverance of the first born from death at the hands of the angel of destruction. And the wrath of God was, as we would term it, a temporal judgment, not the eternal judgment. But when we Christians believe that we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Jesus Christ our Lord, notice the future tense: 'we shall be saved from the wrath of God through him' (see Rom 5:9). The wrath of God that we are talking about in that context is the eternal wrath of God—eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord. So there are very big differences between Israel's experience and ours.

It is so at the other end of the journey. Israel's inheritance to which they marched was so many acres of land in the Middle East. Good land, yes, flowing with milk and honey, but still a geographical land in the Middle East. Our inheritance is different: it is an inheritance incorruptible, untainted and undefiled, reserved in heaven for us. If we then notice the difference, we can also see a similarity, and this will become important for us this evening. A similarity between what they had to do to get into their inheritance, and what we have to do now that we are in ours. They had to fight to get in. When you read the book of Joshua, you will find that the first half records all of the battles that the Israelites had to fight under Joshua. They had to fight them throughout half the book; they weren't allowed to settle down. They had no rest: they had to remain in the military camp as their base, and from there go forth to fight the battles of the Lord. And the battles fill half the book of Joshua. It's not until all the kings and authorities had been put down that the book of Joshua would say that the land had rest and the people were free, then, to enter their inheritance.

That is true of us too. There's a sense in which we are already in our inheritance. Though we are here with two feet on earth, in Ephesians we are said to be risen with Christ and seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. God help us to understand what that means. But we are likewise told that for the present, in the heavenly places, we are engaged in warfare.

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day. (Eph 6:12-13)

While that is true of us now, one day the Lord will put down all rule and authority, and we shall enter the eternal rest of God and enjoy our inheritance to the full. So with those preliminary thoughts, let's now come back to fulfil the promise that we made last time.

## The rebellions

I said that in the brief sessions that we have together, we will be concentrating on these rebellions in the second half of the book. On the first occasion we noticed at what point the Israelites were travelling. They had come out of Egypt, they had arrived at Sinai where they had received the law. But at Sinai they came perilously near to apostatizing from God altogether. They made themselves a golden calf to follow, instead of following the Lord, and the Lord came near to destroying the lot of them. Through Moses' intercession, and the spectacular grace of God, God forgave them. Some of them were destroyed, but God forgave the nation as a whole, and the nation as a whole was thus allowed to carry on and journey towards its inheritance.

Before they were allowed to journey, God laid down these preparations and provisions, and we briefly noticed how these provisions and preparations are related to the subsequent history. Tonight we're going to begin to look in earnest at this first rebellion. We shall see that if only they had carefully followed this preparation, particularly that of the Passover, and the guidance by the cloud, and the guidance by the ark, they might never have involved themselves in this rebellion. Our first purpose is to ask ourselves what exactly that rebellion involved, as distinct from these other rebellions. There's a thing about sin, and in particular about rebellions, that they're not necessarily monotonously the same. Sin has a tremendous variety to it, and that's why it catches us all unaware sometimes, as rebellions do likewise. And it is our wisdom to distinguish the different points of the rebellions that we might be knowledgeable about them, and be wary of them.

Did you hear the story about the ridiculous Englishman? (You say which one, of all the many!) There was a seaside place with a very dangerous cliff. So the town council took advice and decided to set up a warning sign, 'Don't come too near the edge of the cliff.' And nobody fell over for years, so they said to themselves, 'Well what's the point of this warning then?' And they took it down. And then of course, somebody fell over. Silly wasn't it? They should have left the warning in place. Have you any notion why the Holy Spirit has put these rebellions here? It is, of course, to help us not to fall into the same trap, and to become rebels in the same way, which is why men study it.

### The first rebellion—Disbelief and disobedience

If we were in any doubt as to why we must study it, we shall notice that in Psalm 95, the Holy Spirit preaches a sermon and he bases his sermon on the historic fact of this rebellion. And when the Holy Spirit comes to write the New Testament, he repeats the sermon—and it's not there for nothing. You will find it in Hebrews 3 and 4, where almost the entirety of those two chapters is taken up by a sermon given by the Holy Spirit based on this rebellion. We have to take it seriously. So let us now ask what the nature of the rebellion was, and we shall read from the actual text of Numbers.

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is

the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?' And they said to one another, 'Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.' Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, 'The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.' Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones. But the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel. And the LORD said to Moses, 'How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?' (14:1-11)

Now let's look at Hebrews 3, to pick up the first exhortation that the Holy Spirit directs towards us based on this incident in the Old Testament.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, "They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways." As I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest."' (vv. 7-11)

### **Falling away?**

Then we come to the application that the Holy Spirit makes, and you will notice how solemn it is.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. (Heb 3:12)

Now that verse has been a great puzzle and often a great pain to many believers, particularly believers with an especially tender conscience. Reading this exhortation of the Holy Spirit, they say to themselves, 'Is that possible—for a true believer to fall away from the living God and be lost?' And of course there are many believers, true believers, who actually hold that it is possible for a true believer to fall away from the living God and be lost. In my youth it used to be called the 'falling away' doctrine. This is but one of many warnings, similarly solemn, in the Epistle to the Hebrews. In my experience over many years, these are passages that have troubled many dear believers who wonder if, perhaps, they have done a sin that has now been proved unpardonable: they've fallen away and will eventually be lost. Now if any one of us should begin to think like that, the last thing to do is to run away from what the Scripture is saying. The only safe thing to do is to open the Bible and read it. But do please take notice of what the Holy Spirit actually says, instead of being happy to just paraphrase it loosely, as many people do.



So now we're going to ask ourselves, first of all, about this rebellion, the actual historical rebellion. When the people refused to enter the promised land, how did God assess it? What was involved in what they did? Were they, so to speak, dear happy believers who suddenly tripped over some vile temptation or other and got in despair and depression or something? We'll read it again in case somebody wasn't listening.

And the LORD said to Moses, 'How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?' (Num 14:11)

They didn't believe the Lord. In fact, the verse says two things. Not only did they not believe but, says God, 'How long will this people despise me?' Now ponder that a moment. How did God get that out of it? In what sense had they despised him? Well it seems to me this. God had provided them a land flowing with milk and honey, a beautiful land, got through a delightful inheritance with all its wealth and riches. But the people put their noses over the border, had a look at it and said, 'Oh no, if we'd known it was like this we wouldn't have come.' So they despised what God had given them, and that is to despise God too.

Of course, it wasn't the first time in this little bit of history that they had done that. We read that the people complained in the hearing of the Lord, and the Lord was angry (11:1). They said on another occasion, 'Why can't he give us something fresh to eat? We do remember all the beautiful fish we had in Egypt, and we got it free. And the onions and everything else, and all we have in this wilderness is this old manna stuff' (see 11:4-6). It came down from heaven nonetheless. That's very interesting, because in the book of Exodus we read that when they first got the manna, it is said that the manna tasted like wafers made with honey. But now they're bored stiff with it, this light bread, which is very odd. Because the promised land that they were going to was said to be flowing with milk and honey, and if you can't stick honey, well don't go then!

If you go to the Jewish synagogue here of a Saturday morning, when the word of God is brought out on the scroll of the Law of Moses, and it's carried around the synagogue, all the men will get their prayer shawls and touch the Law and put it to their lips. Why? They are saying what the psalm says, 'Your word to me is sweeter than honey' (see Ps 19:10). Do you find it so? Honestly? Do you find God's word sweeter than honey? You say, 'Well not all those names in Chronicles,' but some bits you find sweeter than honey. I'm glad of that, because actually the Bible is God's conversation with us. And if you can't stick his conversation now, you would be advised not to go to heaven! Imagine being in heaven for all eternity, with God speaking the kind of stuff he speaks in the Bible, how would you react to that?

'The people despised me,' says God, 'for the provision that I have given them, and then they refused to believe me.' And said the spies, 'Only do not rebel against the LORD' (14:9). For they were rebelling against the Lord, they despised him, they refused to believe him. What next? They talked of stoning the two good spies that came back with the good report. The others came back and said, 'It's a terrible land: it's a land that eats up the inhabitants.' And in the next breath they said, 'We saw the inhabitants, and they were huge men.' Well how come they have not been eaten up! Curious isn't it, how illogical our criticisms of God can be sometimes. And when Caleb and Joshua said, 'No, it's a delightful land, and the Lord will be

with us and will give them into your hand: there's nothing to fear', the result was they talked of stoning them, rebelling against them and assassinating them.

Then the people talked of choosing a leader and going back to Egypt (14:4). Rebellion is to deny the whole purpose of their redemption. For away down in Egypt, the whole point was not merely to deliver them from pharaoh, but to take them to the great inheritance God had sworn to their fathers to give them. And if you arrived at the inheritance and said, 'No thank you very much,' you are denying the whole purpose of redemption. That's serious isn't it? And then look again at what the chapter says.

None of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. None of those who despised me shall see it. (14:22-23)

Would you call them believers? No, this is a sheer rebellion of unbelief. In spite of all the evidence, beginning in Egypt with the plagues, and the evidence of the miracles in the wilderness, they still have not believed him. And they have tempted him, that is they have put a pistol to God's head, and said, 'God you'll have to do better than this, else we shall kick you out.' They despised God, they weren't nice believers who, under trials had come into difficulty and their faith had wobbled a bit, and they got downhearted and despaired, and they had been caught out in some sin or other and were feeling now they couldn't be forgiven, and it worried them stiff. It didn't worry them at all. They wanted to go back to Egypt.

Why does the Holy Spirit then cite this incident and use it as a basis to warn the Hebrew believers? Let's go back to Hebrews 3 and read what the Holy Spirit is saying.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today', that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.' For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. (vv. 12-19)

Now because this is so solemn, we must spend some time unwrapping it and unpicking it, and examining what the words mean. They provoked God; and who were they that provoked God? Were they not all that came out of Egypt by Moses? Wait a minute, what does the ancient text tell us? That all the thousands of Israelites all provoked God? To whom was it that he swore they would not enter his rest? Was it to everyone in the company? No, it was not everybody: it was the ones over twenty years old in the company who were now grown up to responsible manhood and were the leaders of their families. It was they who provoked the Lord and, among that group, only Joshua and Caleb brought back a good report. It was to those over twenty that God said, 'You'll not enter my rest then, you'll die in the wilderness,'

and they did die in the wilderness. That left those that were under twenty when they came out, to marry eventually and have families. By the time the nation went in, the people that were nineteen when they came out were of course fifty-nine before they got in. And the wilderness, for them, was a time of discipline, and trial, and education of God, fitting them to enter in. It was that first generation who came out who were an evil generation.

But let us notice verse 18: 'And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient?' Let's pause over that, because if you're anything like me, you will say that there are times when you've been disobedient too. Of course, we've all been disobedient from time to time, in many things, says James the apostle. We all of us offend God's principles. Does that mean we can't enter in? Well now we've got to make the old grey matter work, apologies in advance. There are two different words in the Greek of the New Testament for disobedience. The one that is used here, 'for they were disobedient and they couldn't enter in because of unbelief' is a special word that, in the whole of the New Testament, is never used of a true believer.

So let me cite you one or two passages where it is used. This is Acts 14, and this follows Paul's preaching for two Sabbath days in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia.

Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving [disobedient—same word as in Hebrews 3] Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. (vv. 1–2)

Well now, these Jews who were disobedient, what would you say of them? That they were nice believers, only they didn't happen to like the preacher? No, they were disbelieving—it means a failure to obey actually, failure to bow to God's word, to reject his word, to disbelieve it, and in that sense, to disobey it. They weren't converted. They were disobedient. To what were they disobedient? To the message of God; that is the gospel that Paul preached. They were very religious, but they wouldn't have it.

Now let's look at another place where the word is used. This is the epistle of Paul to Titus.

To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work. (Titus 1:15–16)

And what would you say these people are? Nice believers having a bad Thursday or something? No, they are not. They are downright unbelievers.

So in Hebrews, when the Holy Spirit says to these folks who profess to be Christians, 'Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God', he is quoting the Old Testament incident of the people who refused to go into the land. That's what it means to disobey—to reject the very salvation and the inheritance and the promised land that God offers. To despise God, to turn your back on the living God. That is what the writer is talking about.

## Unbelief and disobedience

Let's refine it again. What exactly is it that these people didn't believe — the people in the story in Numbers, and the danger to the people to whom the letter of Hebrews is written? Let's read in chapter 4 of Hebrews.

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest. (vv. 1–3)

The word translated here as 'good news' is the ordinary word for 'gospel' in the New Testament. We have been evangelized, we have had the gospel preached to us in our day, just as they had the gospel preached to them. I know what you'll say if I ask you what gospel has been preached to us. You'll tell me that we were under the wrath of God, and the blessed Lord was our Passover Lamb, and through his blood we are delivered from the wrath of God. That is the gospel for us, so what was the gospel preached to them?

When we think of it in terms of Israel and the journey they were on, there were two parts to it. First they were to be brought out of Egypt and set free — delivered from bondage. Then they were to be brought into the land which God had chosen for them — the promised land. Yes, but surely the second bit was optional. Haven't I read somewhere that Moses came to the Israelites in Egypt and said, 'You are having a hard time down here, and all these cruel, unsociable working hours, and doubtless you are feeling in the blues, and I know God would like to do something for you, for God is kind. And he proposes to come and deliver you from tyranny to the pharaoh and set you free outside the boundaries of Egypt, where you can then please yourself with what you do. Then there is a second part to the course (like there are to some university courses) but that's optional. The second part is that, if you're really keen, you could go and foot slog your way across the desert, and then enter the inheritance beyond. Of course, that's for those that are very keen, but you don't have to take that bit, the main thing is to get out of Egypt, and so long as you're out of Egypt, you're free from the wrath of God, and that will do.'

Is that the way it was? Absolutely not! The whole thing is a package deal. The whole thing goes together: you can't take the first bit without the second bit. You can't claim that you have been redeemed by the blood of the lamb if you are not prepared to push on up the road towards the inheritance. That's not optional. That is like saying 'I've been redeemed by the blood of the lamb, and by the power of God, but I'm not too keen on following God, and moving on like you say, and going in for the inheritance. Let the keen ones in the church do that, but I'm not interested in that. I'm content to know I have been redeemed.' If you're not going to follow on with the Lord, the Holy Spirit calls that falling away from the living God. The second bit is not optional; it's a two part thing: you take the lot, or you don't have anything.

That is the seriousness of it. Just as we've had the gospel preached to us, they had the gospel preached to them, but what happened when they heard the gospel? Our translations may be different at that point. Some render it that 'the word preached did not profit them, not

being mixed with faith in them that heard it' (KJV) or, as we have here, 'the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.' Either way, the meaning is clear. They had the gospel preached to them—deliverance from pharaoh, maintenance through the desert, entry into the promised land flowing with milk and honey— one package deal. That was good news, but they derived no benefit from it because they didn't believe, they were not believers. They despised God and they despised the inheritance when they saw it, and said it was better in Egypt, and proposed to take a leader and go back to Egypt. They were not believers. But there were also those who did hear and obey—people like Moses and Aaron, and Joshua and Caleb. They not only heard the gospel that day, but believed it.

### *Evidence of belief?*

So this is the basic question to those of us who profess to be Christians. Are we giving the evidence in our lives that our faith is genuine? A believer, a true believer will not be lost, because a true believer has an intercessor, our blessed Lord Jesus who intercedes for him or her, that their faith shall not fail. And if someone's faith temporarily fails, like it did with Peter, our blessed Lord will intercede for that person, and their faith will be restored. A believer will not perish. The question that confronts me tonight is whether I am giving the evidence in my life that my profession of faith is genuine. That's a very different question. I've used the analogy before, I'll use it again, and the sheer repetition of it will help get it into the heads! It's the difference between the condition for having eternal life, and the evidence that we have eternal life. When a little baby is born, it cries, and everybody is delighted (perhaps the last time they'll be delighted!). Why is that? Because when the baby cries, it is evidence that it is alive. The baby doesn't get life by crying: the life is given it as a gift through its parents. But the baby is then expected, as it grows, to give evidence that it's got life.

We get eternal life as an absolute free gift. But having got it, we will sooner or later be asked to supply the evidence that our faith is genuine and that we have eternal life. For as the verse puts it, in chapter 3, 'We have come to share in Christ' (v. 14). We have it: we have become partakers in Christ. What is the evidence? That we hold fast the principles of our faith, firm to the end. Said our Lord, 'If you continue in my word, then you shall be my disciples indeed, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (see John 8:31).

To sketch in briefly the history of these people to whom the letter to the Hebrews is written, it was this. They were, after all, Hebrews, and by the miracles they witnessed on the day of Pentecost and subsequently, they were convinced, so they said, that Jesus was the Messiah. They thought that was wonderful, and some of them had suffered in the beginning. But now? They were not attending the Christian assembly—'neglecting to meet together' (10:25)—and that raised questions in the mind of the writer. What were they doing then, and where were they going? And why weren't they coming? And when the writer wanted to talk to them about our Lord Jesus Christ as our great high priest, they weren't very interested to hear it. They'd become slow of hearing, and when they ought to have been teachers, they were still babies, spiritually.

Why weren't they glad to hear that Jesus is the high priest? Well, if Jesus is the high priest, that means the line of Aaron as high priest has been superseded. If Christ's sacrifice is the only

one needed, that's the end of all the other sacrifices in the temple. If Christ has entered into heaven, you don't need the temple here on earth. And now these people began to face the implications of it—what would their family and friends say, and what would the rabbi say? So when they came to see all the inheritance that there is in Christ, his once and for all sacrifice, his heavenly priesthood, and all the rest of it, some of them now didn't seem to want to go on to that: they were going back. What would that mean if they went back? They didn't believe in the first place, did they? And so the Holy Spirit preaches us this very practical lesson, not to undermine our confidence in God, not to give us the thought that a true believer can perish—true believers will never perish—but it does ask us to look to the evidence of our lives. What evidence does my life give that I am genuinely going on with God, step by step, and moving on towards the great inheritance? What evidence is there that I have genuinely believed the gospel?

So this is a very solemn thing, but in the end it is encouraging. Because those verses in Hebrews do not mean that a believer can fall away and be lost, but they do exhort us that if we are genuine believers, then we must show the evidence. For, said our Lord to those that believed on him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free' (John 8:31–32). In many things we all come short, and Paul himself says, 'Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own' (Phil 3:12). We all come short, but the true believer, by God's grace, wants to push on and go on with God, in spite of all the trials and difficulties, and pains and sorrows of the way. The point is that these folks never did truly believe. They didn't believe in spite of all the evidence, in spite of all their professions of faith. In fact, they despised God and rejected him, and refused the gospel.

### **God's provision—the importance of Passover**

I want to say a few things about the provision that God made for these people. Admittedly, they had now been out of Egypt for about a year, so that this would have been the second Passover they were to celebrate. But through the years, there would be a Passover every year, and you see the importance, for it comes in the section about regulations for the journey. It was so important, said God, that they keep the Passover, that if they couldn't keep it on the precise day because they were unclean, or on a journey, then they must keep it in the second month—but you must keep it.

How would that help? Well every time they kept the Passover, as to this present day when Jews keep it, they remember how God brought them out of Egypt, and why they needed to be brought out of Egypt, and what it cost God to bring them out of Egypt. If they had really got that into their hearts, they wouldn't have talked here about going back to Egypt. They remembered the onions and all the nice fish they ate—they said they got it free, but they were slaves. If they had remembered the Passover, they would not have got their memories of Egypt so warped and unrealistic. It's easy sometimes for believers to think the world is more attractive than the people of God, and the things of God. They forget what it means to be in the world—absolutely lost under the dominion of the prince of this world, and subject to the wrath of God. Secondly, the Passover remembrance would have spurred them on to the inheritance that lay ahead, the whole point of their redemption. Now this is true of us, of

course. It was at the Passover festival that our Lord introduced the Lord's Supper. We should attend it: it is not optional. He commanded us to keep it, 'Do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22:19). It is a dangerous thing not to do it, because as we remember the Lord, we remember how we have been redeemed, why we needed to be redeemed, and what it cost God and our Lord to redeem us from this present evil world. Remembering it will help us on our journey, and stop us from turning around and thinking we would be better back in the world.

#### *Other provisions*

Among the other provisions was the guidance by the cloud. They had to follow the cloud, the visible emblem that God was with them, and God had been with them through the wilderness journey. God would have been with them into the inheritance but they didn't seem to believe: that didn't count with them. And then there was the business of the ark. When they first set out, the ark went before them to seek out the resting place. The presence of God going before them—not only with them but before them, to meet the enemies. And when the ark got up, Moses would say, 'Rise Lord, against your enemies' (see Num 10:35). They were God's enemies, and God was going to destroy them. He would use Israel to do it, but it was God that was going to destroy them, and God was in the vanguard.

### **The nation's refusal**

But despite the provisions God had made, the nation refused to go in. And then when God said, 'All right, I'll give you what you ask. You say you don't want to go in, well you don't have to go in. You won't go in in fact: I'll give you what you ask.' This is not God being peevish. They didn't want to go in and God granted their wish. I tell you something, you'll never come across anybody in heaven who will say, 'I never did intend to come here really but my parents badgered me into it, and now I'm here and I didn't want to be here.' Really? You'll never meet anybody like that in heaven. No, God merely said to them, 'Right, you refuse to go in, you don't want to go in, so don't go in.' That's very serious, isn't it? God takes our freewill seriously.

### **Fighting for the inheritance**

Now as to the fighting, we need to get this clear in our minds. One of the reasons why they refused to go in was because they saw it would involve a lot of fighting, and they were scared, you may think. So what is this business of our fighting as Christians? We have to fight the good fight of the faith, don't we? We wrestle against the rulers, authorities and cosmic powers of this dark world (see Eph 6:12) so we can make a good, practical distinction, if we listen to the history of Israel.

When they first came out of Egypt, preserved from the wrath of God by the blood of the lamb, and they stood by the Red Sea, pharaoh came after them with all his military might. The poor little Israelites had been for centuries in Egypt as slaves. So perhaps after all those years they had developed a slave mentality: better to submit than risk the punishment you'll get if you try to revolt. And not being used to fight, when the Egyptians came after them, they panicked and said, 'Moses, why did you make us leave? It would have been better to live there, even in slavery, than to get massacred here' (see Exod 14:11–12). And God in his mercy

told Moses, 'Oh tell them, Moses, they don't have to fight, just stand still. I shall fight for them, they won't have to fight' (see vv. 13–14). Being delivered from the wrath of God through the Passover lamb, and being delivered from the power of that evil tyrant pharaoh, were both gifts of God's grace. Israel didn't have to fight for either of them.

That is true of our salvation. You don't have to fight to be forgiven, and you don't have to fight to get the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul reminds us that we have redemption through his blood, and God has transferred us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his dear son, free and for nothing (see Col 1:13). We didn't have to fight for that. That is important to see. We don't gain that part of our salvation by fighting. But once Israel were out, and now out of the dominion of pharaoh, on the march, then came Amalek to oppose them. And God called on them to begin to fight.

Ladies and gentlemen, they did not remain slavish forever, or have a slave mentality. It is important for our character that we learn to grow and learn to fight. I don't mean with fists or with guns, but in a spiritual warfare. We have to take the armour of God according to Ephesians, and fight. We have to fight the enemy and having done all, to stand firm (Eph 6:13). We have to fight in the practical things of life to maintain the service of God, and find time for it, time for his word. We shall have to fight to do that or else the modern world will overwhelm us and leave us no time for God at all, so we have to fight.

### **A battle lost and a promise restated**

Notice at the end of Numbers 14, when God has said not to go up, then the people said, 'Oh yes we will,' and Moses said, 'No, don't go up, for the ark isn't going.' They didn't bother with the ark, they were going up, and that expresses their whole presumptuous attitude. They had no faith in God. Whether the ark was there or not meant nothing to them, it was merely their self-determination that kept them going. That is fatal. So at this point in the narrative, you see the Israelites; they've attempted to go up against the enemy, and the king of Arad with his forces has come out against them and chased them. Picture them running away as fast as their legs would carry them, running away with their backs to the promised land.

Now look at this, in the very next verses in our Bible, God says, 'Tell them Moses, when you come into the land . . .' (see Num 15:1–2). What marvellous grace on God's part! In the midst of that defeat, here is encouragement to those under twenty who would go now for forty years in the wilderness, and God is saying to them, 'Yes, but you *will* get in: by my grace, you're going in. When you come into the land and reap the harvest, then you will give God part of your crops as a cereal offering.' How shall I maintain loyalty to the Lord? Not only by remembering in the Lord's supper what he's done for me, I need to get into the habit of realizing that everything I have is from God, and he expects me to give him his creatorial and redemption rights. Get into the habit of doing it, for our redeemer expects it.

#### *A heavenly perspective*

One final thing. Chapter 15 ends with a very interesting matter of tailoring. I know the ladies are interested in such things, but this applies to the gentlemen also! The people were told, 'You shall have blue tassels on the end of your garments, and a cord joining them' (see v. 38). So they wore largely white, and then they had these blue tassels. Here was a good lady or



gentleman going along, and at each step the hem would flick up, and there would be the blue. What for? So that they didn't go lusting after evil things. The chapter that ends with this sorry rebellion begins by telling us that on the journey, the people lusted after evil things. Now this is to be a reminder to them to be at their very best so that they don't go lusting after wrong things.

It's good for us too, to be walking like this. If we've got the heavenly blue, so to speak, it will help us, as we walk, to remember our heavenly destiny lest we allow our desires to drag us out of the way. Peter says the same thing, 'You've been redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, and you've got an inheritance ahead, so work out the logical implications of your Christian hope and be not conformed to your former desires in your ignorance' (see 1 Pet 1:13-17). Desire in the human heart is a very powerful thing. Our desires, ladies and gentlemen, will drag us to what we desire, and if our basic desire is sin, our desires will draw us in. If we're not careful about our desires, and we let them go after wrong things, the desires will be drawing us away. We need the blue tassels on our gowns to remind us of our heavenly calling, and that our desires be so controlled that they pull us heavenwards, instead of dragging us earthwards.

Thank you for your patience. Let us commend ourselves to the Lord.

Father we thank thee for treating us like grown up sons and daughters, and talking to us bluntly and seriously. We thank thee that we may trust thee that you are working for our good, so give us good understanding of it quickly, and then beyond that the understanding by thy gracious spirit. Apply it to our minds that we think straight, and to our emotions and desires, that we desire right things. And oh, thou who hast redeemed us by thy blood, keep us by thine intercession we pray. And by the grace and power of that spirit, walking steadfastly along the road that leads us daily nearer God.

So we thank thee, and ask thine evening blessing through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Second Rebellion – Doctrinal Heresy

So now we come to consider the second major rebellion that occurred in Israel's travelling across the desert. It is the rebellion led by a certain Korah. On the chart it's the second column [2.B]. And the first question that arises in our minds, perhaps, is this: Why should we trouble about it? We can get to heaven without knowing about Korah, can't we? Yes you certainly can. It is doubtful whether the dying thief knew anything about Korah, even if he knew something about Moses, and that very day he found himself in paradise with the Lord Jesus. Only I think that most of us are not expecting to go to paradise, necessarily, within the next hour! So why should we trouble to learn about Korah? And the answer is given us in the New Testament, in the epistle by Jude which mentions Korah. So let us read a verse or two to put Korah into his New Testament context.

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3)

We see at once the connection between those two ideas. He wants to write about our common salvation, and that's what we would like to hear about. We love sitting back in our seats (so long as the preacher is tolerable!), and listening all about our common salvation and how we're all going to arrive in heaven one of these days. Yes, but there's another side to it. While we are enjoying all the benefits of our salvation, Jude says that we need to be contending for the faith—that body of doctrine which lies behind our salvation. And why should I bother about contending for the faith? Well because if your faith isn't right, you have no salvation anyway. If Jesus is not the son of God, you sitting here are a lot of deceived folks: there is no salvation for you. If Jesus isn't risen from the dead, you are still in your sins. And therefore, in this modern world which rejects the doctrines and the faith upon which our salvation is built, we as believers must learn to contend for the faith if we're concerned about our own salvation and the salvation of others. It is our responsibility.

And why should we need to contend? The next verse gives the answer:

For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (v. 4)

That is, some of them are saying that because we're saved by grace, it doesn't matter how we behave, and we mustn't condemn any kind of behaviour, even though it be the worst of

perversions: they are turning the grace of God into sensuality. And secondly, they deny our only master and Lord, Jesus Christ. They've crept in unnoticed; where to? Into the church of course. They came in under false colours, they crept in unawares, and now they're proceeding to disseminate doctrines that deny both the deity and the humanity of Christ, his atoning death, and above all, his supreme Lordship. And so we have to learn to contend for the faith.

Just to show you I'm not talking a lot of overheated imagination, let me hold up before you this volume: *The Myth of God Incarnate*.<sup>2</sup> It is edited by a certain Professor John Hick who is, or was, an expert in the academic world on comparative religion, and would himself pretend to be a believer. It is written by Christian theologians, or outwardly Christian theologians; a whole number of them. And their common purpose and consent is this, that the doctrine of the incarnation is a myth. So Maurice Wiles tells us in the course of this book his own ideas: 'The Christians of the early church lived in a world in which supernatural causation was accepted without question, and divine or spiritual visitants were not unexpected.'<sup>3</sup> In other words, the early Christians lived in a world where supernatural causation—that is, things that happened because God supernaturally intervened—was accepted as an obvious possibility. Of course, if the incarnation is true, then that is not only an intervention, it is an invasion of our human world by God himself—God become human, the Word made flesh. The one by whom all things were created, born of a virgin, into our world. That is divine causation in a very big way. Now listen to this theologian. Says he, 'Such assumptions, however, have become foreign to our situation. In the Western world, both popular culture and the culture of the intelligentsia has come to be dominated by the human and natural sciences to such an extent that supernatural causation, or intervention in the affairs of the world has become, for the majority of people, simply incredible. The transformation in popular assumptions has been recent, and far reaching.'<sup>4</sup>

So what? Carry on preaching the gospel, you might have thought. No, says Wiles, you have to give up the notion of the incarnation, because it is logically absurd anyway: how can God become human? That's a contradiction in terms, and we must give up making that claim in our modern world. The last essay in the book is written by a Professor Nineham, also a theologian. He didn't want to join in writing with the rest, he said, because they all say that whereas they can't believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, they think that Jesus Christ is special. 'But for my part,' says Professor Nineham, 'it's impossible to think that Jesus Christ was even special. How can you regard someone as special, of whose life the gospels give you only have a tiny portion?'<sup>5</sup>

Certain men have crept in, in our day—not unawares and not unnoticed—denying their sovereign Lord and master, and yet professing to be Christian. Don't suppose that that's going on just in some remote universities: it will be increasingly taught by teachers of religious education in the schools. It will be increasingly taught over here, as it has long since been taught by teachers of religious education in schools in Britain. We must learn, therefore, earnestly to contend for the faith.

<sup>2</sup> John Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 1977; reissue edn London: SCM Press, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Wiles, 'A cloud of witnesses' in *Myth*, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Wiles in *Myth*, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Nineham, 'A final comment' in *Myth*, p. 00.

So what has Korah got to do with all this? Let's look at Jude.

Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion. (v. 11)

Three gentlemen, if that's the right word to use to describe them, and you will notice that all three committed their atrocities in the context of religion. Cain murdered his brother Abel in the context of offering sacrifice to God. Cain was what we call a layman anyway, but he was offering a sacrifice to God, and when God said, 'No thank you, that's not the right kind, I want this other', he murdered his brother. Balaam was a religious professional, he was a prophet. But he was much attached to the money, and for hire he poured himself out like water coming out of a bucket to get as much money as he could, by means of religion.

He was worse than Cain, but worst of all was Korah. Whereas Balaam was a false prophet, Korah was a priest in holy orders, that is, in minor orders, a minor priest—a Levite, to use the Old Testament term, one to whom was given to carry some of the most sacred vessels in the tabernacle. It was he that led the rebellion. Let's turn back to the Old Testament then, to the book of Numbers, and consider who was involved in this rebellion.

### **Participants in the rebellion**

We begin in chapter 16, where we meet 'Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi' (v. 1). He was the ringleader and the mover in the rebellion. He was a Levite, of the branch of the Kohathites: they were the people that carried the ark of God, the table of showbread, the lampstand and the incense altar; the most holy vessels. He led the rebellion.

Secondly there was a certain Dathan and Abiram and On, of the tribe of Reuben. Now how they came to be affected is simply this. When the tabernacle was put up, the priests and Levites occupied the inner circle nearest the tabernacle, on the south side, and the tribe of Reuben was in the second row on the same side, so there was a close association between Korah, the Kohathite Levite, and these men of the tribe of Reuben.

Thirdly, we read in the next verse that these men:

rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. (v. 2)

That was a sizeable bunch, and all of them very influential men who sat on numerous committees.

And then who else? Well look at verse 41:

But on the next day all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, 'You have killed the people of the LORD.'

And so seriously God took that, as a rejection of his judgment on Korah and his confederate rebels, that God sent a plague among them. As we can see, the rebellion spreads. One little bit of leaven, if it's not stopped, leavens the whole lump. That is the metaphor used in the New Testament of immoral behaviour, and it is also used of false doctrine (see Gal 5:9).

*The nature of the rebellion*

So what was the charge in the rebellion? Well we must distinguish two things. There was first of all what Korah said on his own behalf, bringing his confederates with him.

They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, 'You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?' (Num 16:3)

This was a rebellion against Moses and against Aaron. Moses, of course, was the apostle of Israel's faith; Aaron was the high priest of their faith. They rebelled against the apostle and high priest of their confession. Notice on what ground they did it. Said they, 'All the people are holy.' Well that was true to a certain extent, for according to Exodus 19, when God came down on Sinai, he said to Moses,

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. (Exod 19:3-4)

This was God, early on, stating what the goal of redemption is. He hadn't yet brought them into the promised land — that was their destiny — but the *goal* of redemption was to bring them 'to himself'. In other words, the goal of our redemption is not heaven: the goal of our redemption is God himself. So God came down long before they got to the promised land, and he said:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exod 19:5-6)

All the people then were consecrated to God. In that sense Korah was right, but that being said, Moses and Aaron were unique.

This very book of Numbers in an earlier chapter tells how Aaron and Miriam criticized Moses for marrying the wrong woman. And God came out and talked to them very bluntly, 'You dare criticize Moses? Why, if there's a prophet around, I will talk to him in parables and things, but Moses, I talk to him face to face' (see 12:1-8). Moses was the unique Old Testament vessel of God's self-revelation, the inspired promulgator of the law, and the one who went up as a mediator between Israel and God, and went up into the glory, and the fire, and the thunder, and received the tablets of stone written with the finger of God. And Korah is saying, 'Look, you take too much upon yourself thinking everybody is going to obey and believe what you say just because you say it. We're just as good as you, our opinion is as good as yours. In fact, we're more modern than you are Moses.'

And Aaron, what was special about him? Well he was not merely a priest, he was the high priest. He was the one man in all Israel who, on the Day of Atonement, was allowed to take in the blood of the sin offering beyond the second veil and into the holiest of all, and stand in the presence of God as a mediator between God and his people, and sprinkle the blood of the atonement on the mercy seat. He was unique in Israel's salvation.

This then is what Korah denied and rebelled against. Why does Jude warn us about Korah? Because there were men in his day in the church denying the uniqueness of Christ as the apostle of our faith: God incarnate, the eternal word of God, the word become flesh. 'Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority: they are spirit, and they are life' (see John 6:63; 14:10). 'No, no,' say many modern theologians, 'Jesus was just a man of his own day, and when it came to the Old Testament, he had no better ideas than the ordinary people of his day, and thought Moses wrote the Pentateuch, when we know now he didn't, and in many things he was mistaken. It was the early church that increased his reputation and turned him into a God. He was a just an ordinary person, a very special person who knew God very well, a window into God, but he was just a fallible human being.' That is commonly taught in many academic departments of theology, in many universities in the West.

And Aaron, well he was high priest, and therefore the central figure in the Day of Atonement ceremonies, who appeared outside in public to put away sins by the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, and then went back into the very presence of God, and appeared in the presence of God for the people; and then came out again, the second time, and offered the sacrifices that completed the ritual. But the New Testament says that our Lord was infinitely greater than Aaron. Aaron, like the rest of men, was but a failing man, and he died and all his successors died. Our blessed Lord is high priest after a different order. He's a high priest appointed by God, the very God that said, 'You are my Son, today have I begotten you. You are a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek. Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool' (see Heb 5:5-6; Ps 110:1). Christ has made atonement for us. 'No he didn't,' say some theologians, 'we don't believe in vicarious atonement.' And Mr Chalk, head and chairman of an evangelical organization, has recently published an article in which he says he no longer believes in the substitutionary atonement of Christ, for if it is true that God punished his son for our sins, then God ought to be had up in court for child abuse. Evangelical? Leader of evangelicals in Britain? We need to be realists. We need to strive earnestly for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints, because in the first place it involves the unique glory of Jesus Christ our Lord.

That was Korah, then. And what about his mates, Dathan, and Abiram? Well they stayed in their tents, and Moses sent a message to them.

And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and they said, 'We will not come up. Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also make yourself a prince over us? Moreover, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up.' (Num 16:12-14)

So they defied Moses, 'We won't even come and talk to you,' they said. Now, I fancy that some of you may think that because of my old age, I got the thing muddled up, and read it the wrong way around. But I didn't. You just squint again at verse 13, to see what they actually said. 'Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey?' What, Egypt? Brought us up out of Egypt? And they said, 'Look at the miserable thing you've done. Egypt was a land flowing with milk and honey, and you brought us up out of

that, and you have all these fancy promises of a land out there in the blue somewhere, that God is going to give us as our promised land, flowing with milk and honey. You haven't brought us there yet have you? And you've ruined our enjoyment of life by your narrow ideas of life being a pilgrimage on towards a promised land.'

So what would you call these gentlemen? Dear believers? So now they're saying, 'Moses, by your theories and your dim view of Egypt as the world under the power of a sinister prince, this is neurotic Moses. Actually Egypt was a place flowing with milk and honey, and you've misled all these people into the wilderness and ruined their lives, whereas they might be in Egypt enjoying themselves to the full.' Such men have modern counterparts, don't they? 'Oh you evangelicals with all your rules and regulations, you mustn't do this, and you shouldn't do that, and you shouldn't do the other; spoiling people's lives, and so concentrating on this supposed heaven that nobody's ever yet seen. And you haven't brought us there anyway, ruining our lives; you should have left us in peace in the world to enjoy the world.' Have you ever heard that sort of thing said?

And then these men add another thing, 'You've not only not brought us into your supposed promised land, we doubt whether it even exists. Will you put out the eyes of these men?' They accuse Moses of intellectual obscurantism. 'You won't allow them to think, Moses. You shut their eyes, they're not free to think. You've got them thinking on tramlines that you've laid down. In the name of intellectual freedom, we protest against you and all your rules that supposedly come from God.' This is an ancient story, but if you think of it, it's up to date. So says the world, and so say some in the churches: 'Christianity is merely about enjoying this world to the full, not thinking about a promised land laid up for us in heaven.' But that isn't true: Christianity is not intellectual obscurantism. The Holy Spirit himself urges us to think. We are to think, and to think critically, and to think God's thoughts after him.

Then there were the 250 men: very important men—company secretaries, presidents of the board, and ministers of education, or things of that order. They were men of renown, called to the various congregational departments of government. And Korah was teaching them about democracy: everybody's equal in this life. 'This business of only the priest being allowed to burn incense before God is nonsense. All of you chaps are just as acceptable to God, and you can fulfil the priestly services just as the rest of them could.' You may say that sounds a little bit like true Christianity: are not all believers priests? Yes, they are indeed. Christ, by his sacrifice, has made us a kingdom of priests. But in those days Aaron was high priest, and now in Christianity, Aaron's order has gone by the board. There is now a new priest, Jesus Christ our Lord, great high priest. On him, and on his intercessions, and on the atonement that he has made, stands all our salvation.

You see it in picture when God had executed judgment on Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, and all who sided with them. The people who had escaped the judgment so far now turned round on Moses and said, 'Look here Moses, they were the people of God as much as you, and you've gone and destroyed them, and you shouldn't do that, nice people they were and equally people of God.' God himself had declared his judgment on them, and because they would not agree with God and his judgment of these rank heretics and rebels against God, God sent the plague among them. We read that Moses said to Aaron,

Take your censer, and put fire on it from the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone out from the LORD; the plague has begun. (16:46)

Moses told Aaron to make atonement for them, which he did, for when you read of atonement in the Old Testament, it's our modern word *propitiation*, and propitiation has to do with staying the wrath of God—satisfying the wrath of God against sin, and thus saving the people from enduring the wrath of God. That is, of course, what our blessed Lord has done, he is the propitiation for our sins. 'If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins' (1 John 2:1–2). Marvellous Saviour. Able to save us, so that we may be utterly sure we shall be saved from the wrath of God through him.

What happened to the actual judgment, because reading the text, it's told in the good Hebrew manner, not quite like a modern novel! What happened is that Korah incited these men of Reuben who eventually stayed in their tents and wouldn't even come and talk to Moses, but abused him. Korah also invited 250 of the leaders, of the princes among the tribes, and then he incited the whole congregation. And mark what he did now, he got those 250 men and Moses said, 'Yes, you carry on and do it, and we shall see what happens,' and they all had censers, and they came in the gate of the tabernacle, and assembled in the court, right in front of the door to the tabernacle, offering their incense before God.

Now what God said at that point was this. He told Moses to go down to the tents of Dathan and of Abiram, down in Reuben—they were outside the tabernacle in the second row around—and to warn everybody to get clear of those tents. Korah, it seems, likewise came back to his own tent. What happened then, as you know, when the crowds left the tents, God opened the very earth and swallowed up Korah, Dathan and Abiram, and all they had. (Though Korah's sons were saved, you'll be pleased to know, and eventually their descendants became famous singers in the temple of Solomon.) As for the 250 men in the tabernacle court, those princes of renown, fire came out from God and consumed them. And then there were the people who, the next day, came and complained to Moses, 'They were the people of God as much as we are, and you've no right to take punishment out on them like that.' And because they had accused God of an injustice, God sent the plague among them: many perished and more would have done had it not been for the efficacy of the atonement that Aaron made for them.

What a grisly topic that is, but it happens to be inspired Scripture. It pertains to the rights of him who died for you, and shed his blood for you. If anybody knowingly, having been illuminated by God's Holy Spirit so that they know as clearly as they know anything, then turns around and tramples underfoot the son of God—not accidentally stumble over him, but deliberately tramples underfoot the son of God—what are the implications? If they deny his deity, in consequence they count the blood of the covenant common. If Jesus Christ is the son of God, his blood is of infinite value and our salvation depends on it. But if he's not the son of God, if the incarnation is not true, then his blood is of no more value than your blood. If somebody denies the deity of Christ, the next logical step is to say that he was just an ordinary man and his blood is common.



Then to crown it out, he does despite to the spirit of grace. Why is that? Israel denied the Lord Jesus, and crucified him on a cross; he was buried and was raised on the third day. God sent the Holy Spirit down from heaven, and offered those very murderers forgiveness, and not only forgiveness, but salvation. And not salvation by doing their best to keep the law, but salvation free and for nothing. A gift, not of works, lest any man should boast (Eph 2:9). If somebody has his eyes illuminated to all that, and then with his eyes open, deliberately denies the deity of Christ, counts his blood common, and says to the Holy Spirit, 'I don't need your grace, I can earn my way to heaven,' what then? There is no sacrifice for such a person anymore, says the New Testament. If he won't have the sacrifice of Christ, there is no other. What then? Nothing but an expectation of fiery judgment.

Very solemn isn't it? We are striving for the truth of the gospel, and this is basic gospel. God help us to arm ourselves, to understand the issues, that we in our day and generation may strive for the truth of the gospel. It was a sad thing, wasn't it, that this rebellion was led not by Amalekite or Philistine, it was led by someone among the Israelites themselves, and note where he came from. He wasn't an ordinary person; he was a Levite in holy orders.

### **God's provision**

What could have stopped that rebellion or prevented it from happening? It is important that we should now consider the preparation God had made for the Levites, and for us who are Levites in our day and generation. We have seen some of the characteristics of that rebellion, and listened to the warning of the New Testament that we are to expect such rebellions in Christendom in our own day, with the responsibility, therefore, to strive earnestly for the faith once for all committed to the saints. Our very salvation depends on that faith and the doctrine of the Christian gospel. But now we come to God's provision, and we are to think of the provision which God had made for the Levites that, had they adhered to it, might well have prevented that rebellion altogether. We will therefore come to a practical lesson for ourselves.

To begin, I am going to ask you to come back in your thought to the very first part of the book where we are told of God's claim on the Levites for their service. Their service was indeed laborious. They had to carry the vessels of the tabernacle, they had to carry the frames, the sockets, the curtains, the screens, and all the ropes that went with it: that was an arduous service. Perhaps it was exciting when they first began—to be allowed to assemble the tabernacle where the very presence of God dwelled. But when they had done it hundreds of times and were required to do it again, it could become a very laborious exercise, perhaps even a little boring. What should keep them at it? What right had God to expect such devoted labour from them? In chapter 3, we're given the secret—the ground of God's claim over them.

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of their cattle. The Levites shall be mine: I am the LORD.' (3:44–45)

The reason behind that is as follows. On Passover night, when the destroying angel passed through the land of Egypt, that destroying angel destroyed the firstborn in every family of the Egyptians. And the firstborn in Israel's families would likewise have been destroyed had it

not been for the blood of the Passover lamb that was sprinkled on the lintel and the side posts of the door. And when God saw the blood, he stretched himself over the door, like a mother bird would stretch her wings over her little chicks to stop the hawk coming at them. 'I will pass over them, I will stretch myself over them, that the destroying angel shall not be able to penetrate and execute the firstborn of Israel' (see Exod 12:12–13).

So as soon as the Passover was over, and this now is chapter 13 of the book of Exodus, God came and said to Israel, 'Now because of this, I claim the firstborn as my own. Every firstborn that opens the womb you should dedicate to me, they are mine in a special sense' (see v. 2). Suppose some firstborn said, 'But I don't agree with this, this is not fair,' then the immediate logic was, 'All right, but if it hadn't been for the blood of the Passover lamb, you wouldn't have a life to lead would you? You would have been slaughtered. Because of the redemption that I provided, you have a life to lead, and I count it, I bought it, and you are mine.' And it became an institution in Israel, therefore, in remembrance of the Passover, that all the firstborn belonged to God.

Then when it came to the journey, the rule was changed. Now says God, 'I shall take the Levites instead of the firstborn.' So all the firstborn in the other tribes were numbered to see how many there were, and all the Levites were numbered, and the two numbers put together. There were more of the firstborn than there were of the Levites. And perhaps you would have said, 'Well don't mind about them: what's a few hundred?' 'No,' says God, 'they must pay the ransom money then.' So what number was over of the firstborn, they had to be redeemed by the payment of the ransom money. The claim on the Levites, then, as you will see from historical logic, is that they were God's property, bought by redemption. 'They are mine, they are not their own.' And Korah rebelled against it.

But it is a voice to us isn't it, for we find the same thing in our New Testament. I hope you are all familiar with it. It's 1 Corinthians 6, and it ought to be at our fingertips for it is going to control our lives. We are not our own, we are bought with a price through the redeeming blood of our Passover Lamb. And to take something that isn't yours, and use it on yourself, there's a word that describes that in English—theft. It's not a nice word but it would help me if I could see that I'm not my own because I have been bought with the precious blood of Christ, and I'm expected to glorify God in my body (1 Cor 6:19–20).

Come now to the second part of this section on the Appendix [1.D], where we read of a ceremony that took place before the newly made altar. Directly after it was dedicated, for it was a newly made altar in the tabernacle, there then came this ceremony when Aaron was to take the Levites and offer them up as a wave offering before God. That is, they weren't actually put on the altar and burned up, but they were stood beside the altar, and on the behalf of the nation they were now offered to God in a public ceremony, as being not their own but offered to God for his service. The Bible tells us that Christ offered himself as a sacrifice, but it also says that we should offer our bodies as a living sacrifice.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom 12:1)

Despite what some people say about the Greek, it doesn't mean that you do it once and for all. It means it's a decisive act that I consciously take when I've become aware that I have

wandered—decisively to offer my body a living sacrifice to the Lord for the task that he has appointed for me. If only Korah had remembered it. It wasn't a question of pleasing himself, it was a question of him being offered as a sacrifice to God to do what God had appointed for him—'that . . . you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Rom 12:2). I must ask my heart if I am still behaving in that attitude. The Levites were offered to God as a sacrifice to do a specific task. If you had asked a Levite, 'What is your task that you do for the Lord?', he could have told you, 'I carry the lampstand,' or, 'I'm in charge of the oxen that pull the carts that have the heavy stuff on it.'

But what about us? Are you committed to a work for the Lord? If I ask you, do you have a work that you're committed to, something you feel called to do, not haphazardly? Or are you just floating around the place, otherwise unattached? The claims of redemption are such that whatever the task God calls us to—and there are many members in the body of Christ, and each has a different gift and function—we are surely to find out from God what the Lord would have us do, and to have a sense of commitment to it. Having been offered as a living sacrifice to the Lord, if old age may speak, beware of just wandering through spiritual life, otherwise unattached without any specific work to which you are committed.

They were offered here, and God explains it to the high priest, 'They are my gift to you' (see Num 8:19). I think of it with my childlike mind, the Father saying to Christ, 'See that bunch down in Apsley Street? Well they're yours, I give them to you for your work.'

What was to motivate them? Before they were offered as a sacrifice, the altar was dedicated, and we're told that at the dedication, the chiefs of the tribes came to make an offering, to express their value of that altar. And they brought their expensive gifts, and they all brought them alike, and God records every one of those gifts in identical terms, but they are all spelled out in detail—their assessment of the value that they attached to what that altar represented.

And you who are princes, let me remind you that I listen to you. For instance, at the Lord's Supper or at a prayer meeting, as you bring your gifts to the Lord to tell him what his sacrifice means to you. That's of enormous help to me. I might say, 'Look at him, he's over 80 now, but what has sustained him through life? And why has he been so regular and committed to the Lord's work?' Here's his secret: what the cross of Christ, and the sacrifice of Christ, means to him. We all sing it sometimes don't we?

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.<sup>6</sup>

Worship is a very practical thing. It reminds us of the worth of him who died for us at Calvary, draws out our heart's response to him, concentrates our thought on him. And it has the reflex action: if he did so much for me, what shall I not do for him? Ah, if Korah had known anything about it, and it wasn't merely a job for him, perhaps he wouldn't have rebelled.

<sup>6</sup> Isaac Watts (1674-1748), 'When I survey the wondrous cross' (1707).

And what about Aaron? We have seen how that, when the people murmured and a plague broke out among them, Moses told Aaron to take his censer and stand among the people, and to make atonement for their sins. And that he did, and so many of them survived. And we earlier quoted the verse from 1 John:

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (2:1–2)

Without him, we wouldn't last five minutes—all our mistakes, our shortcomings, our broken promises, our substandard work, our irresponsibility. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us. He is the propitiation for our sins, for if he weren't, we might suffer much more under the discipline of God than we already do.

### **Aaron's staff**

To make sure that the people recognized Aaron as the high priest, God told Moses to tell the leaders of the tribes, each one was to bring his staff of office, his sceptre, so to speak, and they laid them up before God in the tabernacle overnight. When they came in the morning, the sceptres, the staffs of the other tribes were just plain staffs as they were before. But Aaron's staff was alive: it brought forth buds and blossoms and almonds. Thus did God testify that Aaron was the great high priest. And our Lord's qualifications as high priest? Not only did he learn what it cost to obey when he was here on Earth, but he lives now by the power of an indissoluble life. For those priests under Aaron only lasted a few years and then they died. But this man has a high priesthood which is eternal, and he never dies. Therefore, risen from the dead, seated at the right hand of God, God has proclaimed him a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek; and because he never dies 'he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them' (Heb 7:25).

### **The red heifer**

And then there was this famous sacrifice, called the red heifer, that had to be offered for the people. If by accident, or any other way, the Israelites touched a dead bone or came near a dead body, and were thus defiled so that they could not serve God in his tabernacle, then this sacrifice was offered. It's a complicated thing and we haven't time to consider it. It's the most difficult of all the sacrifices, but it cleansed people from defilement by death, so that they may carry on serving the living God. For death is repulsive to God, and actions that have the clamour of death about them—actions that, if they led on, would lead to eternal death—are an offense to almighty God. We too live in a defiling world, so let me read you the assurance of Scripture given us in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who

through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (9:13–14)

You see the contrast between the dead works and the living God. The dead works defile you and would impede your service to the living God. But there is a provision, 'how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.' Poor as we are, and often failing, it's no reason that our service to God should be impeded. I remember some decades ago, in an assembly where I was, there was a young lady, and they needed her in the Sunday school. It was given to me to ask her if she would serve in the Sunday school. She said no, so I asked 'Why not?' She said she didn't feel good enough. And with a certain amount of wickedness, I said, 'So you're good enough to be at the Lord's Supper, but you're not good enough to be a Sunday school teacher?' It wasn't that she couldn't teach children, but she didn't feel morally good enough. Well if you waited until you were good enough, you'd wait forever, wouldn't you? We are all stained from time to time. It is by the superb grace and sacrifice of Christ that we sinners, saved by grace, can come and confess our sins, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us. What for? So that we can serve the living God. We've no excuse for not shouldering our duties, we've been redeemed. Have we not offered ourselves a living sacrifice, are we not under the command of our great high priest? We are his servants, does he not live to intercede for us? And his blood cleanses us that we might carry on serving. We've no excuse for not being committed to his service.

### **A perpetual warning**

One final thing, when the fire of God's judgment fell on the 250 men that had falsely offered incense before God, Moses told Eleazer to take the censers of those men, made of copper, beat them out and put them on the altar, so that in future generations, whenever you came to that altar, you couldn't help remembering the rebellion. So it is, in Hebrews 12, that God again alludes to the rebellion of Korah: 'Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility [or *rebellion*, same word as in Jude] against himself' (v. 3). You say, 'How will that help me when I come to remember the Lord and his sacrifice for me, to remember that he suffered the rebellion of sinners?'

Well it would help those folks for whom Hebrews was written. They were Jews and since they had trusted Christ, many of their Jewish friends had disowned them, ostracized them, and sometimes persecuted them. Where would they find the grace to be loyal to Christ? They could come to his cross and remember that when he died for them, he had to endure the rebellion of sinners against himself that cost him his life's blood, and we haven't got that far yet. You have not yet resisted unto blood. But whatever you may suffer for Christ, let it be your comfort to come constantly and contemplate the cross of Christ, and remember what he suffered from those religious folks that rebelled against him and put him to the cross.

So let's pray that God will show us the meaning of our study and its implications.

Our father, we thank thee now for thy word. Help us, we pray, to understand it. Help us to be warned by its warnings, that we may walk through this world with our eyes wide open against the dangers within the church, of people that deny the faith. But at the same time, father, we pray that thou will use thy word, thou hast redeemed us, and we are not our own. Help us to live consistently with it, thou hast bought us with a price. Help us deliberately to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, that we may be committed to the work that thou dost lay upon us to do. Help us to see what a glorious and wonderful privilege it is thus to serve thee, for thine intercessions, blessed Lord, on our behalf. Even this day we thank thee for the assurance that thou will never cease to intercede. Thou wilt save us to the uttermost. Lord help us then to contemplate what thou has suffered, that our little sacrifices for thee may disappear in proportion, and that we may be so amazed at thy sacrifice for us that we constantly redouble our efforts to be pleasing to thee.

Part us in thy peace, we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Third Rebellion – A Spiritual Battle

Welcome to the continuation of our studies on the book of Numbers, and tonight we come to the third major rebellion. It is the rebellion of Moses and Aaron against the word of God, and in the end, against God himself. To put it in its context, let's begin by reminding ourselves of things historical and geographical. The chapter that we will begin with is chapter 20, which tells us that:

The people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there. (v. 1)

And so we meet the name Kadesh again. It is possible that the first rebellion [2.A] took place at Kadesh, and it may be that the Kadesh here in chapter 20 is the same place. We needn't spend long deciding that question.

We should notice, however, that because of that first rebellion and Israel's refusal to go into the promised land, God swore an oath that all those who came out of Egypt twenty years old and above would be given their own wish. And so Israel were sentenced to wander, as the English translations have it. They lived as nomads in various parts of the desert for forty years. Now at the beginning of chapter 20, they have come to Kadesh, probably the same Kadesh, because the forty years are almost over. And you will observe how very little is said about what happened in those forty years.

They're coming back now to Kadesh. This is the new generation, those who were under twenty when they came out of Egypt and are now grown up: some of them are nearly sixty. This is the generation, and those following, that are eventually going into the promised land. We shall notice certain things about the stories as we proceed. As I say, in the interval we have not much history anyway. We didn't read of very many fights and battles with the Canaanites or anybody else from chapter 11 onwards. Now, from chapter 20 onwards, we shall begin to get stories of battles, because when Israel started to press on with the aim of entering into the land, they found all kinds of opposition. There were literal, physical battles, with the people like the king of Arad, or like Sihon, king of the Amorites, or Og, king of Bashan. But tonight, we shall be reminded in the second half of our passage that as Israel began to move towards their inheritance, there took place a spiritual battle. We read in the older translations of 'the lords of the high places', probably meaning the people in charge of the hill country through which they must pass, but self-evidently, the story here of Balak and Balaam is a spiritual battle. It is an attempt to call in the forces of black magic and spiritism, and omens and divination, and other such things, in order to bring a curse down on Israel and stop them from

going into their promised inheritance. Matters, therefore, become serious. It's going to be predominantly a spiritual battle.

### **The failure of Aaron and Moses**

The particular rebellion that is here, rebellion of Moses and Aaron, is a very sad thing, but to see its significance, we ought to spend just a few moments going back to the provision that God made in chapter 6 of Numbers, before the people set out. For it was the task of Aaron, the very Aaron who rebelled against God here, to pronounce the blessing of the Lord upon his people. So let's take the trouble to read it once more.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.'  
(Num 6:22-27)

Here then, amongst many practical details and arrangements for the transporting of the tabernacle, and its furniture, questions of bullocks and carts and Levites to carry things, and so on, in the very heart of the provisions and preparations, there is what is commonly referred to as the Aaronic blessing. Let's ask ourselves again why it's there. It's there because one of the big dangers of the journey that they are about to set out on would be that sometimes the going would be so tough that people would come to doubt whether God was really with them at all, or whether God had forgotten them. Of course, this would be vital. If the people got it into their hearts and heads that God had forgotten to be gracious, and no longer loved them, and no longer cared for them, then that would be perilous indeed.

It's true to life isn't it? We start out on our pilgrim pathway, most of us, with joy and gladness and songs of hallelujah—suitably put into English and modern music by those whose taste is that way! But wait until your middle life and beyond, or even before, and life can get so tough that sometimes God's own dear people begin to doubt. 'Why has the Lord allowed this to happen to me? How can you reconcile this with the God of love? I've been diligent in my prayer, now look what's happened.' And of course, it is part of Satan's strategy. In all the fights that we shall have to face, this is the central battlefield. If Satan can get us doubting the love of God, and ceasing to believe in his grace and his blessing, Satan has won. For if God doesn't love me today, then he never has loved me and he never will, for God doesn't change. And if God doesn't love me, it wouldn't be a wise thing to go to heaven. To live too near almighty God, and not be confident of his love, would turn heaven itself into a hell.

It is a central battlefield of a Christian's life, and therefore God charged the high priest himself, as God's representative—with a human heart and a human voice, chosen from among the people because he ought to have had compassion on the people and those that were difficult and out of the way—to gather them together from time to time and in the name of God, to pronounce the blessing of God on them, in such fashion as it ceased to be mere words, and carried the reality of the Holy Spirit of God. I wish I could do it for you tonight. All I can



do is to read the words. But God makes it real. It could be that this very night, God is saying something. Or next week you may find the battle will raise the question whether the grace of God and the blessing of God are real. Remember the story of Job, won't you? That isn't the normal experience, every day of every year of every believer, but things like that happen sometimes. So we take God's blessing seriously.

That gives the point to this rebellion. It was the very priest who should have made the people conscious of the blessings of God that rebelled against God himself. And it was Moses the law giver who rebelled against God, with the result that neither Moses nor Aaron was eventually allowed by God to lead the people into their promised land. You say, 'That must have been a very serious rebellion.' It is difficult at first sight, perhaps, to think it was so very serious, when Moses struck the rock, instead of speaking to it. Well if you want to know how serious it was, look up in your Bibles the occasions where the Old Testament refers to this rebellion—three times over in the book of Numbers and six times in Deuteronomy. Yes, all these times over in the book of Deuteronomy. Moses constantly recurs to it, and pleaded with God to let him go in at least, if not to lead the people in—until God had to say, 'Moses, no, you're not going in. Don't mention it again.'

It was a serious rebellion, therefore, so we must spend a little time tonight thinking what was so serious about it. The story is given us in chapter 20, how the people ran out of water and they complained to Moses, and Moses took it to God, and God told Moses to take the staff of Aaron, and speak to the rock, and they would thus bring water out of the rock. But the interpretation of the incident has become a little confused sometimes in people's minds, because it is very similar to a story told in the book of Exodus. You may care to read that story in Exodus 17: we haven't the time to turn to it and read its detail, so let me tell you about it.

It was when Israel had recently come out of Egypt, and they'd run out of water, and it was so difficult for them. They came to Moses and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt? To die in the wilderness? Better slavery in Egypt than attempting to escape and dying of thirst in the wilderness. Why didn't you listen to us when we were in Egypt? Your crazy ideas.' And they tempted the Lord, they were very serious. And Moses had to tell God, 'Please do something Lord, for the people talk of stoning me.' This was nothing short of outright rebellion. They were going to assassinate Moses, they talked of stoning him. And they tempted the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not,' in other words, tempting the Lord. It means, to put it in crude modern English, putting a pistol to God's head and saying, 'God, you'll have to do better than this, or if you don't we shall ditch you.' That's putting God to the test, laying down conditions for him. That's tempting the Lord God, and God counts it as a cardinal sin. This was sheer rebellion, both against Moses and against God.

The interest of that story is how God broke that rebellion. He told Moses to take the staff with which Moses had smitten the River Nile in Egypt. If you remember, it turned the water to blood and killed all the life in it. It was the staff of judgment, therefore. 'Take the staff of judgment,' says God to Moses, 'and I shall come down and stand on that shallow rock there, in front of Israel, where they can all see. You'll take your staff and you'll bring it down.' You say, 'I know what's going to happen now. God's had enough: he's not going to have these little mites of human beings order him around. In spite of his redemption, he'll come down on the rebels, surely.' No, indeed not. Said God, 'Moses, I shall stand upon the rock in front

of the people. You take your staff of judgment and strike the rock on which I stand.' It was a vivid picture, wasn't it? For as we Christians read that story, we can't help thinking of another place. How does God smash the rebel in our own hearts? That's at Calvary where, as the hymn puts it:

Jehovah lifted up His rod,  
Oh Christ, it fell on Thee!  
Thou wast sore stricken of Thy God;  
There's not one stroke for me.<sup>7</sup>

It's difficult, my brothers and sisters, to fight against a God like that. The story is that when Moses struck the rock, the water came out. And Israel was given its first lesson, that a supply of water was not merely a matter of geography: it was a matter of God's own provision. And we have learned the logic, haven't we?

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom 8:32)

No sooner was that over, and the rebellion cured, when Amalek turned up to oppose the Israelites, and God did battle with him, and raised his own military standard to rally the troops. And these erstwhile rebels, now for the moment converted, rallied under God's military standard. And with Moses sitting up aloft on the rock now, and holding up his hands—and Aaron and Hur beside him to hold up his hands, because they got rather heavy—Israel joined in the battle of the Lord until night fall. And Amalek was defeated, for Amalek came out to stop all further progress, and had Amalek won, that would have been the end of the journey. They had to fight their way through. Well that's how you can phrase it, but it was really God's battle. We're not left to fight on our own. We are invited to enlist under God's military standard. (You know the technical term for it don't you? The Lord is my shepherd is *Jehovah Roah*. The Lord is our righteousness is *Jehovah Tsidkenu*. And the Lord is my military standard is *Jehovah Nissi*.)

That was one incident early on; this one in Numbers 20 is some forty years later. It has similarities because the people grumbled against the Lord, and the Lord told Moses to take a staff, and speak to the rock and water would come out. But it is important to see how different the two stories are. First of all, yes, the people ran out of water, and it is said that they quarrelled against the Lord, and they certainly quarrelled against Moses. 'Why have you brought us into this place? Why must coming out of Egypt in order to get us into our promised land involve bringing us through such outlandish places as this? This is nothing but sheer thirsty desert. It's getting more than we bear,' they said. Yes, they quarrelled with the Lord. It is not said they tempted him, nor is it said they talked of stoning Moses. This was a people at the end of their tether. Now I'm not here to investigate you, but have you ever, in your heart, quarrelled with the Lord? Have you ever asked, 'Why Lord? Why have you allowed this? Why don't you intervene? Why don't you answer my prayers?' Many believers have come to

<sup>7</sup> Anne Ross Cousin (1824-1906), 'O Christ, what burdens bow'd Thy head.'

that point of questioning the Lord, if not quarrelling with him. It's amazing if you don't, on your way home, sooner or later come there.

What was God's answer? This time he did not treat them as rebels. He's a God of infinite compassion for his people. So he told Moses to take the staff.

Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle. (20:8)

And Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he commanded. Now do note what staff that was. It wasn't the staff with which Moses smote the River Nile when he was there. It was the staff which we read about in Numbers 17.

The LORD said to Moses, 'Put back the staff of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their grumblings against me, lest they die.' (v. 10)

That is said because the Israelites, and the person of Korah, the Levite, had rebelled against God and challenged the high priest, Aaron, and Moses the prophet of the Lord. So now God had given a miraculous sign to Israel. He had said to the elders of the tribes, 'Now each of you leaders, bring your staff of office, and Aaron you bring yours'; and they deposited them before the Lord overnight. And in the morning when they came, all the other staffs were as plain as they went in, but Aaron's staff budded and bore blossoms and almonds (see 17:3-8). A miracle of God's intervention, to indicate who was the high priest of God's appointment.

'Take that staff,' says God, 'the staff of Aaron's priestly ministry, and gather the elders of the people to this rock with the staff in your hand so they can all see it. This is God's high priest and his gracious ministry of declaring the mercy of God and the grace of God, and the Lord make his face to shine on you. Here they stand, with the staff of priestly ministry. And says God, 'They've accused you of bringing them into this wilderness. There's no water and they have blamed you. All right, stand there with the staff, and all you have to do is speak to the rock, and you will bring the water out of the rock.'

That was nice of God wasn't it, because it was a miracle anyway, but he wanted it to appear to the people that Aaron and Moses had brought the water out of the rock by their intercession. They were genuine priest and representative of God, and God would listen to their intercessions on behalf of the people. God would let them bring the water out of the rock, and in God's infinite kindness they would bring the water out for the people and for their cattle. (Remember that when next you see a cow or a bullock. Remember what God told Jonah, when Jonah would gladly have seen the city of Nineveh destroyed root and branch. For God said, 'There are 120,000 people there that don't know their right hand from their left [i.e. youngsters] and there's also much cattle' [see Jonah 4:11].)

And now God was going to give them a demonstration of his infinite compassion but, instead of which, Moses and Aaron lost their tempers. And said Moses, 'Hear now, you rebels' (20:10). It was, in fact, Moses and Aaron at that very point who were themselves rebelling against God. Calling people in their misery, their difficulty, their pain, rebels. Why haven't they got the discernment of the high priest to see it wasn't rebellion but people at the end of

their tether because of the trial that had come upon them? Why couldn't they read their hearts like God had read them?

And it was as if this was another intolerable burden for Moses and Aaron, even though they hadn't got to do much—just to speak to the rock and God would have brought the water out. But Moses, losing his temper, took that staff of intercession and belaboured the rock twice. That was serious because in 1 Corinthians 10, remembering the various incidents in the wilderness when God brought water from the rock, Paul said that Israel drank of that spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was the pre-incarnate Christ. And Moses was belabouring the rock. We don't have to belabour God to force him to bless us. No, he just had to speak to the rock.

Yes, the water came out, for God wasn't going to deny the people water because of the weakness of his servants, and because of his servants' rebellion. But God said to Moses and Aaron forthwith, 'Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them' (20:12). And later in the chapter, Aaron was told he must be taken up Mount Hor, be stripped of his priestly garments, and in the sight of Israel he would die, and another priest take his place. And as for Moses, he would be allowed to lead the people right to the banks of Jordan, but in spite of his repeated requests, he couldn't take them in.

Why couldn't he? In the passage I have cited to you, their sin is variously described. They didn't believe, it was a lack of faith. God had said, 'Take the staff, and just speak to the rock.' They weren't listening, or they didn't do it, they didn't believe it anyway, and struck the rock twice. They didn't believe, so then God accuses them of rebelling against the Lord, and in his penultimate occasion in the book of Deuteronomy where God mentions it, then he says, 'Moses, you trespassed against me' (see Deut 32:51). Now that's a word that you would use of a woman, for instance, who trespasses against her husband, that is, she acts in bad faith. God accuses Moses and Aaron of having trespassed against the Lord, and above all this, 'You didn't uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people.' What does God mean? Well, if they had done what they were told and just spoke to the rock, and through their intercessions the water had come out, the name of the Lord would have been glorified, and the people would have said, 'Marvellous, we began to doubt whether God really loved us, but look at this, isn't this wonderful?' And Moses and Aaron would have had the delightful occupation of being the people to demonstrate before the nation, the wonderful character of God.

When we read of the Lord's holiness, we normally think of his righteousness, and that's true. But holiness is not negative: holiness is also positive. And so in the book of Ezekiel, where God promises he will restore Israel, he announces himself as the God of holiness, the holy God of Israel, because he would delight to restore them. It's part of his holy character. Let me quote you some verses:

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. (Heb 7:26)

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Heb 4:15)

They misrepresented God before the people. That would make any preacher or teacher tremble in his shoes. To get up and misrepresent the character of God to one's fellow believers, and call them rebels when they were at the end of their tether, as though they were enemies of God; without compassion and misrepresenting God as an unfeeling Almighty, that's a very serious thing to do. Our task as believers is so to represent God, not forgetting his holiness, as a God of infinite compassion, love and mercy. We must not misrepresent him, for if we do, that kind of ministry will not take the people into their promised land.

### **God's verdict**

So the sentence was passed upon them: they would never lead the people into the land. Moses was allowed to go on to take them through the battles that lay ahead, east of Jordan, where they attained some victories. But he was not to cross the Jordan and bring them into the land. It seems to me there is a lesson to be learned from it. Aaron, the great high priest, failed and in front of the people, he was taken up the mount and stripped of his priestly garments, and another priest had to take his place. That was his son, Eleazar. If Israel were ever going into their great inheritance, it would have to be a different priest from this Aaron. And what is more, if Israel were ever going to get into their inheritance, it wouldn't be Moses that would take them, it would be Joshua. What's the significance? There was never another Moses. There was another high priest in Israel, son of the first one, but there was never another Moses. It wasn't Moses' son that took them in, Moses was unique, but in the end he wasn't good enough to take them in. It was Joshua who took them in, and what does Joshua's name mean? Saviour.

Moses the law giver couldn't take them in. What it required was God's saviour to bring them in. Let me just elaborate on that. We often think of Israel going into the promised land as a picture of the believer going into heaven—to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fades not away (1 Pet 1:4). Okay, that's a good use of the story, but first of all it has significance at the historical level. Israel was promised a great inheritance; who would bring them into it? Not the law-giver Moses; they had to wait for the coming of Joshua the saviour. All right, that's a bit of history. Now look at the bigger picture. God, having spoken to the fathers through the prophets over many generations in different proportions, and different methods, gave them the law—and did the law bring them into the glories of the gospel? No, it didn't. The law was given by Moses, but 'grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). Historically, despite all the centuries that Israel spent under the law, the law never brought them into complete forgiveness. Forgiveness of a kind, yes, but never a conscience made perfect; never the freedom to come into the holiest of all; never permanent peace with God. That must await the coming of the greater than Joshua to bring Israel into their next stage of their great inheritance.

So the Epistle of the Hebrews runs like this: there was a priesthood from Aaron and the rest of them, but God did away with it. Why? Because of its inherent weakness. It's worth reading what Hebrews 7 actually says:

For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God. (vv. 18–19)

So the priesthood of Aaron was brought to an end, and another priesthood installed, which is our blessed Lord Jesus, after the order of Melchizedek. Shout a few hallelujahs on that, because look at what that chapter goes on to say.

And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest for ever.”’ This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. (vv. 20–22)

And you’ll know what that means, won’t you? Notice here it doesn’t say by so much he’s been made the mediator of a better covenant. He is that of course. He is the mediator of the new covenant, and a much better covenant. But he’s not only the mediator, he’s the surety: the guarantor. And our blessed Lord is not only the mediator of the better covenant, he is the surety, the guarantor of the new covenant. What a magnificent thing that is. A new covenant that will fit us and lead us, and bring us at last to glory, and he is the guarantor of all the expenses that God will incur in bringing us home to glory. And he’s a better priest anyway, for he can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, and if we find ourselves in a situation like those Israelites in Numbers 20, he will not strike the rock with his staff. He will intercede for us.

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Heb 7:25)

Praise God for a better than Moses, and a better than Aaron. We’ve got to the point, historically, when we see the failure of Moses, the law giver, and the failure of Aaron, the high priest. Neither of them would be able to bring Israel into their inheritance. Our Lord has fulfilled both. That is to say, he is a better priest, after the order of Melchizedek, and then Romans 8 tells us:

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (vv. 3–4)

There was nothing wrong with the law, but it was weak through the flesh, that is to say, our flesh. You have a supreme example of it in Moses. The law that God gave him was perfect but it was weak through Moses’ flesh. He couldn’t keep it himself and rebelled against God through unbelief, and therefore could not bring the people into their promised land.

## Other incidents

We've spent a long time in this session on this early incident: we will not be able to spend as much time on the rest of it, but we shall spend enough time as to make us see the connection of thought. I will ask you to look at the actual text of Numbers, so that you may see the one or two incidents that I shall be referring to. It's going to be quite a while, in the book of Numbers, before they get to the banks of the Jordan. They have to carry on from Kadesh. As the text itself says, they were not far off the border, the western border of Edom. Moses sent an envoy to negotiate with Edom a passage through the country, whereby they guaranteed they wouldn't drink any water; if they did they'd pay for it. And they wouldn't gobble up any food: they merely wanted passage. They tried to negotiate, and Edom wouldn't have it. As a result, they had to turn south once more, and eventually crossed over east of Edom at a point, presumably, where there were virtually two parts of Edom, and a very narrow neck dividing the two, and they went through there, and up the eastern side of Edom.

That would have brought them to Moab, eventually, and then to such countries as the Ammonites, and then to the Amorites. Here they would meet some battles, and Moses would have led the people of God through those battles. And we noticed in our first session that they were physical battles of warfare, but then eventually it came to a question of a spiritual battle with Balaam and Balak. But now, let's notice two incidents that occurred. This is now chapter 21: it's another case of where the people ran out of water.

## The serpent

And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.' (Num 21:4-5)

Now that was very serious. It is serious to murmur against the Lord, even when circumstances are difficult. But on this occasion they not only complained about the lack of water in the wilderness, but they said they loathed the bread, which is the bread that God gave them from heaven to eat. This was insulting God. It is a serious thing to murmur against God, and 1 Corinthians 10 reminds us, 'We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents' (1 Cor 10:9). This time God sent fiery serpents among them, and they bit the people, and many people died. Fiery serpents, so called because their poison brought very serious inflammation and rising of temperature. This was God's discipline on his people. They cried to God, and God in his mercy instructed Moses to make a serpent of copper and put it on a pole, and pronounce in the camp that whoever looked at the serpent on the pole would live—that is, recover from the poison of the serpents.

Now we have our Lord's own interpretation of that story. He used it as an analogy with Nicodemus:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:14-15)

And many an evangelist has rightly taken it and preached the gospel from it, even as our Lord preached the gospel to Nicodemus. But the cross of Christ carries a deep meaning beyond that. 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?' (Rom 8:32). So let's notice the symbolism.

The people's judgment was that the fiery serpents bit them and caused inflammation, and eventually death. We have learned about the serpent from Genesis onward. If you ask where does man's inclination to blame God come from, it originated in the garden of Eden at the suggestion of his satanic majesty. 'Has God said . . .; and 'God wants to keep you down'; and 'God puts lovely things under your nose and then says you can't have them', and all that kind of thing. That's where the human race learned to mistrust God—the poison of the serpent. How has God dealt with Satan's poison? You have the story, it was not a live serpent, it was a serpent of copper with no poison in it, which brought an end to the serpent plague. How does God, for a believer, answer the poison of Satan's temptation and misrepresentation of God? Well we have it in one of our hymns:

He spared not his son,  
Tis this that silences each rising fear.  
Tis this that bids the hard thought disappear.  
He spared not his son.<sup>8</sup>

'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5:21). Thus did God cure this second incident, by this wonderful picture: the serpent, now without its sting, without its poison—a dead serpent on a pole, looking to which brought life and recovery to the Israelites. It's not difficult then to see in the story, historically, a reference to our Lord and his death at Calvary.

## The well

The next major incident once more contains water. Observant students of Scripture will notice how throughout this section of Numbers, water keeps appearing. It will appear in Balaam's prophecies eventually. But here God says,

And from there they continued to Beer; that is the well of which the LORD said to Moses, 'Gather the people together, so that I may give them water.' Then Israel sang this song: 'Spring up, O well!—Sing to it!—the well that the princes made, that the nobles of the people dug, with the sceptre and with their staffs.' (Num 21:16–18)

And if I allowed us to be fanciful tonight, here we have a picture of Calvary with a serpent on the pole, and then we have a well of water springing up. And we are reminded of the story of the woman at the well, where Christ said:

<sup>8</sup> Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), 'Blessed be God, our God.'



If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water. . . . The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. (John 4:10, 14)

Look at the language of this particular verse, 'Spring up, O well', a well of living water, and you will immediately remember the words which our Lord spoke to the woman of Samaria, with all the disappointments that had surrounded her life, sad and serious disappointments in marital affairs, and then in social affairs in the village, and supremely in the utterly unsatisfying religion of Samaritanism. She met our blessed Lord, and to that thirsty woman the promise was given of the gift of the Holy Spirit, a well of water springing up within her to eternal life. Marvellous story for those wanting to get across the wilderness. Taught by the death of Christ, the answer to Satan's poison in our thinking. Then the Holy Spirit, a well of water springing up within us to eternal life.

### **Balak and Balaam**

I'm not now going to speak about the battles that they had to fight on their way towards the promised land. You will see them listed in verse 21 onwards. But I want to come finally to chapters 22–24. Here was another battle, but this time it wasn't a physical battle. It was a spiritual battle aimed at stopping Israel getting any further along the wilderness, aimed at stopping them getting into their promised land. A spiritual battle as Balak, a king of Moab, called Balaam the prophet to come and curse Israel because he was afraid of them. Balaam was a false prophet who used his divination, and his enchantments, and all the rest of the tomfoolery in this pseudo religion. This time it was a warfare carried out on the tops of the mountains: I don't know if Israel even knew about what was going on. Eventually they would have discovered, for in the book of the prophet Micah, God asked Israel to remember what Balaam and Balak tried to get up to and how God answered them. But in that battle, that spiritual warfare, it wasn't Israel who fought it: it was God that fought. It's a tremendous story, and on another occasion perhaps we will be able to look at some of the detail.

The first thing that I would like you to notice is what Balak said in chapter 22:

And Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were many. Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. And Moab said to the elders of Midian, 'This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field.' So Balak the son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the River in the land of the people of Amaw, to call him, saying, 'Behold, a people has come out of Egypt. They cover the face of the earth, and they are dwelling opposite me. Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.' (vv. 3–6)

The first thing that alarmed Balak was the sheer number of the people, and Balaam was brought along to curse them because they were so numerous, hoping that this curse would

diminish their numbers. So let's look at the first message that Balaam was obliged to deliver to Balak the king. This is chapter 23:

And Balaam said to Balak, 'Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go. Perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever he shows me I will tell you.' And he went to a bare height, and God met Balaam. And Balaam said to him, 'I have arranged the seven altars and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram.' And the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, 'Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak.' And he returned to him, and behold, he and all the princes of Moab were standing beside his burnt offering. And Balaam took up his discourse and said, 'From Aram Balak has brought me, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains: "Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!" How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced? For from the top of the crags I see him, from the hills I behold him; behold, a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations! Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!' (vv. 3–10)

Now, notice that remark which Balaam reports, 'Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?' — which is the very thing that the king of Moab was afraid of! He told Balaam, 'They're like a multitude, a vast number of them, and they'll gobble up the whole land, come and curse them, they are so numerous.' And the first thing God makes Balaam report is that this is a special people, not to be reckoned among the Gentiles. Well that is making all sorts of memory bells ring in your head, isn't it? For you will remember what God promised to Abraham originally:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 12:1–3)

I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. (Gen 22:17)

The centuries have rolled by and now here are Israel in the wilderness. And there's going on a battle, up aloft on the mountain. Balaam has come to try and convince God to abandon Israel, and curse them. It won't do, will it? The very first thing was God's promise, 'I will make of you a great nation; your offspring will be as the stars of heaven and as the sand of the seashore' — and God is fulfilling it. And God refuses to listen to Balaam and Balak, or to change his eternal purpose. Marvellous that, because Israel were down the mountain: they weren't listening in to this. We are given a sight of what's going on aloft, up on the top of the mountain, where the false prophet is trying by his menagerie of doubtful practices, black magic and omens and divination, to change God's mind. Using a good pagan idea, he gives more sacrifices than the others to get God to come over to his side. That's the logic of bribery in the business world too. And God remains utterly faithful to his promise to Abraham and to his offspring.

## **Faithfulness of God in blessing his people**

We have already seen the report that Balaam had to bring from God, how in spite of his own inclination, and the desires of Balak the king, God made him repeat the blessing of God upon Israel. There are three major statements by Balaam of God's attitude to his people. At the end of them, the king who had hired him, and had promised him a lot of money if he cursed Israel, flew into a temper with disgust because Balaam had blessed them, and he bade Balaam get home quick. But before he went, Balaam pronounced four short parables. They were parables in which, darkly sometimes, but otherwise quite clearly, he prophesied the future of Israel (see 24:15–25).

But regarding the three major statements of God's blessing upon Israel, as God speaks through Balaam, God was repeating the promises that he had made to Abraham right from the start of that nation in the book of Genesis. God had called Abraham out of all the other nations to make of Abraham a new nation that had never existed before, that was distinct from all the other nations of the earth in its testimony to the one true God of heaven, as distinct from the crass idolatry of all the other nations. And God had said to Abraham that he would give him descendants like the very dust of the earth in number; and he had said that kings would come from Abraham and Sarah.

So now, when Balaam relays his three great reports of what God has said to him, the first one deals with the problem that king Balak had found. Balak had said, 'Look, this nation has come, it is a vast multitude, they will eat everything in the land for the sheer numbers of them.' Yes indeed, God was fulfilling his promise to make of Abraham a great multitude.

And then Balaam added, 'It is a people that dwells alone, and shall not be reckoned among the other nations.' That was already true then. The remarkable thing, it is still true. In spite of the sundry captivities, the scattering of Israel all over the earth, and only until recently a homeland found for them in Palestine, it is a nation that has not become intermingled, and therefore its identity lost among the nations. This is an extraordinary thing and it is part of our Christian apologetics. I had an elderly Jewish friend in this city some years ago, and he used to come to dinner. He was a Jew who had escaped from Austria, from Hitler, and had managed to come across here. In his old age, he was at least bewildered. He would tell me, 'It's you Christians that were responsible for the Holocaust, and the gassing of the Jews. You taught your children that it was the wicked Jews that crucified Jesus, and sowed hatred in their heart that expressed itself in the gas chambers of Hitler.' And then he would say, 'I don't know whether there's a God or not.' And then, he'd add, 'And yet, I look out of my office window, and I see a man there. He's a Jew. How did we remain and keep our identity all down the years? It must be of God.' It is true of course—the nation that God chose and preserved, the nation through whom the Messiah came, the nation who will yet be restored under God, though they have a great tribulation to go through. And God being true to his purpose, all the incantations and enchantments, omens and satanic attempts in the heavenly places to get God to change his mind and curse Israel, are all in vain.

In Balaam's second great statement, he describes the character of God. 'God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind' (23:19). God had given the promises right from Abraham's days; God is not going to change his mind. But then Balaam adds, cryptically, 'the shout of a king is among them' (v. 21). In spite of their trials in Egypt

and now in the wilderness, already there are the beginnings of 'the shout of a king'. God had said to Abraham, 'kings shall come of you' — yes, a whole lot of kings, the chief of them being David. And one day, he of King David's line shall prove to the King of kings and Lord of lords.

The third great report of Balaam gives us, what you might call, the Holy Spirit's view of the matter. I don't have the time to explain that in great detail, but Balaam tells us at the introduction to his third great statement how the spirit of God came on him, and he fell down, and he whose eyes had been shut were opened to see, and what he now says is very interesting. It's the illumination of God's spirit, allowing Balaam to see what otherwise he wouldn't have seen. And he looked from his vantage point down on the tents of Israel, and as we know from Numbers, the tents were all ordered in their particular areas, and what impressed him was their orderliness, 'Marvellous design,' said he, 'and they're like' (and this is the extraordinary bit) 'gardens beside a river, and aloes and cedar trees, and a beautiful supply of water—water shall flow from his buckets' (see 24:5–7). You wouldn't have believed it had you been listening to Israel a little bit earlier, complaining that water was scarce and they had no water. But we got hints of it very early on, when they dug the well and God gave them water in the wilderness.

But the spirit's view that Balaam was made to give, of course, was part prophetic. Already the beginnings were there for all the wonderful things that would later happen. Listen to Ezekiel and all his promise of the living water of life coming out of the temple. Listen to the Lord Jesus at the Feast of Booths, when Israel remembered how once they dwelt in tents in the wilderness, and they poured out the water at the base of the altar in memory of the water out of rock. And we remember that our Lord Jesus stood and cried over the heads of the people, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. . . . "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water"' (John 7:37–38). And then the great eternal vision of the water of life, the river of the water of life coming out of the very throne of God.

Three major explanations: one is God's view (all are God's view of course!); the second one hints now at the coming of the king; and the third one is the Holy Spirit's view. It is the blessing of God Almighty, three in one and one in three. It's a comfort to my heart, you know, down here in this world, fighting the sundry enemies that come my way, and not always successfully, to think of a higher position — of principalities and powers in the heavenly places doing their hardest to destroy God's people and to get God to change his mind. The devil is called the accuser of the saints, and he accuses them day and night. And he tries to lay hold on the very holiness of God, and demand that God should destroy us who profess faith in him, but whose conduct is not always as it should be. What a comfort it is to know that that God, even while we're asleep, even while we're not aware of the conflicts going on, that God aloft is being faithful to the promise given to Abraham and to his offspring. For God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said it, and will he not do it?

We rest on thee, our Shield and our Defender!  
We go not forth alone against the foe;  
Strong in thy strength, safe in thy keeping tender,

We rest on thee, and in thy name we go.<sup>9</sup>

Our father, we thank thee for this Old Testament instance and example of thine astonishing faith to thy people; poor and failing as they were, and sometimes rebelling. But we bless thee thou didst understand their hearts, and for them, and even more for us, thou hast given us a good medicine to calm the heart, to silence our fears, and that our faith in thee might remain in spite of earth's tribulations. And we do thank thee for our perfect Saviour and our intercessor, who at thy right hand intercedes for us. And we bless thee that thou art the God that has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, and nothing can deflect thee from thy purpose to bless thy people.

Thus, send us home we pray, with the comfort of thy word in our hearts, and a determination to go on trusting thee throughout the journey, until thou dost bring us home to thy heaven. For Christ's sake we pray. Amen.

<sup>9</sup> Edith G. Cherry (1872-1897), 'We rest on Thee' (1895).

## Fourth Rebellion – Unfaithfulness

Tonight we must move on to consider, chiefly, the fourth rebellion recorded in the book of Numbers when Israel joined themselves to Baal-Peor, and God was jealous. It is the rebellion that is described in chapter 25.

While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel. (vv. 1–3)

And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. Therefore say, “Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.”’ (vv. 10–13)

The rebellion consisted of physical fornication and adultery, and of spiritual adultery, because not only did they commit physical adultery and fornication with the Moabite women, but they joined themselves to Baal-Peor, that was the name of the local idolatrous god, Baal of Peor. And Israel joined in the worship of him, and therefore God was jealous. And we’ll come to that in a moment. Why, you say to me, should all we innocent nice healthy Christian men and women interest ourselves in such ugly goings on by a few ancient Israelites? Well because the New Testament reminds us Christians of it. So let’s begin to look, just turn over the page a little later in the book of Numbers, where we shall pick up a hint of what happened. This is chapter 31, about a subsequent war with the kings of Midian, and we’re told that Balaam, also the son of Peor, they slew with the sword. Then look at verse 16:

Behold, these, on Balaam’s advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the LORD.

So you notice that bit, ‘on Balaam’s advice’. Now let’s read in the New Testament the occasions where this incident is referred to, where Paul says:

We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. (1 Cor 10:8)

That's a reference to the plague that came upon Israel as described in Numbers 25. Then let's look at 2 Peter, for now Peter is talking about men who have infiltrated the church, and he says:

Especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority. Bold and wilful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones, whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgement against them before the Lord. But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction, suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing. They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, revelling in their deceptions, while they feast with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness. (vv. 10–16)

I needn't go on reading it. It is a very dark passage of denunciation of what was going on in some assemblies in Christian times. But let's go further and read Jude this time. This is Jude writing again about people who have infiltrated the church,

Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion. These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved for ever. (Jude 11–13)

Strong language, but true of some assemblies to which Jude wrote. And if you think that's exaggerated, you won't think what comes next is exaggerated, because this time it's Revelation 2, and this is our blessed Lord speaking.

The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practise sexual immorality. (vv. 12–14)

This is our blessed Lord talking to an assembly, and the name of the place is Pergamum. This is one of the most quoted incidents from the Old Testament in the New. Of course you can understand it a little bit, particularly when the writers are writing to Greek churches, because in countries like ancient Greece, and even in Rome, nobody ever thought that fornication was wrong anyway: that was taken for granted. And when people became Christian, as you see from the Epistles, the apostles had to write to Christian communities and tell them that

fornication was wrong. No Greek would ever have imagined it, but this is now Christian standards being taught, and therefore it's understandable if, in the early Christian assemblies, you find this weakness and temptation.

But my dear brothers and sisters, our modern world in the west becomes progressively more like the world of the apostles than ever it has been in the ages since then. And there is a link, you know. We must hold fast to the true God and he will hold you fast to his moral standards. If you allow unfaithfulness to God through idolatry and a mixture of all kinds of heathen religions, Hinduism, and all such things, you must not be surprised if what comes with it is sexual immorality. The two go together. I'm afraid, in modern Christendom, fornication is thought to be okay. Sometimes, even in Christian unions, in universities known to me. And in many a church.

When we view Christendom as a whole, there is controversy about its pronouncements on the perversions of sexual morality that threaten now to split the Church of England and the Anglican communion around the world. And I'm old enough to remember the 60s and 70s, where we had advocated the new morality, and if you do it for the right reasons, even fornication and adultery can be a good thing. The Bishop of Woolwich so said. And as for the prevalence of divorce, in some places the minister is on his third wife. It is not for nothing, then, that the New Testament repeats and recalls this story more than once in the Epistles by the apostles, and in one of the letters dictated by our Lord.

### **God's jealousy**

Now comes the matter, therefore, of God's jealousy. To us in English, the word jealousy often seems to be a bad thing, so people wonder how you could possibly say that God is jealous. Well jealousy can be a very bad thing, and a root of many crimes, but jealousy also is a healthy thing. If a woman finds that another woman has drawn away her husband, isn't she right to be jealous? If a man finds his wife has been drawn away from him by another man, wouldn't he be jealous in the right sense? If he were not, he never did love the woman to start with. True jealousy is the other side of the coin of true love and commitment. And therefore, God is jealous.

Let's take some passages in the New Testament that talk about God being jealous, shall we? This is 1 Corinthians 10 once more. Paul has been here dealing with the troublesome problem, not of sexual immorality but of spiritual unfaithfulness to God. And the Christians at Corinth were wondering, now, is it okay to eat meat offered to idols? Well if you buy it in the market place, and you don't know where the meat comes from, you don't have to ask about it: eat it and eat it with good conscience. But if somebody points it out to you, that this was meat offered to an idol, don't eat it, for his sake, don't eat it.

But what about the possibility of going to the temple restaurant, which they did have in Greece? The people brought their sacrifices, you slaughtered the animals, and you burnt some on the altar of course, but then you had a lot of spare beef left over, and some very good mutton. So they had a restaurant and you could go to the temple and be served the very best, recently cooked, not imported from New Zealand, but recently slaughtered, and very tender, and beautifully cooked, within nice surroundings and architecture with Corinthian pillars.



And you could invite your friends along to it, and it wasn't all that expensive, not compared with some Belfast hotels. So what about that then?

No, it must not be done, Paul says. (You mustn't confuse this with the other matter that is talked of in Romans 14, where it is a question of whether you can eat meat as a believer or ought you to be a vegetarian. And Christians will go disagreeing about that until the Lord comes, and then the meat eaters will be shown right—or is it the vegetarians, I forget which! But eating meat offered to idols is another thing completely. And it must not be done, knowingly done, that is. You must not, for instance, go to the temple restaurant, and the meat that's just been offered to the idols is brought to you and you eat it. Why not? Because the first basic sin in this universe is disloyalty to the almighty creator.

These chapters in 1 Corinthians are not merely museum pieces. My dear friends in Malaysia had friends who told of a young person there got converted in the Christian camp, and then goes home, in the parents' home there's a god shelf in the corner, and normally when the meal is prepared, it is first offered to the god and then they eat. What should a young person do? Practical questions, even in this modern world, which come back to the point at issue that idolatry is the fundamental sin in the universe: it's disloyalty to the almighty God, the one true God creator. So Paul tells them that this must not be done, and he says,

I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Cor 10:20–22)

When he says you cannot, well physically you can, if you intend to. But do remember, if you do, are you provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? Notice the 'are we stronger than he?' suggesting that you'd be safer not to provoke him to jealousy.

This, then, is over the fundamental matter of our relationship with the Lord God Almighty. So that mustn't be done. And our Lord complains to two churches. To the church in Pergamum, he says that the believers there are being taught by false teachers—some of them, they weren't all like that—to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication. Then to the church in Thyatira, our Lord has some very strong words about a woman called Jezebel. To call someone 'Jezebel' is like calling a man 'Hitler'. Jezebel was the wife of Ahab and she persuaded Ahab—not that he needed a lot of persuading—to shut up the temple of the Lord and build a nice new one in the modern age and to dedicate it to Baal. And now this modern Jezebel in an assembly is teaching the believers that it's right to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication. What is our Lord talking about? Well this, perhaps, if nothing else.

In those ancient days, if you were in a city like Thyatira, and you were a businessman, you would belong to your particular business guild, whether you were a leather maker, or fashion designer, or furniture maker. Whatever you were, there would be a guild of your fellow tradesmen, and of course, you would be invited to become a member of the guild, and then the guild would have its dinners. And you would be invited along to the dinner as a member of the business guild. You say, 'Well what's wrong with that?' Nothing, except that every guild had its patron god or goddess. There would be a statue of the god up in the corner

somewhere prominent, and the food would be offered to the patron god before it was put on the table. And then there would be a lot of ladies present, enough for all the members anyway. They wouldn't be the men's wives though, for this was a Greek city. There were some in the assembly at Thyatira who said it was okay.

Should a Christian be a member of a secret business society? When I first came to Ireland, the bank manager who looked after my one and five pence was a dear believer, and he would take me out to lunch sometimes for sheer Christian fellowship. I remember his asking me, 'David, is it wrong for a Christian to be a member of the Freemasons?'

I said, 'Why do you ask?'

He said, 'Because the principals of the bank are putting pressure on me, telling me that if I don't belong to the Freemasons, I'm losing them custom.'

(My own brother was a representative of a firm who likewise brought that pressure to bear upon him.) And members of the Freemasons in their services—it is absurd in one sense—had a mixture of all the heathen idolatry you could possibly imagine, for they worship the sun god, and Osiris and On, the Egyptian Gods, and bull for Baal, as well as Jehovah, or Jah. A horrible mixture of paganism. I had an accountant who once told me, 'It would surprise you how many folks in the church are Freemasons.' This is disloyalty to God, of course, serious disloyalty to God, which our Lord rebukes.

There is, however, another form of jealousy. Let's look at 2 Corinthians 11 this time.

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (vv. 1–3)

This is a question, therefore, of Paul getting jealous for God's sake, and for Christ's sake. 'I betrothed you,' he says, 'as a pure virgin to Christ.' And in the ancient world, of course, betrothal or espousal, what we call engagements, were more serious than our engagement: they were tantamount to marriage. 'I've betrothed you to one husband and I want to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I fear lest Satan will get at your thoughts, and corrupt your thoughts and your thinking from absolute simplicity, loyalty, and purity to Christ.'

Here's a young lady contemplating engagement—not that I know about these things but I've read about it in books!—and before she gets engaged, or betrothed, or espoused as the Hebrew has it, why shouldn't she keep an open mind? I mean, shall it be George? There's a lot to be said for George, how handsome he is, curls and style of dress, so should it be George? On the other hand, George is okay, but his conversation is rather empty, so what about Phillip? Now he's very knowledgeable and very charming in his conversation. The question would be is that all superficial. What would he be like in the home: just a theorist, never help with the washing up and that kind of thing? So should it be Phillip? Oh, then there is Robert, look at his Jaguar, and his dad is said to be worth millions! Why shouldn't the dear lady keep an open mind? But once she has taken the vow, she is no longer free to keep an open mind.

And if thereafter she keeps an open mind, that is not a sign of excessive intelligence, that is a sign of defective loyalty and morality. 'I have betrothed you to Christ'—our thoughts, ladies and gentlemen, must be loyal to Christ. Now for some of us who must face the world

of thought, where we meet all sorts of theories, both scientific and philosophical and literary, we'll have to watch ourselves lest our thoughts be corrupted from the loyalty that is towards Christ, as the serpent deceived Eve. How did Satan manage that then? Well he said,

'I hear you can't eat of any of these trees.'

'Yes, we can eat as many as we like, except one tree.'

'That's just like God. He puts a lovely thing in front of you and then tells you, you can't have it. Well then go on and eat it, woman'

'No, God has said that if you eat it, you will die.'

'Oh did he say that? Well there is another opinion in which that wouldn't be altogether true. You won't surely die, and in fact, if you eat it, the alternative view is that you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'

And the dear lady in her innocence allowed the alternative explanation to enter her thinking, and thinking led to action. I'm not arguing for wearing intellectual blinkers. Let us be aware of the world we live in, but we have to guard our thoughts, because in it all, the great tempter still rages, and what he's out to do is to corrupt our loyalty, our intellectual loyalty, to Christ. And therefore provoke God, our father, and the Lord Jesus, to jealousy.

It is, perhaps, not for nothing that when God was talking about the provisions and preparations for the journey, he talked about this business of when a man gets jealous, or suspects his wife has gone astray and becomes jealous. Well he could possibly be an arbitrary old boy, and there's nothing wrong with the woman at all. But God arranged a system by which the doubts could be settled, and the two can come to trust each other. For the woman submitted, indeed invoked, God's discipline and judgment on her if she had gone astray, so that God could then vindicate her if she hadn't gone astray, or discipline her if she had.

And when it comes to our trusting each other, not even man and wife trusting each other, but Christians trusting each other in the church, you don't know what I get up to when I go to Spain or Ukraine. We trust each other because, at the Lord's Supper, we are made aware that we must discern ourselves as we come, for if we come carelessly, allowing blatant sin in our lives, then the Lord will judge us, discipline us, and because we're all in that same boat, we can trust one another. If we are sincere in saying, 'Yes, I do not come to the Lord's Supper knowingly involved in some wicked enterprise, I've confessed my shortcomings, if I am perverse, let the Lord discipline'; if we all come with that, honestly, how shall we not trust each other?

But notice the incident, this is jealousy between a man and his wife. What do you hold about marriage? You're the experts, I'm not; what do hold about marriage? That God created man and woman and after some centuries of watching them, he said to himself, 'You know, I've got an idea, I could use that as a sort of analogy of the relationship of the church to Christ'? Do you think it was that way around? Most certainly not: it was the other way around. This is an expression of God's own heart, and so when it came to Israel's redemption, God represents himself as a lover, and Israel as his wife. And to Christians, the New Testament represents Christ as a lover, a bridegroom, and the church as his bride. So as we have at this level some understanding of the very heart of God in his relationship to his people, and just as a man or wife would get jealous if the purity of their partner were corrupted, so God gets

jealous. The sacredness of life, therefore and the seriousness of life, and the seriousness of this particular sin. That's solemn stuff, but we shall put another side to the story.

### **The sacrifices**

We have thought from the first part of these particular chapters about the fourth rebellion, and tried to apply the practical and solemn lessons to ourselves. But as with the other passages, so with this, the second half of the narrative is given largely over to sacrifices. And it is on those sacrifices that I suggest we concentrate for the next few minutes. They are listed in chapters 28 and 29 of the book of Numbers. I am about to suggest to you that this is God's provision for the nation, in the light of their tendency to be unfaithful to him, for producing and maintaining in his people a sense of devotion and loyalty to the Lord. The tendency to be unfaithful to him has to be rebuked by strong language, of course, but that doesn't of itself cure that tendency. To overcome the tendency to be unfaithful and disloyal to the Lord, we need to practice positive devotion to the Lord, and to make it a practice in life to be devoted to him.

So look at how chapter 28 begins.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Command the people of Israel and say to them, "My offering, my food for my food offerings, my pleasing aroma, you shall be careful to offer to me at its appointed time.'" (vv. 1-2)

Notice the phrase 'my food for my food offerings'. That is such an unusual phrase in that context that some of the experts tell us the word doesn't mean 'food', it means something else, but to my simple mind, it is not only right, it is highly appropriate. 'My food' says God. What do you think all those sacrifices were that are now listed in great detail? Well he didn't eat them physically, but they were his food. You say, 'Did Israel have to feed God?' Well don't you? What about our Lord and what he said to the church at Laodicea? He said, 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and I will eat with him, and he with me' (Rev 3:20). It must have been a marvellous experience for Martha and Mary when the Lord took time off to come and stay with them, and they were allowed to feed the Lord. You dear ladies feed the preachers more than they deserve, but if you got a chance to have the Lord at your table, it would be the very best you could put on!

#### *The daily offerings*

But feeding the Lord is not just with physical food. So here he begins to list the sacrifices that he asked them to offer to him.

And you shall say to them, This is the food offering that you shall offer to the LORD: two male lambs a year old without blemish, day by day, as a regular offering. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight; also a tenth of an ephah of fine flour for a grain offering, mixed with a quarter of a hin of beaten oil. It is a regular burnt offering, which was ordained at Mount Sinai for a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the LORD. Its drink offering shall be a quarter of a hin for each lamb. In the Holy Place you shall pour out

a drink offering of strong drink to the LORD. The other lamb you shall offer at twilight. Like the grain offering of the morning, and like its drink offering, you shall offer it as a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the LORD. (28:3–8)

This is one of the basic elements in ancient Israel's worship of God. It was the daily continual sacrifice, one sacrifice in the morning, another in the evening. The nation itself had to go about its business, but while they went about their business, they could rely on this, that in the morning the smoke of their burnt offering, offered in their name, would go up to God for a sweet savour, a good smell, a fragrant smell, and then again at evening. Without interruption, every day of every week of every month of every year of every century. It is called the *tamid* in Hebrew. It was one of the terrible wickedness of that villain Antiochus Epiphanes that when he got control of Jerusalem, he took away the continual burnt offering. Christianity, or Christendom shall I say, took over the idea. And so in the cathedrals of the land there are Matins and Evensong every day. Whether anybody attends or not, that is not the point: morning and evening, the praise of God should ascend.

It's good for us too isn't it? We want to be faithful to the Lord, pay regular devotion to the Lord. The presenting of ourselves, a living sacrifice to the Lord, to abound in thanksgiving, to be pleasing to him not just when we feel like it, but regularly each day, positively devoted to the Lord. It's a good habit to get into. So I set you a little exercise to go through these two chapters, 28 and 29, because in addition to this daily sacrifice, one morning and one evening, they had special days when they had to offer a lot of sacrifices, and special feast days, and so forth and so on. All the detailed sacrifices are listed, what they had to offer on these special days, and then at the end it says that they are in addition to the daily one. However exciting the special meetings are, so to speak, don't let them take away from daily offering ourselves to the Lord, making a habit of it—a habit of devotion to him.

#### *Feast days*

Then there were the special days; they were the feast days, and again I must leave you to work them out for yourself, starting at chapter 28 and verse 16. There was a Passover, and later on, in verse 26, the firstfruits. And then in chapter 29, there was the Feast of Trumpets, and then there was the Day of Atonement, and then there was the Feast of Booths. They were remembrances of what God had done for them. At Passover they remembered what God had done for them in Egypt; and then when they got into the land, the firstfruits had to be offered, green in the ear; and then later the firstfruits at what is called the Feast of Weeks, that is, Pentecost. And then later on there was the Day of Atonement, and then finally the Feast of Booths. On each of these occasions—sometimes they lasted a week or more—there were sacrifices, keeping God entertained, so to speak.

Do you have to entertain God? Well of course you have to entertain God. I've often wondered to myself, when the Lord came to Martha and Mary, and he would have congratulated them on the soup and the main dish, and all the others, and then he might ask, 'How are you Martha, and how are you, Mary?' and so on. What would you talk to Christ about? I go into a lot of homes, as you know, and when you first go, conversation is easy. How are you? And how long have you lived here? And where were you born? Do you have any children? (And if they've got a half dozen children, all the better, because it makes more

conversation!) But after about the third day it's a bit difficult to think of something to say! Well perhaps you don't—you're an easy conversationalist! But suppose the Lord came to stay, what would you talk about?

God taught Israel: talk to me about the Passover when I redeemed you, go over the details in the symbol, talk to me about it. Talk to me about when you used to live in tents, at the Feast of Booths. Talk to me about the firstfruits, and the Feast of Weeks, and the Day of Atonement. I think, if I had the chance, and the Lord came to me, I would say, 'Lord, if you don't mind me reminding you, but on the road to Emmaus, you gave the two people, whoever they were, an exposition of Old Testament typology—all the things in the Old Testament about yourself. Would you mind doing it for me just now? I've got a bit of bother with that bit about the tabernacle. And please could you tell me why the Day of Atonement came so late in the year: I thought you'd have begun with that.' Do you think we'd be allowed to discuss with the Lord the Old Testament? Well you'd need to know a bit about the Old Testament to discuss it, wouldn't you?

But to be able to talk to the Lord intelligently about those feasts, and how they were prophecies of him, and help our understanding of him, what a thing that would be to do! What do you think you're going to talk to him in heaven about? Well that will make a start won't it? Of course, he'll have ten thousand new things to tell you. But still, yes, God's wisdom in training his people to be loyal to him, to concentrate on him, to be devoted and to be remembering what he has done for them in the past, and the wonders of redemption, and the implications of it, and the future things of it, what a wealth of material there is!

I think I'm going to check up one thing with the Lord if I can: those feasts of the Lord, and how each one starts with Calvary. First one, Passover, and then it goes on to the Feast of Booths which is, among other things, a prophecy of God's future restoration of Israel. But if you take that view, some people will say, 'No it's not, it's not right, because the second last one is the Day of Atonement. What's that got to do with the future coming of the Lord: what's a day of atonement got to do with that, it's out of place.' But I'm going to try my theory on the Lord, and I'll say, 'Now Lord, I've a notion about that: am I anywhere near right? Though it was the Day of Atonement, it was one of the feasts that symbolized the second coming of Christ.'

Yes, it was, wasn't it, because on the Day of Atonement, the high priest came out of the tabernacle and came down to the big altar, and there he offered the goat for the sins of the people. So he appeared in the presence of everybody to put away sin by that sacrifice. Then he took the blood and he went back into the holiest of all, for the first time, and the only time in the year, and sprinkled the blood upon the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat. He appeared in the presence of God for Israel. So he appeared out here, in the presence of the nation outside, in the big world, to put away sin by this sacrifice. Then he went back and appeared in the presence of God, for the people. And then, lo and behold, he appeared, came out again, the second time, and appeared to the people, and when he appeared the second time, they had to offer this other sin offering, the scape goat, and confess their sins on it and it was taken away to oblivion. The second time, and the New Testament says similarly in Hebrews 9, 'he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages [that is in our world] to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself' (v. 26). Now he's gone back. What for? He appears in the

presence of God for us. And says Hebrews, presently, he shall appear the second time: he's coming again, and when he comes, he won't have to offer another sin offering. When he appears a second time, it's without a sin offering unto salvation. Meaning he comes to take us home, to the Father's home on high.

That's my private view, and I hold to that, but wouldn't it be a great thing to discuss with the Lord, if he came to tea one day! And why shouldn't we, because this is his inspired word, and what could we do better than discuss with the Lord what he himself has written about what he has done for us, what he will yet do for us. That might stimulate our love and affection for him, as we admire his wisdom in holy Scripture, and inspire us to go out and work for him loyally, that others might come to know him. The warning, then, is against disloyalty to the Lord, and here among other things, positive training, regular training, in being devoted to God. So may the Lord bless our study.

Shall we pray.

Lord thou knowest our hearts, we would not pretend anything in thy presence. Thou knowest our failings, and our inconsistencies, we are unprofitable servants; at best we have done merely what is our duty to do. We rely on thee, Lord, for thy forgiveness as we confess our sins, but Lord, we dare, falteringly, to say with Peter, thou knowest, Lord, that we love thee. By thy grace we pray, help us to practice our devotion to thee, that we might entertain thee, that thou mayest dine with us, and we with thee, and as the days of our temporary life go by, we may come to know thee and enjoy fellowship with the father and with the Holy Spirit, on the glories of the son of God, that we may become, Lord; not only devoted in our hearts to thee, but devoted likewise in our systematic work for thee until the great day when thou shalt come again, and we shall see thee face to face. Bless us now we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Fifth 'Rebellion' – Two Tribes Remain East of Jordan

This is the last of our small series of studies in the book of Numbers. And because it is the last, by hook or by crook, we must try to understand the main import of the last section of the book. Like all those in the book, from chapter 11 onwards we begin with what seemed to Moses to be another serious rebellion. It wasn't, in fact, a rebellion, though if it had been, it would indeed have been exceedingly serious. When Moses first heard of it, he thought it was a repetition of the rebellion that happened here in chapters 11–14, a refusal to enter into the land. It wasn't such, and the two and a half tribes who had put to him the suggestion that led him to think they were rebelling were allowed to explain themselves, what their real motivation was. What had happened was that before the Israelites entered Canaan, they came up the east of Jordan, and under Moses' captaincy, God gave them victory against enemies that there attacked them. And the victory involved not only the destruction of the enemy, but the taking over of the cities in which the enemy had thus far lived. Moreover, the country east of Jordan in those parts is beautiful grass land and very good cattle ground.

Two and a half tribes, therefore, asked Moses, because they had much cattle, if he would allow them to take this part east of Jordan as their inheritance. Moses thought that they were thereby proposing that they should forthwith be allowed to settle east of Jordan, and not go over Jordan to the war along with the rest of the tribes. They protested that they had no such intention, that they were quite prepared to go over Jordan in the vanguard of the army, and to fight with their fellow Israelites until the land of Canaan was subdued and possessed. And only then would they come back east over Jordan and settle there as their inheritance.

Now, we need to be clear about one geographical fact: that according to the inheritance God promised and delineated to Abraham in Genesis 15, the territory east of Jordan was part of the inheritance, and therefore Israel had a right to it. In asking to settle there, they were not going against the promises made to Abraham. Nevertheless, Moses, when he understood the situation, laid down very strict conditions. Yes, they could be allowed to settle east of Jordan if, and only if, they were prepared first to go across the Jordan with the rest of the tribes and fight, so that the nation as a whole should possess the land of Canaan. If they were prepared to do that, then they could go back and enjoy east of Jordan as their inheritance. But if they were not prepared to go across the Jordan west, with the rest of the nation, and fight with the nation for inheritance on that side, then they would not be allowed to come back east of Jordan. They would have no inheritance east of Jordan unless they were prepared to go over with the rest, west of Jordan. The matter is a little complicated so I'm going to get someone with a stentorian voice to read the passage, to help us get the facts in front of our minds.



Now the people of Reuben and the people of Gad had a very great number of livestock. And they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, and behold, the place was a place for livestock. So the people of Gad and the people of Reuben came and said to Moses and to Eleazar the priest and to the chiefs of the congregation, 'Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo, and Beon, the land that the LORD struck down before the congregation of Israel, is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock.' And they said, 'If we have found favour in your sight, let this land be given to your servants for a possession. Do not take us across the Jordan.' But Moses said to the people of Gad and to the people of Reuben, 'Shall your brothers go to the war while you sit here? Why will you discourage the heart of the people of Israel from going over into the land that the LORD has given them? Your fathers did this, when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to see the land. For when they went up to the Valley of Eshcol and saw the land, they discouraged the heart of the people of Israel from going into the land that the LORD had given them. And the LORD'S anger was kindled on that day, and he swore, saying, "Surely none of the men who came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upwards, shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, because they have not wholly followed me, none except Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have wholly followed the LORD.' And the LORD'S anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the LORD was gone. And behold, you have risen in your fathers' place, a brood of sinful men, to increase still more the fierce anger of the LORD against Israel! For if you turn away from following him, he will again abandon them in the wilderness, and you will destroy all this people.'" Then they came near to him and said, 'We will build sheepfolds here for our livestock, and cities for our little ones, but we will take up arms, ready to go before the people of Israel, until we have brought them to their place. And our little ones shall live in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until each of the people of Israel has gained his inheritance. For we will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has come to us on this side of the Jordan to the east.' So Moses said to them, 'If you will do this, if you will take up arms to go before the LORD for the war, and every armed man of you will pass over the Jordan before the LORD, until he has driven out his enemies from before him and the land is subdued before the LORD; then after that you shall return and be free of obligation to the LORD and to Israel, and this land shall be your possession before the LORD. But if you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the LORD, and be sure your sin will find you out. Build cities for your little ones and folds for your sheep, and do what you have promised.' And the people of Gad and the people of Reuben said to Moses, 'Your servants will do as my lord commands. Our little ones, our wives, our livestock, and all our cattle shall remain there in the cities of Gilead, but your servants will pass over, every man who is armed for war, before the LORD to battle, as my lord orders.' (Num 32:1-27)

If Moses had been right in the conclusion he drew from the suggestion of the two and a half tribes, namely that they were really unwilling to go over with the rest of the nation into the full inheritance that God was offering them, the situation would have been serious indeed. So that this passage, without further ado, brings us an exceedingly practical lesson. The lesson

is about the danger of slacking, the danger of settling down because we have assurance of salvation, and not pushing onward into the full inheritance that Christ has made available for us. As Moses pointed out to the two and a half tribes, if the two and a half tribes started to slack, and didn't go across with the rest, they not only did damage to themselves, they did damage to the others. And that applies to us as well, doesn't it? If I am not following the Lord and going on as best I can into the full inheritance that Christ has made available to us, I not only damage myself, I damage you.

And, God forbid it, but if it should be that any of you are slacking, you not only do damage to yourself, you do damage to the people of God. That, of course, is to be seen in practical matters. If you don't turn up to the meetings of the church, you very obviously discourage the rest of the church. Hence the importance of not giving way to slacking, but positively going ahead into the enjoyment of the full inheritance that Christ has made available. The classic place in the New Testament that urges this attitude upon us is Philippians 3, where first of all Paul makes it very clear that justification is altogether by faith, and not by our religious exercises. In Judaism he had been full of effort to obtain acceptance with God by his religious exercises. Through Christ he learned better, and all his attainments on that score he counted but rubbish, so that he should be found simply in Christ, not having a righteousness which was of his own devising, or achievement, but the righteousness which is of faith, the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. But now, assured of salvation, he didn't just sit down and take it easy for the rest of his existence. Some of the strongest language he ever used is used in this passage to describe his attitude, from verse 10 onwards:

That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained. (Phil 3:10–16)

The need, therefore, as Christian men and women, not only to rest in the assurance of salvation, but to expend every ounce of energy we have in pressing on, that we might grow in the likeness of Christ, and enter the full inheritance that he has for us. Now do be careful as you go out tonight, for if you see some elderly gentleman out there looking extraordinarily old and he were to grab you and say, 'My dear, I hear you're slacking', of course you would say, 'No, I'm not.' But suppose he were to say, 'Give me some evidence that you're not slacking', what kind of evidence would you give him? Because you never know, it might be Moses himself! And he would want some positive evidence that you are not slacking, but deliberately pressing on towards the mark of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. So our lesson has an immediate practical implication for us all. And tonight I want to spend most of my time putting this incident into its historical context, and what was about to happen here, in the final section of the book.

Israel had come up to the Jordan, and east of Jordan they had fought and won many battles. They had done all that under Moses, but now the chief objective lay ahead, that was crossing Jordan into all the benefits, as well as the fighting, of course, on the west of Jordan, the land that God had promised to them. And for that part, they were no longer to be under Moses: he would go home to glory, dear old soul. Now they were to be under a different leader. His name was Joshua, or to put it into Greek, Jesus. It was going to be a different experience for some of them, leaving Moses behind and being under Joshua's command and direction, going over into the promised land, and into the full enjoyment of the full inheritance that God had promised them.

That being the historical setting, it immediately becomes a prototype of later Judean history. The Jews lived under Moses: all down the centuries, even after they went into Palestine, they lived under Moses until Christ came. Christ lived and died, and was buried and rose again, and ascended into heaven. And if you listen to Paul in his epistles, he would tell you that as a result, those who put their faith in Christ are no longer under law: they are under grace. The New Testament Epistles are full of all the benefits that people never knew under Moses. Justification by faith spelled out, though it was an Old Testament doctrine. More wonderful still, the fullness of the sacrifice of Christ, unlike those sacrifices under Moses' dispensation, and the old covenant, where you had constantly to offer a sacrifice on the altar to keep right with God, and to keep on getting forgiveness of sins. That finished because of the one great sacrifice for sin offered by our blessed Lord at Calvary. And then of course, our Lord's resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. So now it's not a question of our trying to keep the law for salvation, that's gone by the board. In order to please the Lord, we must do his commandments, but we're not left to our own effort to do it, but by the grace of the Holy Spirit come down from heaven. Glorious gospel.

You say to me, 'I suspect the Jews, when they heard of this and saw the superiority of Jesus to Moses, said, "Marvellous, Lord, we're now going in for it head over heels.'" No, they didn't. Indeed, some who professed to believe that Jesus was the Messiah when he lived, and also professed to believe after he rose from the dead, well at first sight it seemed they were slacking. But that raised very serious problems. In fact, it raised the question whether they had ever been true believers at all, and there is a whole epistle in the New Testament written over this very point. So we're going to use this last so-called rebellion that wasn't a rebellion, to look at how the New Testament deals with this problem — Jews who, to start with, professed to believe in Christ but were not prepared to move on. So let's start by reading Hebrews 10, where the writer is describing the delightful benefits that come through the sacrifice of Christ.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (vv. 19–25)

Why make that fuss? The custom of some, now, was to forsake the assembling of themselves together with the Christians. Why was that serious for them? Because these were Jews who had professed faith in Christ, and as the epistle shows us, some of them were persecuted severely by their families and by others for professing faith in Christ. And at the start they endured the persecution, but now some of them were slacking off. And if they were not coming to meet with the Christians, it raised the question, where were they going? Why weren't they coming to meet with the Christians?

They weren't going back to Judaism were they? For if they were seriously going back to Judaism, the writer now warns them what's involved. If now they go back to Judaism, formally and officially, they are trampling underfoot the Son of God. No less than that. Notice the terminology. Not merely trampling underfoot Jesus, but trampling underfoot the Son of God (v 29). To this present day, if you would become a member of the Jewish synagogue, you must renounce your faith in Jesus as the Son of God, for that Judaism will not have. This was one of the reasons why they crucified Jesus. I have a friend in Belfast, he's a business friend, and he's a Jew. He married a girl from a Presbyterian church. She was required, even by liberal Judaism, to admit that Jesus is not the only saviour, and she did it to marry him. If you're going back to Judaism, says the writer, you trample underfoot the Son of God. You must deny his deity.

You count the blood of the covenant common. That follows logically. If Jesus isn't the Son of God, his blood is no more valuable than yours in your veins. His blood is the blood of an ordinary man. It follows logically, if he's not the Son of God, his blood is common, and the new covenant, signed in his blood, isn't worth the paper it's written on. It's serious stuff isn't it? But this is New Testament truth, and somebody who does what the writer here warns them not to do is doing despite to the spirit of grace. Notice the term. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth, he's the spirit of God, he's the spirit of Jesus. Here he is described as the spirit of grace. Marvellous grace indeed, for when God sent his dearly beloved Son, he sent him to his own people, and they that were his own rejected him, and persuaded the Romans to crucify him. When they'd done it, and God raised him from the dead, the Holy Spirit came down from heaven with a message for these very same people, and what was that message? 'Well now gentlemen, God is going to give you one more attempt, just one more. You don't deserve any. One more attempt to earn your way into God's favour. You'll have to work jolly hard now.' No, indeed not. The extraordinary thing to those who had murdered Jesus Christ was the message of the Holy Spirit. They could, if they repented and received the Saviour, be saved by grace alone through faith in our blessed Lord Jesus.

Did you ever hear such a message of grace? But to reject Christ, to deny his deity, to count his blood common, is to throw back in the face of the spirit of grace, salvation by grace. That is a serious thing to do. And that's why the writer of this epistle is getting concerned for these dear folks who had once made profession of faith in Christ. So let's turn to another passage in Hebrews where he exhorts them:

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith towards God, and of instruction about

washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement. And this we will do if God permits. (6:1)

Now you'll notice language that might immediately provoke in your mind memories of what Moses was saying. He said to the two and a half tribes, 'What do you really mean gentlemen? Are you suggesting that you be allowed to stay here east of Jordan and enjoy the nice grass with your cattle? And you're not prepared to press on over Jordan into the inheritance that God has given you? Is that what you're saying? Well if you do that, I tell you straight, if you're not prepared to press ahead across Jordan into the inheritance that God has given to Joshua, then you won't have inheritance this side either. If you are prepared to press on under Joshua, west of Jordan, then you can come back and enjoy your inheritance east of Jordan.'

### **Laying a foundation**

Notice the things that are in the foundation; let's look at them again. 'Repentance from dead works and faith towards God' — that is good Judaism. 'Instruction about washings' — Judaism had a whole array of washings, and there were places that had ceremonial baths, and some Jewish families still keep it up. And what of 'laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead'? Well orthodox Jews, and Pharisees in particular, believed in the resurrection of the dead. There were some sects in Judaism like the Sadducees that didn't believe in the resurrection, but the majority of Jews in our Lord's day did believe in the resurrection of the dead and of eternal judgment. Yes, they believed in the judgment after death, and they still do. But believing all that isn't enough. Not now it isn't.

What we have to do is not just going over those basic principles, but to press on to maturity, or 'perfection' as the King James Version puts it. Now that is a difficult word, isn't it? I remember writing a little book some years ago and some Polish believers asked if they might translate this book into Polish. So they translated it into Polish, and it dealt with some of these verses here. So I went over to meet the translators before they put the thing in print, and they went through the translation, and they had no difficulties, and all was well. So then I said, 'Now, tell me straight, the translation is okay, but are there some points of doctrine in this that you find difficult?'

Well they said, 'Yes, we do find one bit difficult. We're surprised that you believe in sinless perfection.'

I said, 'So am I. I don't believe in sinless perfection!'

'Oh but you do, you say it here, "Let us pass on to perfection".'

The trouble was that the Polish word for 'perfection', in their language, meant sinless perfection. What a mercy we'd gone to discuss it with them, otherwise the book would have been printed and would have been ruined by that one mistake. We had to spend a morning discussing together what Hebrews means by the term 'perfection' and much the same would apply if we used the word 'maturity' — what does it mean in that context? We'd better know because we're supposed to be pressing on here to perfection. What perfection? Well, let us look at how the word is used. We read in chapter 7 about the priesthood of Aaron under the old covenant, and it says,

For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); (vv.18–19)

That ancient Jewish priesthood descended from Aaron was ultimately weak and therefore useless. But in what sense was it that the law made nothing perfect? Well, let's pass on to chapter 10, and we'll come across another use of this word and we shall see at once what the man is talking about.

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshippers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices, there is a reminder of sins every year. (vv. 1–3)

So now it's becoming a bit clearer what the writer means by perfection or being made perfect. He's urging his Jewish readers, who professed faith in Christ, to notice the difference between those sacrifices, and that priesthood, and that temple under Moses, which couldn't make you perfect according to the conscience, and the sacrifice of Christ that can make you perfect as to the conscience. Isn't he being rather severe in his criticism of the Jewish system, saying it couldn't make them perfect? No he's not, because if their conscience had once been made perfect by those animal sacrifices, they wouldn't have offered them again. It's like paying the mortgage, having to rake the money together every month to get the money for the mortgage at the end of the month. And then, of course, next month, it's the same old process. But just imagine the point when you pay the last instalment of the mortgage—what a marvellous relief to be free of that! And then the next month comes around, and the wife says to the husband, 'I think we better go and pay another instalment, just to make sure.' Well of course not; once the thing has been paid, they don't pay any more instalments. The conscience is cleared.

That's the magnificent thing that Christ does, as these next verses tell us:

Every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (vv. 11–14)

And if we weren't so well behaved, we would shout 'Hallelujah' at that point! Perfect as to the conscience doesn't mean that in all that we do we're morally perfect: we've a long way to go. But this is the perfection of conscience into which Christ brings us through his sacrifice on our behalf. And you can tell if anybody has been made perfect in that sense, according to the conscience, for they would never, after this, offer anything as a sacrifice for their sins. Find me a man or a woman who feels obliged to offer something to God, even what is said to be the sacrifice of Christ, to offer it constantly, and join in offering it on the altar as a sacrifice to

God to get forgiveness of sins. That person shows by her act, or his act, that they don't have a conscience made perfect.

Now we're dealing with the absolute basis of salvation. Why is this very important? If we see somebody burdened with the notion that they have to keep sacrificing, and bringing offerings for sin in order to keep saved, it's a lovely thing to be able to come alongside and point out what the New Testament says. It's a marvellous gospel, so let's go back to these Jews of the New Testament. The writer points out that because of the utter sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice, Christ has now sat down. He's not offering a sacrifice in heaven at this moment, and because he's offered the perfect sacrifice, all the sacrifices of the Old Testament are cancelled. They're no good anymore. Suppose a Jew says, 'I agree with you that Christ has offered this sacrifice once and for all, and I can be absolutely clear and certain in my mind that I am right with God, but I want still to continue with the sacrifices of the Old Testament.' What would you say to him? Would you tell him to go ahead? You wouldn't, because the perfect sacrifice of Christ has made the whole lot obsolete.

If you won't have Christ's sacrifice, you can't have the Old Testament sacrifices either. If you are not prepared to cross the Jordan into the inheritance, then you can't keep hold of your inheritance east of Jordan either. To put it slightly more plainly, if you're not prepared to follow Joshua into the inheritance if he leads you in, you can't have the inheritance under Moses either. Do you see that? Now let me not over emphasize it, but do let me point out the implication for the Christian gospel.

The Christian gospel has been sadly distorted by those who've tried to mix it with the Old Testament sacrifices. Dear old Jerome, great scholar that he was, when he translated the Vulgate and came to this verse, he translated it into Latin as, 'This man sits in heaven offering a sacrifice', which of course is the direct opposite of what the Greek is saying, and has serious implications. Some people argue that because Christ offered himself through the eternal spirit to God, his sacrifice is of eternal significance. Absolutely true, his sacrifice is of eternal significance, we can all agree on that. But some of them add that, because it's eternal, in heaven he is eternally offering a sacrifice for sin. No, he is not. That is a grotesque idea. Remember what happened when at Calvary he offered a sacrifice for sin. The very sun was darkened, and God forsook him, and according to Isaiah 53:5, he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities; and the chastisement of our peace was upon him. It was God's decided purpose to bruise him, to crush him and to put him to grief. That's what happened at Calvary when he offered himself a sacrifice for sin, and bore our sin in his body on the tree. Now in heaven, is he offering the sacrifice for sins? And being bruised by God? And is God abandoning him? And is he being smitten and afflicted for us eternally? It's blasphemous to begin to think of it that way.

We're here with the very basic gospel, urged upon the Hebrew people who have professed to put their faith in Christ. Yes, the Old Testament sacrifices look forward to the coming of Christ, but the blood of bulls and goats didn't put away sin: they were only symbols. Christ came and fulfilled what they promised, offered the complete sacrifice, and God has accepted it. He is raised now in heaven. If you receive Christ in true repentance and faith, you can have a conscience perfected, and never attempt again to offer anything to God, not even (supposedly) the blood and body of Christ, as a means of getting forgiveness. If you don't

accept the sacrifice of Christ, it's no good saying that you'll carry on with the old system: it's no longer valid. That was what Moses, in his prototypical language, was saying to these tribes. 'If you're prepared to go across under Jesus, under Joshua, into the full inheritance that God has promised, then you may be allowed to come back east of Jordan to what you've gained under Moses. But if you're not prepared to go across with Joshua, then you will not inherit anything under Moses whatsoever.' So let me just explain that bit of the prototype.

What marvellous things there are in the Old Testament. What a glorious inheritance, so much so that I, an old Gentile who never was a Jew and never tried to be one, can enjoy the 'inheritance' east of Jordan under Moses. I can enjoy it, and the book of Isaiah, and the story of Abraham, and the Exodus for that matter. Yes, I can enjoy those things and profit from them because, by God's grace—to use the language of the picture—I've crossed Jordan westward under Joshua, under Jesus, and entered into the great inheritance into which Christ brings us. It is not abstruse theology. You will know friends who are not yet saved and they think they're doing well in offering God regularly a sacrifice for sin—for example, the body and blood of Christ when they take Communion or the Mass or whatever—and you will find they have no conscience made perfect. How could they have, if they are found constantly offering a sacrifice for sin? Once the conscience is made perfect, they would cease offering anything at all in order to get salvation. Let us therefore go on to perfection in this sense, the perfection that comes through Jesus Christ our Lord, and the wonderful perfection of his sacrifice for us at Calvary, and his resurrection into heaven, and the coming of the Holy Spirit for us.

#### *Alternative views*

I am aware, my brothers and sisters, that the interpretation I have given of the two and a half tribes and Moses' insistence that they must go across Jordan and fight, will disappoint some believers, and that on two grounds. I was brought up by godly men and women who sometimes preached on this matter, and they assured me that the two and a half tribes insisting on living east of Jordan were, what my seniors called, 'world boarders'. They wanted to live as near the world as they could, only to be part of the people of God, but were not prepared to go onward with the rest of the people of God into their inheritance. Those who hold that view will find what I said earlier somewhat unacceptable, because I was saying that they were good and godly people and had no intention of deserting the rest of the tribes, and indeed were prepared to go ahead of the rest of the tribes, in the vanguard, and fight with the tribes for the possession of the Canaan west of Jordan, and not come back until Joshua gave them permission to come back. So it is not fair to say that they were world boarders. It contradicts the very facts of the history that are recorded.

And then I shall have disappointed people for whom the notion of pressing on to perfection is to be understood in the terms of Philippians 3—that's why I read from Philippians 3 to start with, to show I do believe it! The need to press on to perfection, not only now to accept the messiahship and deity of the Lord Jesus, but also the fact that his sacrifice has done away with all other sacrifices. His priesthood has done away with the priesthood of Aaron, his temple service in heaven does away with any earthly temple. So to press on into that perfection, but also of course, as Philippians 3 tells us, now that we are redeemed by



Christ, we are to press on that we might know him and be conformed more to him daily. That is, press on to the enjoyment of our great inheritance. So I hope I don't disappoint people too much because I took the historical approach at the beginning of the meeting, pointing out that for the Jew it has a special lesson—the leadership of Moses ceased and Joshua succeeded him. And the tribes were required to follow Joshua under his leadership, and under his command, to fight for the full inheritance west of Jordan as a condition for coming back and enjoying the inheritance that Moses had given them east of Jordan.

And I tried to make the point that the analogy fits us as well. As believers we are numbered among those who are prepared to follow Christ and the perfection of his sacrifice, of his priesthood, of the temple in which he now ministers, and understand it clearly. It makes obsolete the Old Testament sacrifices, and temple and priesthood, so that we don't copy that priesthood with high priests and garments and altars and all sorts of paraphernalia. So long as we're clear about that, we can nonetheless go back and enjoy the inheritance that God gave his people under Moses and the prophets in the Old Testament.

You will notice that when they went into the land under Joshua, they had to fight. And if you read all the detail of Hebrews, about these people that professed to have faith in Christ, they had to fight hard, not with sword, but they had endured the spoiling of their goods, their houses, some had been executed. Orthodox Jews, if they get converted to Christ, will to this day endure great afflictions from their family and friends; and if you get a Muslim converted to Christ, you know what happens. We who trust in Christ and enjoy his salvation are nonetheless called to fight. We're not in heaven yet—if you haven't noticed that, let me tell you! And therefore we have to gird up the loins of our mind (1 Pet 1:13 KJV), and we have to put on the whole armour of God (Eph 6:11), and make progress in the enjoyment of our Christian inheritance, and the development of Christian character, until the Lord comes and takes us physically home into the glories of our eternal inheritance. If you like to think with Peter—of entering Canaan as an analogy of our eternal inheritance—I give you permission to follow Peter in his thinking!

He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. (1 Pet 1:3–4)

### **The Levites' inheritance and the 'cities of refuge'**

All that having been said, I want to call brief attention to some of the provisions in the last part of the book. Provisions now for the tribes and the Levites, and what should be done for the Levites in the promised land. Technically, the Levites didn't have any inheritance. God says to them, 'I am your inheritance.' So they had no claim on land, but when the other tribes got their parts of the land and their cities, they had to be prepared to give some of the cities to the Levites. We need to understand that when they got into the land, the people no longer lived all around the tabernacle and moved with it. Now they were stationary and the tabernacle was in Shiloh or somewhere else like that, and some of the tribes were living quite a distance from Shiloh. The Levites had to have homes in different parts of the country, and certain of them would come up to the temple to perform their duties, and then they would go

home. So Zechariah, for instance, father of John the Baptist, when you meet him in Luke 1, is doing his job as a priest, doing his days of service, and when he had completed them, he would go home to his particular city. The tribes were to provide, out of their inheritance, cities for the Levites, and the cities were given a bit of ground around the city, so the Levites could keep a goat or two, or the odd cow, to give the babies milk. But for tonight, I want to come to the final provision. The tribes had to mark out certain cities as cities of refuge, and these were for the following purpose: they were to cope with the possibility of what we call 'accidental homicide'.

### *Cities of refuge*

It could happen that a man killed a fellow Israelite, but not intentionally. Perhaps he was cutting wood, his axe head came off the haft, and hit the other chap on the head and killed him. He was not intending to murder him, but he had killed him anyway. Now under the provisions in those far off days, if a person was killed, his next of kin had the duty and the right to avenge that killing. And so the next of kin could come and kill the person who had killed his relative. Now in some countries that still exists. It used to exist in Afghanistan. If when you were motoring across Afghanistan, somebody walked straight in front of your car and you killed them, the advice given by the tourist authorities would be that you didn't stop. You carried on driving faster than ever to get away, for if you didn't, the next of kin would come and kill you. No such thing as listening to, 'But I didn't intend it, it was an accident,' or anything like that. You killed him, that is the main thing, and the next of kin would kill you. And when that system of law existed—it existed at one stage in Greece and elsewhere—provision had to be made for the man who had killed somebody accidentally. So there were these cities of refuge so that somebody who had accidentally killed somebody could take off and run to the nearest city of refuge. Once he reached there, the elders of that city took him in and heard what his story was.

As long as he was there, the avenger of blood was not allowed to touch him. If the avenger of blood tried to touch him, and kill him, the avenger of blood would be had up for murder. So the elders of the city then examined the case of the man—was it really an accident or was this malice aforethought? Then they had to bring him before the all tribal council, as it was called, for judgment. And then, if the all tribal council agreed with the city elders, he came back to the city of refuge and was pronounced innocent. The interesting thing about that ancient law system was this, that the elders and the all tribal council, having decided the man was innocent, insisted that the man remained in the city of refuge.

Why couldn't he go home? He was innocent. You say, 'Well that wouldn't be safe, because if the next-of-kin got hold of him he would still murder him.' But the law would then murder the next of kin if he murdered this man, and that would be made very plain to them. So why couldn't he go home? And the other relevant thing was that he had to stay until the death of the high priest. That seems very arbitrary, because the high priest could die next Tuesday, or the high priest might not die for the next thirty-five years, so that man had to stay in the city until the high priest died. Why on earth was that? I've asked many lawyers, but I'm still waiting for an explanation of the jurisprudence!

But there were two possible reasons, even though the thing was an accident. Think of Mr Smith here, and he was chopping up wood along with his neighbour Mr Brown, and the axe head flew off and killed Mr Brown. Mr Smith runs to the city, is cleared and pronounced innocent, so why couldn't he come home? Well partly because of the consequences. Why should this man come home and enjoy his inheritance, and the other chap's widow, living across the road, be robbed of her husband for the rest of her life? Does that sound to you to be fair? There are consequences even of our unintentional actions, so perhaps the fact that the man was required to stay in the city for a while was meant to soften the blow of the consequences for the injured party.

However that may be, it is said that when the high priest died, the man could go home. That raises another big theological question. What had the death of the high priest to do with it? A theory to which I am, myself, inclined—it's only a theory, it's not stated in black and white—is that the high priest was a representative of the nation, and when it came to things to do with God, and the temple, and so forth, and the holiness of God, then the high priest wore a piece of metal across his mitre, saying 'Holiness to the Lord.' And it is said that he wore it because he should bear the iniquity of Israel. That is to say, if Israel had done wrong, and he was their representative, he took the punishment. He bore the iniquity of the holy things. We have a hymn in one of the books we use:

For us He wears the mitre,  
Where holiness shines bright;  
For us His robes are whiter  
Than heaven's unsullied light.<sup>10</sup>

It is the fact that our blessed high priest has paid not only the guilt of our sin, but will ultimately pay the damages. The damage sin does is a serious business. Here's a young teacher coming out of university and full of confidence, and he's teaching the kids that there is no God, and his students have grown up into atheism, and gone out into life, and wasted their life, anti-God. The teacher gets converted later in life, and some of the students that he taught atheism have died. How will that be put right? And all the consequences of sin in this evil world that have come upon people comparatively innocent, it is my belief that Christ will compensate, put right the damage of sin, not merely the penalty.

That being said, let me now come back to my hobby horse of this evening, to interpret this thing as a prototype in the context of Judaism. In the book of Acts, Peter stands up and accuses the people of Jerusalem and their rulers of having murdered their Messiah. And in a famous passage he says to them:

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom

<sup>10</sup> Mary Bowley Peters (1806-1856), 'The Holiest We Enter.'

you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. (Acts 3:13–17)

I would have thought the people did it deliberately. But here, through the mouthpiece of Peter, God is saying ‘I realize you did it in ignorance, not knowing what you did.’ Therefore, serious though the crime was, that they took him, and by the hands of lawless men, Romans, crucified him, yet the vast majority didn’t know what they did, and hence repentance was offered them through faith in that same Lord Jesus Christ. Amazing isn’t it, salvation through the death of their true high priest. It wasn’t only the people of Jerusalem. Listen finally to Paul reminding Timothy of how Paul himself got saved. He says, ‘You know, I was the veritable chief of sinners, I persecuted the church of Christ, tried to eliminate the name of Jesus from the earth.’

But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. . . . But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Tim 1:13–14, 16)

Amazing that, isn’t it? God has taken the worst of sinners, in the sense that Paul deliberately tried to eliminate the name of Jesus from the earth, and tortured Christians. What God will put up with is amazing. What Christ would put up with, when Saul of Tarsus persecuted him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ And God has done it as an example to the rest of us who shall believe on Christ for salvation. Paul, the example convert, mercy was shown to him because he did what he did unilluminated by God’s spirit, and therefore in ignorance.

All of us who know the Lord, looking back we understand a little bit of what that means. We were opposed to Christ, we were not interested in Christ. We certainly were not stretching out and moving forward to make progress in our glorious inheritance. Now, looking back upon it when we have come to know the Lord, we see what fools we were. We did what we did in sheer ignorance of what Christ is really like.

So thank you for tonight and your patience. You who have done our hearts good, I pray that God will use this series to stimulate your interest in holy Scripture. One of the ways in which we go in for our inheritance is to be consistent with what we profess to believe. If this book is the inspired word of God, then the implication seems to be that we should do our best, each in his own way and according to his own gift, to get to know it. If you’re going to be a cook — I have occasionally tried it, so I am aware of what I say! — you can’t do it haphazardly. You have to have at least one cook book that tells you how to go about things. And you have to take it seriously. If this book is God’s word, God save us from treating it with less diligence than we would our cook books, or our books on accountancy, or physics, or woodwork. This is God’s inspired word; it leads us nearer the Saviour and draws us towards our great inheritance in heaven.

So let's pray as we go.

Our Father, we thank thee for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord. The more we explore it, the more wonderful it becomes—the superabundance of thy grace, and the glory of thy saving ingenuity that has provided such a vast inheritance for us, beggars of the earth.

So we thank thee for Christian fellowship, and we thank thee for thy word. Help us to treasure it, we pray. And as we have thought of its practical implications, give us the grace to live it out in our own way, and to go on with the Lord Jesus. Help us, Lord, to take the glorious gospel to those whose consciences are not yet made perfect, who live in darkness and spiritual unawareness of the wonder of thy salvation.

Part us now with thy blessing we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## APPENDIX

### Preparation

1:1–4:49	5:1–6:21	6:22–27	7:1–8:26	9:1–10:36
<b>Numbering for the Journey</b>	<b>Keeping the Camp Clean</b>	<b>The Aaronic Blessing</b>	<b>Dedications</b>	<b>Regulations for the Journey</b>
A. <i>The tribes</i>	A. Physical and moral uncleanness	The Lord:	A. Offerings of the princes at the dedication of the altar	A. 1. Passover
1. For war	1. Physical uncleanness	• Bless you		2. Guidance by cloud
2. For camping and marching	2. Business trespass	• Keep you		3. Guidance by trumpets
B. <i>The Levites</i>	3. Trial of jealousy	• Make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you	B. The lampstand and the offering of the Levites as a living sacrifice	B. 1. Order of march
1. Levites for firstborn	B. Nazirite's vow and rules about defilement	• Lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace		2. Hobab as eyes
2. Duties: to transport the tabernacle		My name on them		3. Movement of ark
		I will bless them		

## APPENDIX

### Journey

11:1–15:41	16:1–19:22	20:1–24:25	25:1–31:54	32:1–36:13
<b>A. Rebellion</b>	<b>A. Rebellion</b>	<b>A. Rebellion</b>	<b>A. Rebellion</b>	<b>A. Rebellion?</b>
1. Murmuring 2. Lusting 3. Criticism of Moses  Refusal to enter the land	Of KORAH THE LEVITE and others   Censers of rebels nailed to THE ALTAR	Of Moses and Aaron: 1. Moses smites rock 2. Opposition of the kings 3. Serpent on pole 4. Wars of Lord 5. The well	Israel joins himself to BAAL-PEOR   GOD IS JEALOUS	Refusal to journey further?   Settlement of inheritance for THE TRIBES
<b>B. Sacrifices</b>	<b>B. Sacrifices</b>	<b>B. Sacrifices</b>	<b>B. Sacrifices</b>	<b>B. No Ransom</b>
When you have entered the land . . .	The rights of Aaron and sons as priests and of THE LEVITES	By Balaam  GOD HAS BLESSED	For each day of FEASTS OF THE LORD  Vows	For murderers or homicides  Settlement of LEVITES and the CITIES OF REFUGE

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019)** was Professor of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.