

## George Philip Bible Readings

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## 1:1

This fascinating book deals with a specific section of the history of the children of Israel. If we look at Exodus 40:17, 34-38 we see the chosen and redeemed people of God now in possession of the Law, the Tabernacle, and the presence of God was signified by the pillar of cloud and fire. They were a people under divine guidance and called to a future destiny of tremendous significance. The purpose of God was set, the guidance clear, the timing perfect and the command was to move forward. That was the first day of the first month in the second year after the Exodus from Egypt. In today's verse it is the first day of the *second* month and the scene is the wilderness of Sinai where the children of Israel had been since Exodus 19:1-2. They remained there until Num. 10:11-13 when after virtually a year that had been full of significant spiritual instruction the time had come to move forward into the land of promise. In Num. 13:26 they are at Kadesh, a mere eleven days' journey from Horeb (Sinai) (Deut. 1:2-3) on the borders of the land. The spies were sent to view the land; then comes all the story of Numbers, and from the reference in Deut. 1:3 we realise that after thirty-eight years Israel was still only at the *borders* of the land. They were still in the same place. There had been no progress, no advance; they had been stuck for all these years because of their disobedience and lack of faith. That is a parable of the lives of many Christians.

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## 1:1

From the end of yesterday's note it is clear that much of the Book of Numbers need never have been written if only the people had believed God. They should have taken the advice of Joshua and Caleb to go in and possess the land they had actually been given, and for the conquest of which they had been prepared. Lest we are tempted to make excuses for Israel remember what has gone before. In Genesis we have the book of beginnings, the election and choice of a man, Abraham and his seed after him. God began His work of revelation and redemption in the context of the fall of man and the disaster consequent upon the entrance of sin. It was a world already under judgment, and this is always the context in which we can understand salvation. In Exodus we have the book of redemption, the deliverance of God's people from the power of the world (Egypt) and the judgment of Egypt. God took the people of Israel to Himself as a blood-bought people. They were separated unto Himself and He gave them the Law and the Tabernacle. In Leviticus God speaks to His own from their midst and everything is concerned with worship, the drawing near to God, and with the walk of that people in purity of life. In Exodus they had been delivered from the power of sin and Satan unto God (Acts 26:18; Col. 1:13). In Leviticus they are dedicated to God with a two-fold emphasis on the removal of defilement; and the restoration of fellowship. They were to be a holy people because God was holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16). Everything pointed forward to the further fulfilment of God's purpose of blessing and service. In the early chapters of Numbers the people were being prepared for the battle involved in taking possession of the land of promise. At such a significant crisis-point the trouble started. There is a Devil, and he waits his chance. He got it. We see the need for the whole armour of God. We see the need to take heed lest we be too sure of ourselves (1 Cor. 10:12).

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## 1:1-3

It is important for the study of Numbers and for understanding Christian life and service to have a true historical perspective. The present is understood in terms of both the past and the future. The evil of Canaan had a great part to play in driving Israel into Egypt four hundred years previously (Gen. 15:12-16). Egypt was first the protection and then the scourge of Israel (Gen. 50: 19-21; Ex, 1:8-14), and it was in the H.Q. of Egypt that Moses got his training in statesmanship (Acts 7:22), although this had to be followed by many years in obscurity because he presumed too soon that he was ready and competent for spiritual leadership (Ex. 2:10). Think also of Paul's long years in Arabia before he was launched on his life's work (Gal. 1:17). How we need to value and make use of our days of training and learning the discipline of duty and dependability. How many people mortgage their long-term service because of the carnal attractions of pleasant activity? In due time the people chosen in Genesis, purged and trained in Egypt, are led forth for service. The basic principles of their life and work are enunciated in the Law and the Tabernacle, and in the opening verses of Numbers they are being prepared for war. They were called to be at the heart of the onward moving purposes of God and they failed.

The greater part of this book is the story of God's rebuke of His own people. Read again 1 Cor. 10:1-15 and Heb. 3:7-4:2. Numbers is a solemn book, full of warning regarding the perils of disobedience but at the same time it is a glorious testimony to the patience of God who did not give up His own people.

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### **1:1- 4, 17-19**

The people were being numbered for war because facing them were the powers of entrenched evil which would not yield easily or willingly. This is realism, and there is a right and necessary time for counting the cost before you launch out on a spiritual venture (Lk. 14:25-33). There are too many ill-considered activities that are far from honouring to God. Of course, we have other occasions in Scripture where the numbering of the people was a wrong and sinful thing because it was putting emphasis on man rather than God (2 Sam, 24:1-14: Judges 7:2-7). We need to be very careful with regard to statistics. They often lead to a totally false assessment of the spiritual situation. At the same time the numbering we have here was at the command of God. The lesson for Israel and for us is that as we set ourselves to advance in obedience to the will of God we must make it our business to know and to grasp the facts of what we possess in Christ. It is a perfect salvation that we have. All things are ours (1 Cor. 3:21-23) and we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3). God has given us the victory (1 Cor. 15:57). These are the facts that we must rest on and live by. We must hold them by faith. There is no other way to serve. The rest of the first chapter gives the detailed numbering of the tribes and a final total of 603,550 men under arms. Statisticians say that this means the total number of the children of Israel would have been in the region of 2.5 million, and critics say that the seventy families of Jacob (Ex. 1:7) in Egypt could not have multiplied to such an extent and that the wilderness of Sinai could not have supported such a vast throng. But these are arbitrary statements. Bible dictionaries give helpful comment on the difficulty of deciding just what the Hebrew words mean, but while we give rightful attention to this we must not lose sight of the fact that the dimensions of the people and work of God was and is far greater than we think. If we consider 1 Cor. 1:2 we realise that we are not an insignificant remnant. Never underestimate God.

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### **1:47-54**

The one exception to the numbering was the tribe of Levi, by far the smallest tribe as we shall see later. In Gen. 49:5-7 we are told of a curse upon Levi because of a life of violence and cruelty and this seems to be part of the explanation of their smallness. Yet "later history was to show that the loyalty of Levi's descendants to Yahweh could turn the curse to a blessing, and their division and scattering in Israel was as His representatives" (Ellison). Something of this story of the loyalty of the Levites is seen in Ex. 32:25ff. Certainly here in Numbers the Levites are seen in very close proximity to and in service of the Tabernacle, having responsibility for erecting, dismantling and carrying it. But more, the Levites seem to be something of a buffer round the Tabernacle to protect it from unholy intrusion and to protect the people from the anger of the Lord. This is holy service indeed and a tremendous responsibility. They had to take care of the Tabernacle of testimony (50) which housed the two stone tables of the Law. The word "tend" (RSV) has to do with "all kinds of noble service", particularly worship, so that the whole people would in fact be "holy unto the Lord" (Deut. 10:8-9; 17:8-13). Of course, the Levites themselves were solemnly called to be holy because their work was holy, and that is a call to all of us who are involved in the work of God's house. Be clean, all of you who bear the vessels of the Lord (Isa. 52:11 AV). The Levites, whose numbers were really irrelevant, were "set apart from the generality of Israel, set free from worldly cares, forbidden worldly advantages, to be a people for God's own service." (W. Still) If we are so called to specific service in holy things, see to it that we are found worthy and faithful.

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### **2:1-2, 31-34**

Old family Bibles used to have a drawing of the Tabernacle showing the various places appointed for the tribes of Israel. This chapter also makes plain the order of the tribes when on the march. Judah, Issachar and Zebulun were always to take the lead (3-9), and such a privilege would make it necessary for these men to set a close guard on their hearts lest pride entered in. To be out front is a dangerous place, and if that requires preaching it

is doubly dangerous (James 3:1). On the other hand it takes a lot of grace to come last (31), but if that is our God-given place then it is there and only there that we can be truly fruitful. To be anywhere else is to be absent from the place of duty. Note here that it was not just the mighty host of Israel that was set in its place. Every individual was under the direction of God and they would have been conscious of their solidarity with one another, not simply interested in each other but integrated with each other in the one glorious unity that was Israel. There was no selfish individualism. Israel in its identity, calling and service was more important than the individual, family or section. They were servants *together* and therefore servants of each other. This is gloriously expressed in 1 Cor. 12, especially v.11, 14, 21-22, 27. There is only one Moses, Joshua, Caleb, Paul or John of the Revelation, but all are needed to be what God has ordained them to be. That any sinner man has a place at all is all of grace. There is no room for pride, only for responsibility. Note lastly how at the opening of the chapter it is made plain that all had to take position facing the Tabernacle. Their eyes had to be on God. We are already beginning to stray when we are preoccupied, as Peter was, with what others are called to do (John 21:20-22).

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### 3:1-10

The Levites were separate from the priest and were in fact their servants, although both belonged to the one tribe of Levi, as did Moses. Two of Aaron's sons died without heirs when they presumed upon their privileged position and decided to branch out and "do their own thing" (Lev. 10:1-3). There is a great warning here to all who are richly and significantly blessed and used by God. We must never seek to become independent of God, never grant ourselves experimental privileges that do not have the sanction of God, nor consider ourselves essential to God. Our business is to be "holy unto the Lord". The Levites were servants of Aaron and his sons and at the same time they were servants of the congregation. Some of the jobs they had to do were very humble and humdrum but even there we see a great lesson on spiritual duty, service and maturity. It was Jesus who insisted that only those who were faithful in small things were worthy to be entrusted with the bigger things (Lk. 16:10-11). That is a searching standard and we must remember how unwilling Jesus' own disciples were to take on the task of the humble slave and wash the each other's feet (John 13:1-15). We note, but do not over-emphasise the fact, that only Aaron and his sons were "ordained" to act as priests in holy things. That means the Levites were in some senses the servants of the servants of the Lord and yet their service was specifically "unto the Lord". When we read the word "anointed" (3) we should think of our modern word "ordained" for both have the significance of "entrust to the hands of". This means the emphasis is more on responsibility than on privilege. To have the stewardship of holy things, especially leadership in these things, is an awesome task indeed, and not one that a man takes to himself. He must be called.

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### 3:11-51

Read **quickly** through this long passage without lingering on the numerical details. Consider first the tasks allotted to the various families of the sons of Levi (25-26, 29-31, 36-37). For some it was a very humble task while others had to carry the holy *vessels* themselves. How easy it would be for jealousy to arise, or pride, or a careless slapdash attitude on the part of those who carried the *heavy stuff* (36-37). It is only when we see even the humblest task to be God-given work that we can do it unto God's glory. Moses and Aaron (38-39) may well have been envied and resented, and indeed they were, but their task was a lonely one. The remaining verses, 11-13, 40-51 highlight a very important principle running through Scripture. The Levites were representatives of and substitutes for the first born of the people. The firstborn belonged to God by right of redemption from the time of the Exodus from Egypt. The Levites "stood in" for them, man for man, and in the case of the extra 273 (v.49) who were not "covered", a price of redemption was paid. The whole scheme was, of course, not a human invention but a Divine ordination and in this we begin to see the foreshadowing of the One who in His death and resurrection "stood in" for us in relation to our redemption and our reconciliation to God. The whole life of Israel was centred on and conditioned by the thought of the holiness of God and the way of sacrifice by which a sinful people could come near to God and live in His blessing and in glorious fellowship with Him and with each other. One last thought: in claiming the firstborn God claimed all. As a people Israel had an identity, a life

and a destiny, only because they were ransomed and delivered by the blood of the Passover Lamb. So it is with us.

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#### 4:1-49

If this is too long a reading concentrate on v. 1-6, 15-20, 46-49. What is the lesson? The priests dismantled the Tabernacle and the various loads were given to those appointed to carry them. But the carriers were forbidden to touch the sacred furniture. The various items were carried on poles. What an emphasis on the holiness of God there is in all this! How little time we give to such consideration of holiness. Do we not sin in being too familiar with things belonging to God? Reverence and godly fear are not, generally speaking, prominent marks of the evangelical church and we are the losers. In a general sense this whole chapter has to do with the "care-takers" of the House of God and we see how vital they are. Their service is holy. We all like to sing the metrical version of Psalm 84 and profess that just being a doorkeeper in the House of God is privilege and blessing. Yet how easy it is to seek place and prominence. But what do we mean by prominence? Is it that we want to hold down an important job or is it that we want publicity and place? Doubtless there was a sense of awe and importance as the appointed men set the holy furniture in its place in the Tabernacle, and it may be that the sons of Merari (3:36-37) felt a bit inferior even if others did not think that of them. But pause and consider: if the men responsible for the base sockets, pins and bars had not done their job properly the whole structure might well collapse just at the grandest moment of the whole ritual. That would make the holy service of the Lord into a laughingstock. It is not the "showy" parts of Christian service that are vital. If a church has not foundations it will collapse. If a fellowship does not have men and women who can be depended on in terms of spiritual *duty* then some of the Lord's people are manifestly out of the will of God.

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#### 4:1-49

Take the last section of this chapter 46-49 to learn a final lesson. It has all to do with bearing burdens. Paul seems to refer to this in Gal. 6:2-5 when he speaks of every man bearing his own burden and yet the spiritual necessity for bearing one another's burdens. On a personal level, but more particularly in terms of the organised work of God, there is the need for those who will carry the work forward, not in fits and starts, but steadily and progressively from generation to generation. In this situation there was such accuracy of appointment that we must believe there was a fitting of each man to the task that he was capable of doing. The A.V. reads v.49 "every one according to his service, and according to his burden." As well as God-given responsibility there is God-regulated care so that no man would be over-burdened. This is one of the dangers of a fairly numerous congregation when things are progressing favourably. Some of the "willing horses" are left to carry more and more of the load of hard, routine duty, while others live a more carefree life. This is very wrong, and when a fellowship is healthy there should always be a sufficient supply of volunteers ready and willing to take their share, and to *see* the share that needs to be taken. There must, of course, be no unwise pressurising. It is wrong to assume that each individual is capable of the same kind of service to the same extent. Just as there is the measure of faith (Rom. 12:3) so there is the measure of capacity. But we have the promise of God that grace and strength will be given for the tasks we are called to do in the service of the gospel (Dent. 33:25 AV). Never try to be what you are neither called nor equipped to be. Never try to make someone else what God does not want them to be. There is order in God's work. That leads to peace and to productivity.

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#### 5:1-10

Is all this too grim and unnecessarily severe? Keep in mind that the first ten chapters of Numbers have to do with the *preparation* of the people of God for going forward into new areas and dimensions of spiritual service. We have spoken of God's careful provision for the needs of His people. Now we are dealing with the general and specific provision whereby all that is sinful, typified by the uncleanness of leprosy, is to be rooted out of Israel's life. If we think of how dread a disease leprosy was in these days, we will see that the health as well as the purity of the nation is at stake. Sin is an infectious and contagious disease. It is a powerful virus that can

course through the body to devastate it. There can be no concessions or compromise. Think of the story of Achan in Joshua 7:1-15. At a time of victorious progress in the work sin entered in and at once the work ground to a halt. You cannot have God and your sins; you cannot have the blessing of God and the pleasures of sin. There is a choice to be made. Read carefully 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1 where Paul quotes from Lev. 26:11-13 and Isa. 52:11. The only thing to do with sin is to keep out of its way. And in order to preserve our testimony as the people of God called to holy service we must abstain from all appearance of evil (1 Thess. 5:22 AV). It would have been good for Israel if the people had always responded with the same radical obedience as we see in v.1-5. Keep in remembrance, of course, that the people already had in their possession in the Book of Leviticus, all the regulations for the cleansing of the leper. Undergirding all the life of the ransomed people is the fact of the glorious forgiveness of God. It is wonderful to read such verses as 1 John 1:9.

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### **5:11-31**

On the face of it this seems a very grim passage but careful consideration reveals important lessons. It is not only the open and obvious sins (1-4) that God is concerned with. He speaks now of secret sins done in stealth with the deliberate design of keeping the facts secret. These verses deal with private life and personal relationships and emphasise the lesson that God brings our actions to light and brings them to judgment. When will we learn that we cannot sin with impunity? It is interesting to note here how the sanctity of the marriage relationship is given such importance in the life of Israel. The health and safety of the whole nation is at risk whenever this relationship is devalued, because it sets in motion a process of rotting that is hard indeed to stop. This is why the measures spoken of here are so stringent. Note carefully that there is no place here for unfounded suspicion or accusation, for such things breed bitterness and strife. The facts must be established, and this is done not by the "ritual" but by the act of God. Nor is any man entitled to take the "process" into his own hands. It is the work of the priest alone. All this passage speaks of the exposure and judgment of sin, but we must not forget that provision has been made in Israel for the forgiveness of the sinner. This is part of the significance of the Tabernacle and all the sacrifices. It is only the impenitent sinner who is left to judgment. The one who truly repents is not abandoned as Israel marches on. The sinner, he or she, may forfeit (for a time) her true place in the fellowship and service of the people. but when all is done for purification and restoration according to the laws already made, there is return and restoration. Never forget that it is God's activity to put away sin by the sacrifice of His Son (Heb. 9:26). There can be no place for an easy attitude to moral wrong, but read Jesus words to the woman who was taken in the act of adultery in John 8:3-11( AV and RSV). He not only spoke pardon. He said, "Go and sin no more."

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### **6:1-8**

Yesterday's reading indicated the need for love, loyalty, integrity and trust in the relationships of family life. Of course in all relationships there must be conscious effort to maintain harmony and trust lest the relationship deteriorate because that puts a strain on and a temptation in the way of one or both the parties. There must be openness and there must be communication and indeed there must be times and tokens whereby the relationship is affirmed and confirmed. If this true on the level of human relationships, it is equally true in our dealing with God, and this seems to be part of the significance of the Nazirite vow, undertaken by either men or women, setting themselves apart for God for some specific service. There seems to be no set length of time for this vow to operate and it would appear that the choice was made deliberately and responsibly by the people concerned, although Samuel and Samson were Nazirites from birth as was John the Baptist. (The word Nazirite has nothing to do with Nazareth; its root meaning is that of separation). "A man might want to take this vow either following an act of repentance to reassert his consecration to God. or to reassure himself that underlying the routine of daily life he was devoted to God:" (W. Still) The various aspects of the vow symbolise separation from all that would hinder the holy service of God and speaks of a total yielding of the life to God. It did not involve seclusion, for true dedication operates in the context of the realities of daily life, The abstinence from wine may indicate a refusal of anything that would simply quicken the senses, for that can lead to unreal "feeling". The uncut hair may be a public testimony to the vow (Jesus suggests that secret vows are less open to

carnal influence - Matt. 6:16-18) or a token that the natural growth and capacity of the life is dedicated to God. The separation from dead bodies speaks of separation from all that could defile. A man would need to be serious before taking such a vow.

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### 6:9-12

Vows are difficult things to handle no matter how earnest and sincere we are in the making of them. Scripture says it is better not to vow than to vow and not pay (Eccles. 5:1-6). That thought led Jephthah into serious difficulty in his vow (Judges 11: 29ff). In the first place that vow should never have been made, for human sacrifice was forbidden in Israel, and secondly when the hideous significance became obvious he should have rescinded his vow because it could never please God. The second of Paul's two vows in Acts (18:18; 21:18-26) led him into all sort of difficulty and we may have to learn from the story is that vows are for pleasing God and not for appeasing or manipulating people. The wonderful thing here in Numbers is that provision is made for those who unwittingly break their vows, and although the man has to make up the "lost" days of his vow, the provision is essentially gracious and merciful. It signifies that the Lord thinks the best of the man, giving him the benefit of the doubt, and not charging him with deliberately turning back from consecration. Would that we took this attitude to those who fall or who *seem* to go back on their vows. We need to remember this in respect of own failures because, inspired by the Devil, we are often far too harsh and condemning with ourselves in our failures and as a result we cause ourselves too much hurt and grief (sometimes with psychological harm following) and lose sight of the whole objective which is to get back to fellowship with God and dedication to His service with the least possible delay. Read 1 John 1:5-2:1.

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### 6:13-21

We do not propose to go into the details of the offerings required here nor their specific significance as they are spoken of in Leviticus. We content ourselves with saying that there is a right and a God-pleasing way of making vows and of ending them so that in it all God is glorified. The ending of the Nazirite vow of separation does not mean the man is "off the hook" to go back to ordinary life and live as he pleases. If that happens it signifies that the vow was a psychological rather than a spiritual experience. No matter what "experience" we have, if it does not lead us into loving obedience to God then it is suspect. We cannot emphasise too strongly the words of Jesus, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." (John 14:15 AV). The Nazirite, having kept his vow for the allotted time, must have no hesitation in making the transition back to "ordinary" life, if life is ever ordinary for the believing and dedicated person. There are times when we must yield legitimate things in the interest of service (1 Cor. 7:5) and then take them again. There are some who are called to surrender marriage or parenthood (as some missionaries have done) in order to do God's will, and this is costly indeed. Some envy others their privileges and possessions and harbour suspicions about their dedication. We need to get our eyes and our hearts on God. Our separation to God in Jesus Christ is total and for ever. We are His not our own (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The call to us, whether in obvious dedication or not, is to give ourselves to God (Rom. 12:1-2).

We are named by His name (Isa.43:1).

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### 6:22-27

The reference to the name of the Lord at the end of yesterday's reading leads us on to the last verse of the chapter and we take today's verses still in the context of the Nazirite vow of dedication. Our separation is for life. We are to be in the world but not of it, and this detachment will be a dynamic element in the ordering of our lives (1 Cor. 7:29-31). In the A.V. the last verse of that reference reads, "They that use the world, as not abusing it," and this highlights the need for a right attitude to life. Our separation from worldly things can be very theoretical and even in high and holy moments the thoughts of our hearts can be totally centred on worldly things. But we can also learn to sit so lightly to the "things" of the world that God can give us many things to enjoy to the full (1 Tim. 6:17) because He knows: they have no longer any seductive power over the heart. We have to learn this for it is in this way that we fulfil our chief end, which is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for

ever, in this life and the next. Never forget that in His presence (down here as well as up there) there is fulness of joy and pleasures for evermore (Ps. 16:11AV). Note how all this is leading us on to the Aaronic blessing which we consider tomorrow. The whole point of salvation and dedication is that God might bless us. This is His desire and He works to this end in and through His providence which is often mysterious to us. Sometimes we think God is set on denying us life when He calls us to be separated unto Himself. But He is working for our blessing in the things He has prepared for us (.1 Cor. 2:9 AV). Of course, there is a note of caution. Paul makes it plain that life will always be narrower than it needs to be for the sake of our brother (1 Cor. 8:9-13). Dare we insist on *our* fulfilment, if it may cause a precious brother or sister to stumble? Where is our dedication? Where is our spiritual Nazirite vow to serve the Lord?

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## 6:22-27

Here is the Aaronic blessing which God ordains to be pronounced upon His people. However stern we may feel some of His laws are, the fact remains that we are a people for God's own possession (1 Pet. 2:9), chosen and precious, and His deep desire and determination is that His people should be blessed. He puts His name on His people (27) for He is not ashamed to be called their God (Heb. 11:16). The various phrases or petitions of the blessing have great significance and they express, not pious hope that these things might be, but rather assurance that this will be the portion of an obedient people who walk in fellowship with their God. The whole eternal Trinity is involved in this blessing, just as the three Persons of the Trinity are spoken of in Rom. 8:26, 31-34. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each and all "for us". The Father is the source of the blessing; the Son is the channel of that blessing; the Spirit is the gracious and powerful creator of that blessing in our personal daily experience. Consider Jesus' words in John 14:26 where He promises that the Father will send the Spirit to do all His gracious and continuing work of blessing, teaching, leading and encouraging. Aaron's words speak first of blessing, in the sense of bestowing all we need for daily life (Phil. 4:19), and of protection whereby God will keep His people from evil (Ps. 23; Ps. 46; Ps. 121; Jude 24; Gen. 28:15). The second part of the blessing speaks of God's face and His grace, and reminds us of our God's near and gracious presence and activity on our behalf at all times (Ps. 31:14-16; 34:15-16). He accepts us in His beloved Son (Eph. 1:6 AV). The final phrase refers to God's countenance, His open-faced attitude towards His people, whereby they are at peace (Ps. 4:5-8; 43:3-5 AV). How much we need to centre the thoughts of our hearts on God Himself. This will in fact be the blessing of Heaven (Rev. 22:3-4).

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## 7:1-11

Do you ever wonder if the people of Israel got restless in the midst of all these detailed arrangements and preparations? Would there be those voicing their criticism and murmuring (they were good at that in Israel) saying that it was time to get going, to go forward, and to be active in the Lord's service? If there were such they were exposed later when they refused to go forward. Isn't it interesting that when it is time to stand still, to prepare the heart before God, and to make preparation for long-term service, there are those who want to be on the move, and then, when it is time for moving, the same people tend to be full of excuses? We forget that God raises up leaders who are to be trusted, and such a leader was Moses, a man who knew God. All this preparation, so detailed and full, emphasises amongst other things that the work is no individual effort but is the task of the people of God as the people of God. Everything we are reading emphasises the essential unity of the people and counters any tendency to divide up the people or the work into groups or sections. We have already noted how the gifts of God vary from person to person and how God allocates duties and service in His wisdom. Here we see how the princes were inspired to make material provision for the spiritual service of the Levites. Some suggest that there was a reluctance on the part of Moses to be dependent on these gifts and the Lord made specific command (4-5) that all had to be received and administered so that all would be provided for. The work of God needs practical as well as spiritual support as the New Testament makes plain (2 Cor. Chaps. 8 and 9). But why make a distinction between the two? The practical is spiritual, but some who are spiritual are not practical.

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## 7:12-89

Do not be appalled by the length of today's reading for you need read only one section because the whole passage is repetitive, telling twelve times over how the leaders of the tribes brought their offerings. Perhaps the repetition is designed to emphasise the generosity of the people and to serve as an example to future generations. The Lord does indeed love a cheerful (the word is literally hilarious) giver (2 Cor. 9:7). In v.84-88 there is given a summary of the grand total of the offerings and perhaps here we have the example we follow in giving the Lord's people, month by month and year by year, a detailed account of the Lord's offerings and what has been done with them. In days when there is so much secrecy and suspicion about religious and charitable organisations and their funds this is very important. In the last verse, immediately after all this talk of finance and provision, reference is made to God speaking with Moses. Practical things are not an intrusion into worship, they are part of it, and should be a means of grace to us. Note, of course, that there was an equality in the giving so that any possibility of a spirit of rivalry was excluded. In the Gospels, the story of the widow's mite is set in the context of the attitude of the Pharisees, who made a public show and boast of how much they gave (Mk, 12:41-44). In 2 Cor. 8:12 Paul makes it plain that it is according to what a man has that he should give. If God has blessed us in material ways then we are privileged indeed to give as the men of Israel did, spontaneously by the inspiration of God. As one missionary put it, the Lord's work is the best investment for your money: The dividends are eternal.

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## 7:89

Read also Ex. 25:16-22; 37:7-9. It was from the Mercy-Seat that God spoke to Moses for the people's blessing. Of course, at the heart of the Mercy-Seat, in the Ark of God, there rest the two tables of the Law. Nothing that God does or says is ever contrary to His own Law or His eternal righteousness. That is why the blood of atonement is needed to be sprinkled on the Ark so that what would have been a judgment seat for sinners could be a mercy-seat for pardon and peace. But it is not merely a detached or judicial transaction, for the object of atonement is the restoration of fellowship between man and God. It is wonderful to think deeply of this verse which portrays God and man speaking together in holy fellowship and united intention. Read Ex. 33:7-11 and marvel at such a friendship. All through the Old Testament the veil of the Tabernacle and Temple testified that the way into God's presence was not yet open to all (Heb. 9:8). But when the great Mediator died and the price of sin was paid once for all, the way of open access was made available for all believers (Matt. 26:51; Heb. 10:19-22). All this is foreshadowed here in the Old Testament. But note one final point. This verse states very specifically that God spoke and Moses heard His voice. The communications which Moses received were not just subjective impressions but objective statements. This seems to be the emphasis in Ex. 32:15, 16 where it speaks of the Law written by the finger of God in tables of stone. If we were dealing with a mere man's impressions of and reactions to being in God's presence we would have no certainty. Moses could have reacted wrongly. This is the attitude of many "critics" of the Bible and they beg leave to differ from what God has said. But Moses heard the voice of God. We are not dealing with fables but facts (2 Pet. 1:16).

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## 8:1-4

Again we need to refer to Exodus 25: 23-37 and to the furniture of the Tabernacle. It seems that the Table of Shewbread, the Bread of the Presence, stood over against the seven-branched candlestick so that it was bathed in light. This light was not to be allowed to go out (Lev. 24:1-4; cf. 1 Sam. 3:3). God is light, and in Him is neither darkness nor even shadow (1 John 1:5; Jas. 1:17). And He wants His people to live with Him in light, out in the open with unshadowed face and with nothing to hide or to cause our eyes to be cast down (2 Cor. 3:18). After all, if our eyes are cast down how can we see the smile of God's countenance spoken of in the Aaronic blessing? Don't let your sense of sin and shame steal God's blessing from you. Remember that in the moment of his denial, when the Lord turned and looked, Peter was in fact, through his tears already begun, was looking towards Jesus (Lk. 22:61). Everything about God is light. He has brought us out of darkness into His marvellous light (1 Pet. 2:9) and all so that He and we might have fellowship together. There is more than enough here for one day's meditation. Think of how Jesus Himself, the light of the world, promised that all who

come after Him would not walk in darkness but have the light of life (John 8:12). He also said His followers would be the light of the world, and that is what Israel was called to be in its life and witness. Paul called the Christians in Ephesus to the same glorious calling, to shine as lights in a wicked world (Phil. 2:15). There is something healthy and hopeful about light. It is when we prefer the shadowy darkness and become secretive and evasive that there is something wrong (John 3:19). Walk in the light, with God and with your fellows.

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### **8:5-26**

The key verses here are 5, 10-11, 14, 19, 22-26. The Levites were set apart and cleansed in order that they might be servants of others before God. This is a high calling but tends to be a lonely one. In a sense the Levites had no private life of their own, and even in the Promised Land they had no territory of their own. The Lord was their portion and He made provision for them in all their life, through the other tribes of Israel. But the point is that there was nothing the Levites could mark out in their lives as being their own private reserve. Their whole existence was to serve others in the things of God. In a very real sense they had to die to self and live unto God for others. This is costly, not least because they would often be taken for granted; they would see others having and doing what was never open to them. Theirs would be a life of particular need in terms of fellowship. Think of how much the home at Bethany meant to our Lord Jesus. Think of how Paul needed and prized the caring support of his fellows. Think of the lonely missionaries whose lives would be heartened by letters from Christian friends who would keep on writing even if they only occasionally got a reply. Think of a whole host of things that could be done for others if only we "died to self" and gave ourselves for service to God and His people when the need arose and not just when it was convenient for us. It is costly and lonely. But some have forfeited the possibility of fruitful service because they have refused the discipline of loneliness. Let none use this reading to justify cutting themselves off into a martyrdom of isolation. That can be sheer self-indulgence. Let us all learn from the Levites and be servants of others for the Lord's sake (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

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### **8:23-26**

It is clear from what we have been studying that in the onward march of the purposes of God there were to be no slackers or passengers. The call to service was radical and demanding. And yet in the midst of it all we have here an example of how the Lord remembers what we are, what we are capable of and what limits must be observed lest we do harm to ourselves and to the work committed to us. The transporting of the Tabernacle was heavy work, requiring men in the full vigour of life and strength. They did not do the work until strength had matured, and after strength had passed its full capacity the Lord eased His men of the full burden. He remembers our frame (Ps. 103:13-14) and we must do the same, recognising that rest is as important as work. Jesus was aware of this in His dealings with His disciples and insisted on rest even when they were eager to keep going (Mk. 6:31). It was the exhaustion of over work and excessive expectation of immediate fruit from his labours that led Elijah into the despair of depression (1 Kings 19:4ff). The Lord God is mindful of us and His Son is ever calling us into His own rest (Matt. 11:28-30; cf. Heb. 4:9-11). Too often it is a carnal spirit that drives us on and on, refusing to stop and rest. But God is not the God of tension. He cares for us. "He never asks too much. He has more consideration of our need of rests and respites for body, mind and soul than our most devoted loved ones, and when He calls us to bear extra strain, as He sometimes does, He instantly provides the extra strength and brings a personal comfort to bear upon the soul that can make the emergency pure joy." (W. Still). We must have God's attitude to ourselves and to others.

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### **9:1-5**

The preparations for advance were almost completed but the people had to be reminded of and recalled to that great saving act of God by which they existed as a people and on which they based all their hope and trust. The Passover had to be celebrated in the wilderness. This was the first annual remembrance of that great night of deliverance from Egypt, and some commentators suggest that but for the slowness of the people this first celebration would have in fact been in the Promised Land. We cannot be sure of this but it does suggest

something of the total nature of the salvation that God brings, taking us in one sure act from the jurisdiction of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of His love (Col. 1:13). However, the Passover in the wilderness is itself a vivid illustration of our own experience as we come to the Lord's Table. We look back to the finished work of our salvation and we look forward with anticipation to the full enjoyment of it in the heavenly land of promise. But more. Just as Israel was unmistakably aware of the Lord's presence with them as they celebrated, so are we aware of His "real presence" in every memorial meal. It is not in a carnal, physical sense that He is present (the bread and wine remain bread and wine). But just as God is mightily present in the preaching of His word, to be received by faith, so He is present with us and for us in the memorial feast so that it becomes a means of grace and a real strengthening of faith and life here with heavenly provision. Moses told the people to keep the Passover, as had in fact been stipulated in Exodus 12:24-27; 13:11-16; cf. Deut. 16:1-8. This great annual feast was set to remind the people that they lived only by the mercy of God. Their God was always with them, yet there were seasons when the facts of salvation and of His presence were significantly brought into focus so that they might be grasped more firmly.

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### 9:6-14

Although the Law of God was specific in all the details of its observance we discover here that concessions, modifications and indeed accommodations were made in certain circumstances. In v.13 however it is made clear that no man in Israel who deliberately sat lightly to the keeping of the Passover Feast would be without guilt. No man was allowed to hold back because, for example, he felt unworthy. No one is ever worthy, but in faith he must come by the way God has appointed. In the New Testament a man must come in the name and by the virtue of the shed blood of Jesus Christ. To hold back is to refuse the precious Saviour and that is to grieve God and to sin against His grace. Of course, when a Christian sins and is consciously convicted of his sin it is so shattering and shameful an experience that it takes a great deal to persuade him that God does in fact forgive. But the gospel declares that if we confess our sin He is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9; cf such verses as Isa. 1:18 and Zech. 13: 1 which are addressed to God's own people). It is a work of deception by the Devil, who is a liar from the beginning (John 8:44), that we tend to think of God as being the one standing ready to condemn as soon as we blunder. He is the God who forgives and, though the language lends itself to misunderstanding, we have here the gospel of the second chance. But it is renewed opportunity through grace here in this life. There is no second chance after death. Now is the time for salvation. The men in v.6ff were unclean because they had legitimately been at a funeral. In v.9 reference is made to men who had been legitimately away on business. In v.14 the stranger who was gladly in Israel, sharing the life, faith and commitment of the people of God, was likewise provided for. God does not want any hungry soul of His to miss the blessing provided. A second celebration of the Passover was ordained.

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### 9:15-23

What a word for a Sunday. We may not see the visible tokens of the pillar of cloud and fire but we have the unshakable promise of God that His Presence will go with us (Ex. 33:13) and that He will be personally present in the midst of His people (Matt. 28:19-20). The God of the Aaronic benediction still stands with upraised arms of blessing and will continue so until His glory is finally made manifest (Acts 1:6-11). This assurance of the Lord's presence (and how He accommodated Himself to their limitation by such obvious signs and tokens) was the last thing they needed to complete their preparations for advance. First the Passover, then the assurance of grace to the erring, and now the confirmation of the presence of the God who accepted full responsibility for them in every step of the way. Everything about this passage, culminating in the summary of last verse, points the lesson that they were to be a people who would live in unquestioning obedience to their God. Did they resent being treated thus like children? Yes, they did later and often. Did they think they were spiritually established and not in need of such meticulous oversight? Yes, they often did and caused many complications for themselves. By their pride they often stole from themselves much of the enjoyment of God's blessing. We must see to it that we are not like them.

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## 9:15-23

Take a day to consider the full message of v.23 and link it with the words of Jesus, "Follow Me." Consider also the call of the Psalmist to commit our way to the Lord (Ps. 37:5). Then consider these verses from the hymn by Anna L Waring.

"Father, I know that all my life  
Is portioned out for me;  
And the changes that are sure to come  
I do not fear to see;  
But I ask Thee for a present mind,  
Intent on pleasing Thee.

"I would not have the restless will  
That hurries to and fro,  
Seeking for some great thing to do  
Or secret thing to know;  
I would be treated as a child  
And guided where to go.

"Wherever in the world I am,  
In whatso'er estate,  
I have a fellowship with hearts  
To keep and cultivate,  
And a work of lowly love to do,  
For the Lord on whom I wait.

"So I ask Thee for the daily strength,  
To none that ask denied,  
And a mind to blend with outward life,  
While keeping at Thy side,  
Content to fill a little space,  
If Thou be glorified."

The children of Israel were not called on to consider or decide either time or direction of the march. They were not allowed to argue, modify or delay. Their business was obedience. God was in charge. If we could but learn this we would also learn the secret of fruitful and compassionate service. In the words of another verse of the above hymn, we would have,

"A heart at leisure from itself,  
To soothe and sympathise."

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## 9:15-23

There is wonderful comfort here for every believer. The pillar of cloud and of fire told Israel that not one moment of its life was without the direct personal scrutiny and supervision of the Almighty God of their salvation. No stage or circumstance of their life was accidental, for their daily pilgrimage was under God's instant and positive direction. Even the timing of their lives had to be seen in this light. Sometimes there was the steady daily rhythm but sometimes days passed without any movement. It was life lived step by step, and of course such was its uncertain certainty that the people could not really get too involved in any aspect of their passing, temporary situation. They were destined for a more glorious land and life and they had to learn to sit lightly to the things of this world. This is very akin to our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 6:19-21, 25-34, and it is a lesson pressed home by the sweeping but accurate assertion of John concerning the world and its essential spirit (1 John 2:15-17; 5:19). Read this whole chapter and see how all the real decisions

were made by God. All the people had to do was to trust and obey. So long as they lived like that in the life of faith they knew a life of communion with God and certainty of purpose. No matter how swiftly their circumstances changed; no matter if they were required to march through the night instead of sleeping; no matter if they were suddenly roused from sleep or disturbed in some delightful and joyous activity, this they knew: the God who watched over them planned and worked for them in love, and all things work together for good to them that love God (Rom. 8:28).

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### 10:1-10

This passage has to do with the trumpets and the various calls that had a clear message to the whole of the people. Anyone who has served in the forces or been part of a large organised camp will grasp the pattern quite clearly. The various "calls" had a specific message and, of course, the trumpeters had to be competent. Paul is possibly thinking about this chapter when he warns against trumpets giving an uncertain sound (1 Cor. 14:8) and Nehemiah made the same use of the trumpet in his work of building Jerusalem surrounded by enemies ((Neh. 4:18-20). The trumpets were in the hands of the spiritual watchmen of Israel (8), and it was necessary that Israel should trust its watchmen who were, after all, under God's instruction and direction. The trumpets seem to have had two clear functions. They were used in various circumstances of danger, need or rejoicing to call the people to God (3). The people were to remember that they were not their own and they were called to prepare to meet their God (Amos 4:12). Secondly, when the people went to war the trumpet not only summoned them to battle, it reminded them that the battle was the Lord's and that they did not go forward to the fight alone or at their own charges. Do not fail to see how vital all this trumpeting is. Is it not true that all too often when crisis comes upon us we forget God and trust to our own strength? Then when we are delivered and blessed it is so easy to forget that it is by grace alone that we are where we are. We need to be *called* to worship and to prayer again and again, and the Lord has His own designed ways for doing so. Do not make the mistake of thinking it takes loud trumpeting to remind God of His pledge to and responsibility for His people. He will not forget (Isa. 49:14-16). We are the ones who need to be reminded of spiritual truths.

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### 10:11-28

The first three verses of today's reading tell of the huge concourse getting under way, and the rest of the passage tells of how all took their places as had been commanded, If it had not been so; if some had decided to be inventive and experimental, seeking with carnal spirit to adjust God's order, the whole thing would have degenerated into chaos. The obedience of faith involved the people in submission to the leadership God had ordained, and it was safe for the people to trust their leader, for Moses was a man who was called to go into the presence of God and speak with him face to face. Such a man will be too aware of his answerability to God to trifle with his leadership. Israel was on the move by the direct command of God, as Dent. 1:6-8 makes plain. They had been in Horeb (Sinai) for the best part of a year, and we all know how easy it is to settle down and to be no longer disposed to move. But God spoke, and the pillar moved, and the people followed. They started their journey with no idea how long they would be on the move, or what demands would come upon them, or what the end product and reward would really be. But they moved at God's command, helped and inspired by all God's mercies and provisions, and by the remembrance of His mighty deliverance in the Passover. Almost immediately the people must have been aware of the demands the journey was to make on them, for the wilderness of Paran, according to Deut. 1:19 was a great and terrible place and it may well have been that right from the start the Devil (Yes, he would be there if the work of God was on the move!) began to press in on them and to work on their immediate feelings which, as we know, are so susceptible and such a vehicle for unbelief.

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### 10:29-32

This is fascinating but difficult. Moses speaks to his relative in words of wonderful and gracious testimony and appeal. Here is a man who is sure of his God and he says, "Come with us, because we know we walk with God. Follow us as we follow Him and you will be safe and blessed." This is the confidence in God we need to have

when we ask people to come to church with us. This is the integrity of heart we need if we are to be a good influence on people. Think of Paul in 1 Cor. 11:1. He was a man who was safe to follow. But, Hobab was reluctant. He had come among the people of Israel and had stayed with them a long time. It was now forty years since Moses was first in Midian and married the daughter of Reuel (Ex. 2:15-22). Possibly for all that time Hobab had been happily associated with Israel and its leader but association is not the same as the commitment of faith. The time had come for this man to choose and to go on to full faith and fulfilment. But he was reluctant and the promise of blessing does not seem to have held much attraction for him. He seemed set to go back. But Moses appealed to him to come and to be of service and this had the desired effect. It may have been that Moses was a shrewd observer of human nature and could see that this man had in fact yielded his heart to the God of Israel and needed both help and opportunity to make confession of this in terms of service. If this be so then we have a lesson here on how to lead a soul gently along the way of faith. But it has its hazards. Think of how Lot *attached* himself to Abraham (Gen. 13:1). Was he ever a man of faith or did he travel on Abraham's ticket? Think of how a mixture of people went up from Egypt with Israel (Ex. 12:38). Were they not a constant source of distraction? We must encourage people to come, and help them to do so, but we must not encourage them to think of themselves as Christians unless there are signs of the things that accompany salvation (Heb. 6:9).

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### 10:29-32

There are still questions and lessons arising from this incident. If God was so manifestly the guide of Israel, what did Moses mean in v.31? Was he suggesting that Hobab would make the decisions? Was the assurance of divine guidance not enough? We need to remember that true miracle never despises natural provision nor does divine assurance eliminate the need for wise management. Moses had no intention of giving way to carelessness by neglecting to take all the ordinary precautions a leader would take during a journey through unknown territory. Hobab would know the territory better than any and would serve as a scout and be able to help Moses to anticipate practical difficulties. To look always for miraculous provision may seem to be an attitude of faith but it may also be an abdication of responsibility. It certainly does not lead to the strengthening of faith because we become dependent on "signs" to such an extent that without them our faith and conviction become minimal. Paul had the wise balance when he spoke of working out our own salvation, because it is in fact God working in and through us by His Spirit (Phil. 2:12-13). In the shipwreck story in Acts 27:13ff., in spite of glorious assurance from God that all would be well, Paul is seen to address himself to the situation with great practical wisdom. We tend at times to be too spiritual in our attitudes. Think of the words of the Confession of Faith with regard to Providence. "God in his ordinary providence makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure." Never despise the ordinary. Rather see God's hand in all things and his gracious provision in the way that He so often brings to us the people and the opportunities that are exactly fitted to the occasion. Of course we need the eye of faith to discern the angels of God when they are sent to us (Heb. 1:14; 13:2).

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### 10:33-36

Whatever interpretation we give to the invitation to Hobab, it is clear from these verses that Moses' confidence and hope were in God alone. He was a man fixed on God (Ps. 108:1 AV), a man who encouraged himself in God, and it appears that at the beginning and end of every stage of the journey Moses drew near to God in prayer. Note that the great concourse is now leaving the mount of the Lord where God had spoken His word and prepared them under His instruction. Now the Ark, which symbolises so much of the saving word of God, goes before them, affirming and confirming divine leadership for the journey. It was powerful leadership (Deut. 9:3; Josh. 3:1-6). It was the speaking God and the Word He spoke (and they must not be separated) that led Israel. The people were not to be left in doubt and uncertainty. God Himself, in His Word, was to be the lamp of their feet and the light of their path (Ps. 119:105) just as He was their life. The exultant songs of Moses (35-36) are not irrelevant, bloodthirsty proclamations, but necessary reminders to the people that they were engaged in holy warfare and that the issues were spiritual. This is something we need to do for ourselves if we are not to lose sight and perspective as we become increasingly involved with issues far greater than any mere local work.

When the cloud moved, Moses declared the willingness of the people to follow, no matter the cost, and the assurance of victory (Ps. 68:1-10, 19-20, 32-35; 124:1-8; 132:8-9, 13-18). When the cloud stopped and the Ark rested then Moses proclaimed "We rest in Thee, our Shield and our Defender." The whole story is full of promise and hope. Blessed is the people whose God is the Lord (Ps. 144:15).

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### 11:1-3

We said yesterday that the situation was full of hope but the enemy struck quickly. It was not an outside enemy but trouble arising from within the hearts of Israel. In this first initial move from Sinai, lasting three days, there flared up like a fire with a secret air supply, a spirit of complaint and rebellion which drew upon the people a sharp, swift judgment of discipline. When we read such stories there is a tendency in many to think at once of the severity of God and almost to suggest that God was more severe than He needed to be, especially since the people were obviously going through a hard and difficult journey. There are two answers to this. Why do people tend to take the side of the sinner against God, or the side of any wrongdoer against the person who represents authority and discipline? This seems to indicate misplaced sympathy and suggests that in similar situations we also would take the way of selfish complaint (Rom. 1:32). The second observation is to remind ourselves of the privileges of this people who little more than a year previously had been miserable, demoralised slaves in Egypt. They had been chosen and redeemed by God. They had been given power, promises, provision and purpose. They had in their short experience known both the mercy and judgment of God and had learned sore lessons from life, as the Book of Exodus makes plain. But here they are again, murmuring against God's dealings with them and being verbally quite open and brash about it. It is quite alarming just how swiftly and radically God dealt with this. In Exodus 16:1-12 and 17:1-7 the murmuring of Israel was answered by significant tokens of blessing. But now it is not so, for the people are no longer novices and the issues are far more fraught with spiritual significance. Read 1 Cor. 10:1-13. It is a passage we should all know.

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### 11:1-3

We have already noted how swiftly this bitter spirit of criticism, digression and disaffection arose and we must now consider where it arose from in the life of Israel. Read Deuteronomy 9:13-29, and consider the summary of Israel's spiritual history in Acts 7: 30-44, 51-53. Who, apart from the ordination and command of God, would have chosen to be the leader and shepherd of such a people? They would neither learn nor be led. Rather than live by spiritual principles they preferred to give way to immediate inclinations and reactions. Note that the trouble started in the outlying parts of the camp. Was it more difficult for them than for those near the Ark to grasp the spiritual significance of all that was going on? They could have lifted up their eyes to see the cloud of the Presence. Was it that those on the perimeter felt they were the first people likely to be exposed to the attacks of the enemy? We can only speculate as to the identity of the complainers, whereas God always knows, and knows how to deal with them. Were they some of the "mixed multitude" who were perhaps spiritual "passengers"? Were they people who were lagging spiritually or wandering, or absent from their appointed place of duty? Were the complaining people those who were having a hard time on a human level, family or finance difficulties, or business worries and were they transferring their hurt and frustration to the work, the people, and the leadership of God? It happens. Every work of God sees it happening. Some hold back from spiritual commitment to the work God has made them a part of and in consequence they can end up like these un-named people in Israel. The perimeter of a work is a dangerous place. Some who read these words need to get the prayer meeting into its proper place. Heb. 3:7-19 is the Biblical comment.

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### 11:4-9

There are several lessons here and one of them is that murmuring and complaining is an interim stage of that disaffection from God which ends in lust or strong craving (whatever it is for) that completely blinds the mind and corrupts the heart. The word "rabble"(4) is translated by some as "riff-raff" and may very probably refer to the "mixed multitude" that journeyed from Egypt with Israel (Exod.12:38 AV). They may have been the

families of Hebrew women by Egyptian fathers. Whatever their pedigree or background their influence here was powerful and they were critical of the constant and sufficient diet of manna, the food provided by God. Of course, heavenly food needs heavenly appetite, and there are many whose appetites are more for the titivation of the palate than for body-building. Note that the present discontent was inspired and maintained by a backward look to the early days in Egypt. Memory plays lots of tricks. When we are out of sorts spiritually it is only the pleasant parts of the past that we choose to recall, and we dwell on happy times, interesting diversions, intriguing companions and pleasurable activities. We forget the spiritual barrenness and bondage that once was our experience. We need to be wary of camp-followers who have no real appetite for long-term obedience to God and the spiritual work that is involved in building churches. These are the people who are always creating diversions, possibly because they like being "in charge" of them, and they seek by the blackmail of discontent to impose their will on the whole of the work. This is what was happening in Israel. The manna tasted like honey (Ex. 16:31) and it was fresh as oil (speaking of the Holy Spirit) and it was in plentiful supply. But still the people complained they were hungry. It was not the food but the appetite that was defective.

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### 11:10-15

People say the grass is always greener on the other side and it is amazing how some people praise every work of God except the one they are called to work in. Moses was more aware than anyone else just how much better and healthier and more hopeful this people were than they had ever been before. He could see them, or most of them, showing signs of growth in grace. He knew also that they needed both the food and the discipline God was giving them and that their whole experience was leading them forward. He was not unmindful either of the burden he had carried on their behalf and of how his own heart was being disciplined to keep him close to God, trusting God and obedient to God. But when this open bitterness raged and God's displeasure was made manifest, Moses himself seems to have been affected and he complained to God. He was a humble man (Num. 12:3) and once he was established in his God-given task, neither Pharaoh, nor the Philistines, nor the rigours of life and service could overcome him. But this evil discontent among the people nearly broke him, as v.15 makes plain. Others of God's mighty men have likewise been worn down by the sheer ingratitude of the people they served (Jer. 20:7-10, 14-18). There is no doubt here that Moses was overwrought, yet what he says about his ministry (12-13) is very revealing. It is similar to what Paul says in 1 Thess. 2:7-12. It is sad when a man of God has to defend his ministry and usually his personal character at the same time, but even a great man like Samuel had to do so (1 Sam. 12:1-6). Even God had to expostulate with His people about their ingratitude (Isa. 5:1-4). But that does not excuse the people

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### 11:10-15

Note carefully where Moses went wrong. He seems to have shared the feeling of the people that God had somehow dealt unfairly with him. Of course Moses was very conscious of the burden of responsibility that came with spiritual leadership, but he had to remember that he was not in fact in charge. He was under orders to obey, just as the people were. The ultimate responsibility was God's, and Moses had to learn the detachment of that easy yoke which Jesus spoke of in Matt. 11:29, 30. There are burdens which must be cast on the Lord (Ps. 55:22) and every servant of God has to learn that in fact he can do nothing at all (1 Cor. 3:7). This man needed fellowship in carrying his God-given burden. Why was it not forthcoming? Back in Ex. 18:24-27, following the advice of his father-in-law Jethro, able men had been chosen to help Moses. Where were they in this present situation? Was it beyond their capacity, or had the office become an "honorary" or non-operative one, or was Moses the kind of man who could not delegate responsibility in certain areas? Whatever explanation we give of this serious situation we must recognise in it the direct assault of Satan against the holy work of God. Part of the evidence that marks it out as devilish is the totality of Moses' reaction. He could see no light anywhere. He seems to have thought that all the people were apostate, whereas it was only a group of them, a group that was not really significant, since they were only camp followers rather than committed men. Granted they had infected quite a few, but there was hope of restoration for them, but little such hope for the trouble-makers.

They had God to deal with. Rather, God would deal with them. It is all very serious or comforting, depending on your spiritual attitude.

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### 11:16-25

Moses had posed two questions to God. How was he to carry this people on his own and how was he going to meet their cry for meat? God answered him on both counts. God provided that Moses should never again be on his own, or for that matter feel alone. Seventy elders were appointed with the specific purpose of taking their stand with Moses (16). They were to be his supporters in spiritual leadership and stewardship (cf. Deut. 31:14-15). This was not the institution of a committee of management with democratic equality among the members. The fact of Moses' greater endowment seems confirmed by v.17, and we must not think of a "sharing out" of the Spirit as if the Holy Spirit was divisible. There seem to have been two types of service, elders and officers, but it is not clear what the distinction was between them. They were already accredited men of faith and integrity and that is why they were chosen for spiritual service. Ordination does not *make* a man an elder. The New Testament qualifications could be considered here in Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:1- 11; 1 Pet. 5:1-4. No man can serve effectively apart from the life-giving power and blessing of the Holy Spirit, and God gave a clear token to the people that these men were ordained and commissioned by divine authority. They prophesied, and this seems to refer to some ecstatic experience. It was a once-for-all token (25) rather than a permanent capacity and it seems to have been to confirm God's appointment in the eyes of the people rather than to be a particular blessing to the elders themselves. There was to be no adulation of the men nor of their office. They were ordained to serve, not just the people but Moses their God-given leader.

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### 11:16-25

Having provided for Moses, God now addressed Himself to the people. Just because they cried for meat did not mean that Moses was obliged to fall in with their desires (15). There are times when a leader must ignore requests or allow people to go their determined way without necessarily going with them (2 Kings 2:15-18). But God decided that the people would get what they asked for with such clamour and spiritual protest. The people were called upon to consecrate themselves in anticipation of a great manifestation of God's presence and power. Their request was a sinful one but it was not going to be denied. It was to be answered in judgment. Read Ps. 78:18-32; 106:12-15 AV. Here in Numbers it is made clear that the fulfilment of their desire was to be their judgment. This is solemn. We can be so petulant and persistent in our unbelief and complaining that God will hear our cry and let us have our own way. The heart that is humbly submissive and seeks the good and perfect will of God can rest assured that there will be an over-ruling by God, and that our prayers and actions will not lead us astray. In that sense God will not let us go wrong. But there is a wrong spirit that argues the point with God and is so self-opinionated that God does at times grant the request and send leanness to the soul. Moses' reaction was not to question the morality or spiritual wisdom of God's purpose but to question God's capacity. But Moses was too materialistic and statistical. The Lord's hand is not shortened (cf. Isa. 50:2-3; 59:1-2). This fact was very soon to become evident.

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### 11:26-35

The second half of this passage tells us of how the quails and the judgment both came from God and of how both came in full measure. God is not mocked. How we need the wise counsel of Heb. 3: 7-13 and the prayer in Ps. 139:23-24. The story of Eldad and Medad is fascinating and in some ways full of difficulty. It reminds us of the story in Mk. 9:38-39. If these men were among the chosen seventy we have no idea why they did not gather at the Tabernacle along with the others. Even though Jesus Himself taught the freeness and sovereignty of the Spirit's working (John 3:8) we cannot draw from this incident the principle that we can sit lightly to God's commands and still know the blessing of God's Spirit. Nor are we warranted in drawing from this story any particular doctrine of the charismatic experience as it is often spoken of today: All we can say is that this happened as it is recorded to two men while it happened otherwise to sixty-eight men. We are not told much

about Moses' anointing by the Spirit referred to in v.17 but we cannot doubt God's hand upon him. Joshua was obviously worried by this "independent" course of action and he is not without New Testament warrant in questioning just what spirit inspired these men (1 John 4:1). On the face of it these two seemed to be pursuing an independent line of action which was not according to what God had instructed. Moses was not too worried. Why? Was he now reassured of the immediate presence and over-ruling control of God? Was he just so relieved that a spiritual vitality was being manifested over against the carnal complaining of the people that he accepted it without too much questioning? Certainly he expressed longing that all the Lord's people were Spirit-inspired men who looked to God, loved God, and obeyed God. If God marks out a man as one of His Spirit-inspired men we do well to be careful before we criticise.

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## 12:1-2

We must learn to discern very carefully the spirit that motivates people because, as Jesus pointed out, not all who call Him Lord or who do wonderful things in His name are actually His (Matt. 7:21-23). The Lord knows them that are His (2 Tim. 2:19) and He hears what people say against those whom He has put in authority. Moses played a significant part in the whole scheme of God's work and we must learn spiritual lessons from his experiences at the hand of others. This teacher and administrator of God's people had faced disaffection in the outlying camp, ill-tempered rebellion in the midst of the camp, and now he was assailed by jealous rebellion from his nearest and dearest, Miriam and Aaron, his sister and brother. It is clear that the woman was the instigator and driving force of this complaint, for she was the one who was punished by God. On the face of it the criticism was concerned with Moses' marriage to the Cushite woman and this probably refers to a recent marriage rather than his marriage to Zipporah some forty years previously. It is not clear whether Moses transgressed God's law in contracting this marriage and certainly God remained remarkably silent about it. The real focus of Miriam's criticism was not the woman Moses married but Moses' spiritual leadership. Miriam (who was older than Moses) and Aaron (who was a gullible character easily manipulated into wrong actions by powerful personalities as is evident in the incident of the golden calf in Ex. 32: 1ff) were jealous of Moses' primacy and they sought to undermine his leadership in order to take the prior places for themselves. Had the scheme been successful there is no doubt the woman would have been boss and this spirit of seeking power is manifestly not of God. But they made it all sound so spiritual saying, "Aren't we all spiritually minded people?" The answer is No! Cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-3.

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## 12:3-8

It is quite a problem having God so very near, so immediately knowledgeable about all that is going on. He looks into the hearts of men and women rather than listening to their mere words (1 Sam. 16:7). In the previous two verses it is clear that Moses' critics had begun to despise and undervalue him quite apart from the issue of the woman he had married, who had possibly ousted Miriam from her prominence in the household. The reference to God speaking through men probably refers back to Ex. 4:10-16, where Moses bewailed his lack of eloquence and Aaron was made the official spokesman, and to Ex. 15:20 where Miriam was called a prophetess and played a leading part in celebrations. It may be that having once had a little prominence Miriam was not disposed to take a back seat. How we need to bring our motives into the light of God. It would have been much safer for Miriam to do so. She wanted place and sought to usurp leadership and this marks her out as totally different from Moses who was above all else a meek and humble man whose chief concern was not place, prominence or praise, but to be the servant of God. No doubt Miriam also claimed that she desired to be God's servant, for she seems to have had no doubts at all about her spirituality or capacity. One wonders whether the women of Israel would have wanted to be led by her. The issue did not arise for *suddenly* the Lord took charge and called the three of them into His presence. It was not to have a debate as to who was the most spiritual. It was that God might vindicate His servant and at the same time expose the secret reservations Miriam and Aaron had had in their hearts for some time. It was almost as if God was counselling Moses to be careful whom he trusted. Can we be trusted safely?

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## 12:9-16

This situation, which seemed fraught with so much danger to the work of God, was dealt with in a salutary manner, and the onward movement of the work was delayed a mere seven days. Read through the whole of this chapter, not least to see what God said about Moses. He was named as God's trusted servant, and already Israel had good cause to trust him also. God agreed that He speaks to many people in different ways, but this man Moses was significantly different. Read Ex. 33:7-23, and think also of Abraham in whom God confided (Gen. 18:17). Try to imagine the feelings of Miriam and Aaron when the anger of the Lord was made manifest in the departing of the cloud. Note also the reaction to the immediate appearance of leprosy upon Miriam. Instantly Aaron turned to Moses in abject sorrow for his foolishness and in anguished concern for his sister who, as the priest knew only too well, could be banished from Israel (Lev. 13:45-46). In answer to this cry for help (Miriam herself seems stunned into silence - and little wonder, for God was angry) Moses immediately became the great intercessor as he had been before (Ex. 32:11-14, 30-35). Aaron would remember that incident clearly and would know that Moses was the kind of man you could go to in a crisis and ask him to pray for you. Aaron's attitude to Moses was deeper than either his sin or his shame. The outcome of it all was the necessary public rebuke to Miriam, and by that divinely-appointed means she was pardoned, cleansed and restored. It was a solemn lesson for all who were involved. How we need to guard against the subtle inroads of pride and self-deceit. But the story ends with the wonderful mercy of God which tempers the chastisement. Let us see to it that we learn the lesson and walk in the light.

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## 13:1-24

Something of the devilish nature of the incident of the previous chapter is seen now in that it came immediately before a significant and critical stage in the forward movement of the purposes of God. In this sense it is both comforting and encouraging when the Devil launches an attack. He does not waste his time. He is out to oppose. As one person put it, "If you are never confronted by the Devil you must be going in the same direction." Note at the beginning how God reaffirmed his appointment of and confidence in Moses, and later (26) we find Aaron in his appointed place by the side of Moses. We referred in the note for 12:1-2 to incidents of weakness in Aaron's life and we see why he was destined to be a "second-in-command" rather than a leader. But if that is the place ordained, then it is the place of fruitfulness. If we look back to 8: 1-3 we find no suggestion there of Aaron resenting that God did not speak directly to him but through Moses. God's men were in their places, the spies were sent out with detailed instructions to do a thorough job (17-20) and they were given encouragement. How important this is and how we need encouragement and respond to it. We can all do a lot for each other in this respect. The spies were told to be very accurate in their assessment of the situation because confidence in the promise of God, who had given them the land, was not to be an excuse for carelessness, which usually leads to complacency and over-confidence. Apart from Joshua (Hoshea) and Caleb (6, 8) we know nothing of these men named, but they all had a job to do, and they did it, finding, as God had said, proof of the great fruitfulness of the land.

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## 13:25-33

It might have been best for Israel if they had not known so much detail about the situation in the land. We do not mean to contradict the comments at the end of yesterday's note, but if we compare the account of this situation in Deut. 1:6-8, 19-25 it seems that the idea to send spies arose from the general wish of the people and that their suggestion pleased Moses. We do not need to think that Moses was swayed simply by what people wanted, for in Numbers the Lord confirmed the plan and gave the people their desire, as He had done so recently in respect of their crying for meat. Perhaps what the people should have done was to go forward in faith without waiting for evidence and confirmations since God had commanded them to go and had promised them the land. The spies came back in due time with manifest evidences of the desirability of the land. How could it be otherwise? God would not lead His people to a promised land of desert. He is not perverse. But along with the good news the spies brought the alarming tidings of strong giants and fortified cities and different races of people who seemed anything but friendly. Some of the Israelites would remember the name Amalek (Ex.

17:8ff) and the reputation of the Amorites (Gen. 15:16), and in remembering they took their eyes off God, forgot His presence and His promise, and they saw not just the difficulties but impossibilities. This is the curse of unbelief. Even though they had behind them the history and experience of God's power and faithfulness, they would still do anything rather than just trust Him and go forward. Would they have been better without the spies' report? "I do not ask to see the distant scene, one step enough for me." (Newman)

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### 13:25-33

We are so conditioned these days by our theorising about democracy that we have endowed the "majority" with what amounts to Papal infallibility or even "divine right". But the majority here were disastrously wrong, for the simple reason that their calculations were on the basis of sight rather than faith. This is no way to live as the people of God. It is our calling to endure as seeing the invisible (Heb. 11:27) and to set ourselves quite deliberately to look at the unseen and eternal realities of the promises of God, and not to be cowed and conditioned by the appearance of immediate circumstances (2 Cor. 4:18).

"Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees.

And looks to that alone;

Laughs at impossibilities

And says, 'It shall be done.'"

That was Caleb's attitude. He stilled the people, insisted that they were able to take the land and called them to go forward. He tried to get them to calculate on God and not just on the measurements of the giants and the fortifications. Had they not seen the armed might of Pharaoh demolished in one fell swoop? Had they not lived through the plagues of Egypt and seen the power of God in bringing evil low within their own nation? But it was no use. They preferred the inaccuracy of their feelings to the theological truth of the sovereignty and sufficiency of God (31). Caleb pointed to the cloud of God's Presence but the people looked to the spies and their infectious doubts and fears. They were quite right in describing themselves as grasshoppers (33) if that saved them from self-confidence. What they forgot was that God was not like an insect, and the battle was His, not theirs (10:9 cf. 2 Chron. 20: 15).

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### 14:1-4

It is almost unbelievable that a people who had known so much of the blessing and goodness of God should react in this vile and blasphemous way. Yet it is true to human nature in all its self-idolatry. They were not prepared to fight, suffer or even be inconvenienced in any way. If God gave them blessing they would take it gladly and greedily but if He demanded anything of them they refused point blank. Their tears here were in no sense tears of repentance because they had failed God, but rather tears of self pity and they lashed out in bitter recrimination against their human leaders and against God. They were all set to go back from God to Egypt or to the wilderness, saying that any kind of life would be better than to be tied to this kind of God. What terrible blasphemy is here! This is saying that the world, the flesh and the Devil are better to their servants than God is, and of course, this is the testimony of all backsliders. There was a terrible blindness in the minds and hearts of Israel at this crisis point. Did they think God would bless them in their disobedience? Had they forgotten what it was like to live as slaves in Egypt (Ex. 1:11-14) with all its bondage, frustration and denial of human dignity? Think of what the New Testament says of this turning back from God. Read Rom. 6:15-23 and Heb. 10: 26-39. What is it to be? Do we go on with God in the life of faith and obedience or do we go back from God to the world in its aesthetic or carnal indulgence? John 6:66-68 tells of the time in Jesus' ministry, after the great discourse on the Bread of Life, when many went back and walked no more with Him. If we do not go on, we go back. There is no standing still. But a more solemn thought. God barred their way!

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### 14:5-12

The last verse of yesterday's passage is an deliberate insult thrown in Moses' face and a total rejection of his leadership, slandering it as disastrous. The great man and his loyal lieutenant instantly fell on their faces before

God in awe and entreaty, but although this was in full view of the people they were in no mood to be impressed by prayer or by holy devotion. You can imagine their contemptuous looks and whispers. In Deut. 1:26-33 we learn that Moses had in fact spoken directly to the people leaving them in no doubt, as to the spiritual significance of what they were doing. But it was all to no avail. There were not many willing to stand against the popular discontent in Israel, nor many prepared to show publicly their loyalty to Moses, their human leader, nor many with courage to speak out and risk losing friends for the sake of spiritual truth and principle. But Joshua and Caleb did. This *was* a time for taking sides, and many such times come upon us in the course of Christian life. It is not wise to refuse the decision. It was not just a case of being on Moses' side, but on God's side (Ex. 32:26). The appeal by Joshua and Caleb is wonderfully expressed (7-9) but it was refused. The fury of the people was murderous (10) and there was no saying what might have happened. But the glory of God appeared. We think of that tomorrow. If all this had been happening at the beginning of Exodus when spiritual experience was minimal it might have been understandable if not, excusable. But this was a people who had known for a long time and in rich measure the blessing of God. Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor.10:12).

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### 14:5-12

These rebellious people had simply forgotten about God. Did they expect Him to stand idly by, abandoning His faithful servants to the savagery of a mob and allowing His holy purposes to be thwarted and slandered? In a significant intervention and by demonstration of His glory, God took the whole situation out of human hands. The words of God in v.11-12 are alarming in their extremity and yet are totally justified. They describe and diagnose the situation with total accuracy. They show how near Israel had come to being disinherited and how they could have disappeared from the scene and could have been lost in irrelevance and obscurity. Had they any real awareness of what they were risking? When we are in this kind of spiritual distemper as the result of spiritual disobedience we are seldom able to assess exactly what we are doing and seldom willing to listen to spiritual counsel from leaders whom we have secretly despised even when we were following them. This incident is best described as an outburst rather than a rebellion or reaction to difficulty. Its nature was devilish and it instantly brought the people into direct confrontation with God. They must have had some idea of what this would mean, as is clear from earlier history in Ex. 20:18-20; 24:16. But is it not true that even when we know something we can still blunder blindly on into trouble? Consider these references in the context of today's passage: Prov. 29:1; Heb. 10:31; 12:28-29; Acts 5:39. Think very carefully of what it might mean to be discovered to be at cross-purposes with God, the God who has blessed and redeemed you and created in you by grace all that is good and worthy.

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### 14:13-19

Note carefully the amazing and significant detail of the Scripture narrative. In yesterday's passage God is seen with Moses over against the sinful, rebellious people, but now Moses is seen standing with the people, acting as Mediator, doing the work of intercessor, and pleading for their pardon and restoration, as he had done on a previous occasion (Ex.32:30-35). Here is a man who was able and willing to stand in the gap for the nation (Ezek. 22:30) and his prayer prevailed. We have already learned that Moses was a meek man (12:3) but here we see him bold in the presence of God with a holy boldness that had nothing of presumption in it (Heb. 10: 22) Here is a man who knew his God and his people and loved them both. Note how his intercession and advocacy did not begin with the wellbeing of a discontented and rebellious people but with the name, character and reputation of God in the face of the slander of the powers of evil. That is mighty ground to take. There is no doubt that Moses had a heart of compassion for the people but he did not sympathise with them in their sinning. He did not for a moment question God's righteous anger. Nor did he suggest that God was concerned with human approval. But the integrity of the whole plan of redemption, the glory of God, and the testimony of righteousness in the world were all at stake. In relation to v.16 think of how the derelict condition of the organised church in our day has brought shameful contempt on the whole idea of God. A church whose own members are casually indifferent, a church which cannot support its missionary endeavours, a church that does

not know what it believes and is not sure if it can stand by what it is supposed to believe, is a shame to the name of God. If the honour of God matters to us then we have grounds for praying with earnestness like Moses.

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### 14:20-25

Yesterday's passage needs to be read in conjunction with these verses and we must ponder them well because there are deep spiritual lessons to be learned. On the face of it, in v.13ff it seems as if Moses was more gracious and loving than God, but this loss of "reputation" on the part of God was the necessary means whereby Moses' great love for God and for Israel was brought out into the open and allowed to operate. But note how patterned on God Moses was, for he also was prepared to abandon reputation and the offer of spiritual prominence (12) for the honour of God's name and the blessing of his unworthy people. This "dying to self" is of the essence of spiritual service, as is seen so clearly in Paul's words in 2 Cor. 4:7-15 and in the words of John the Baptist in John 3:30 (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-7). When you think of how much Moses had suffered at the hands of a contemptuous people his intercession is all the more moving. His prayers were answered. But the question arises. How can God, if He has pronounced the people guilty, proceed to extend mercy and still remain righteous? That leads us on to the wonder of the Cross, foreshadowed in all the sacrifices of Israel's worship. Sin is never just "let off". Its price is paid (Rom. 3:21-26). But, and this is very important, within the great forgiveness of God there are still the consequences of sinning to be lived with, as today's verses make plain. This generation of Israel lost the privilege of service and also the enjoyment of the fellowship of the Lord. This is something to be remembered, no matter how long and fruitfully we may have served the Lord. Think of Samson in Judges 16:20. His tempestuous wilfulness caught up with him and cost him dearly. Think of Paul's teaching in 1 Cor. 3:10-15 about suffering loss, and how in 1 Cor. 9:23-27 he testified to the self-discipline of his life lest he should ever lose his place in service.

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### 14:20-25

There are at least three further lessons to be learned from these verses. In the first place there is a statement of absolute assurance as to the issues of history (20). Nothing can prevent, the glorious triumph of God (Isa. 6:3; Hab. 2:14). God's will shall be done, every knee shall bow and God shall be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28 AV). This is the comfort of the faithful and the fear of the evildoer. The sovereign providence and purpose of God should give us a confident detachment from the operations of evil (Ps.73:16, 17). This should also give us hope in our failures because this great God is the God who pardons (Micah 7:18-20). The second lesson concerns the persistence and incorrigibility of unbelief (22b). Some commentators suggest a list of ten specific incidents of murmuring and rebellion, but the phrase "ten times" may simply refer to a full measure of unbelief and disobedience. It is alarming to think of such wilfulness among God's own people, but the theme is taken up in the New Testament by one of the gentlest of saints (Acts 7:51), and it is something we see constantly in the story of the church and can discern only too easily in our own stubborn lives. The third thing here is the clear distinction God makes between those who are in the right spirit and those who are not. There is no sentimentalism here and God deals with the people according to the disposition of their hearts. It is not a case of "bad luck" or "unfortunate experiences" but of God at work disposing the ways of men (Jer. 10: 23; 17:9-10). All through the Bible, as Jesus states so clearly, faith and unbelief can be distinguished. By their fruits they are made manifest (Matt. 7:16-21).

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### 14:26-38

This makes solemn reading but it is realistic. There come upon us all, times of momentous setting of direction which cannot really be changed. So often, as here, it is the direct result of our own dealings with God which reach a point where God confirms us in our own choice and sets the necessary time of our discipline. If we link v.28 with 14:2 we see how God will demonstrate to them the folly of their choice. If we link v.31 with 14:3 we see that God will demonstrate their wrongness by doing the very thing they said was impossible. But in v.33 we see that the unbelieving parents had left their children a legacy of frustration they would have to live with. The

fathers eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge (Ezek. 18:2). The generations are not independent; one sows the next reaps and at times when a nation sows the wind it reaps the whirlwind (Hos. 8:7). Do not fail to note how immediately present God is in this situation and how personally involved He is in the detail of it. We all have allowed ourselves to be deceived by the devil into believing that God is really far away and that it takes Him quite some time to enter into any given situation of our making. This is quite false, as Psalm 139 makes so plain. Even the uttermost parts of the earth are not far away from Him. Think of how Jonah found God very near and so very much involved in his situation. God is real. In v.34 the A.V. speaks of God's "breach of promise" and there is more than just "displeasure" there is alienation and rejection. If we link this with Joshua 7: 1 we are shown the real issue. The people broke faith with God, and there were consequences.

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### **14:39-45**

The strange perversity and deceitful shallowness of the human heart is demonstrated in this passage. When God had commanded and encouraged them to go forward they refused resolutely in self pitying petulance that reviled their leader and slandered God (14:1-4). Then when God had declared in rebuke and judgment that they were not to go forward to take the land they reacted with a show of immediate but superficial repentance. It was almost as if they thought that a short "spasm" of religious and apparently spiritual zeal would put God in a good mood again. We all know this kind of thing. When life gets difficult and dangerous we read our Bibles, pray and vow, and even start going to prayer meetings. But, so very often, it is a temporary "sanctification" and when the crisis eases we lapse back into our more normal carnal and worldly ways. Read of this in Hosea 5:15-6:4 (the AV conveys the sense best) where the casual attitude to sin is so manifest. The people thought a few days or at most a few weeks would see things right again. This is an attitude that recognises neither the reality of sin nor the reality and necessity of God's rebuke. In today's passage the people manifest unthinking reaction but not repentance for there was no real change of heart. In any case their reaction was too late, for God had spoken and His action was settled. But still, in spite of spiritual counsel, they insisted on doing what *they* wanted. They presumed on God (44), taking it for granted that He would toe the line and "let bygones be bygones". But they were confounded. It was a sore and humbling experience, as it was for the young men in Elisha's day (2 Kings 2:15-18). We must learn to listen to God's wise men and appointed leaders.

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### **15:1-16**

We do not concentrate on the details and spiritual significance of these offerings, which are dealt with in Exodus and Leviticus, save to say that all the Old Testament offerings in various ways point to Christ in some aspect of His person and work as God's Lamb, His perfect life and atoning death. This is why the offerings are described as a "pleasing aroma" or a "sweet savour" to God. They are a reminder or testimony to God concerning His own Son in whom He is eternally pleased. This means, amongst other things, that we are most pleasing to God when we are centred on and making much of His Son, who is in fact everything to us in terms of salvation and life (1 Cor. 1:30). The only thing we have to offer to God is Christ and ourselves in Christ, and Christ ever more fully grown and developed in us. The people here are reminded that worship, never separated from obedience, is not a thing of free choice, offering to God whatever takes our fancy in whatever way our immediate feelings dictate. Worship is submission to and acceptance of what God has ordained. The objective is not that we should be pleased but that God should be pleased. Such God-directed worship will certainly not lack blessing for the people, and that is exactly what God is providing for here, not just for the specially chosen, but also for the stranger within the gates (15-16). There must not ever be a wrong, selective exclusivism, because all is totally of grace from beginning to end. There is no difference and God is no respecter of persons (Rom. 3:9, 22, 23). There is more in this passage and we return to it tomorrow. Think hard as to what it is.

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## 15:1-16

The chapter begins with a great affirmation of the grace of God. At the very time of the rebuke and casting away of Israel, God is speaking of their restoration and their return to service. He does not say, "If you come into the land," but "when you come ..." The biggest thing in the situation is not the sins, disobedience and failure of the people, great and terrible as that is. God is greater than all. There is no question as to their guilt, and their punishment is ordered and begun. But God is already speaking of the future. We found the same thing in our studies in Ezra, setting the background of Israel's failure in the land and their being carried captive to Babylon. God's glorious intentions, so stringent in their practical outworking, are declared in Jeremiah 29:4-14. Dealing with a people and a work that had failed, God declared that He was planning to give them a future. What grace! Amazing grace. But there is a further lesson. God recognises that sharp or long discipline, far from driving His people away, will in fact bring them to a truer desire to worship and obey. Here is a test of the work of grace in our hearts. If discipline under God (whether in direct providence or through human spokesmen) evokes resentment and rebellion then we are not true sons of the Father. Consider well Heb. 12:5-11 and then 1 Pet. 5:7. It is true of most of us that we have not yet grasped the wonderful, patient, persistence of the God of all grace. His designs for us in salvation are perfect and He not only refuses to give us up finally in spite of all our stupidity and sinning (Hosea 11:7-9), He perseveres in His gracious purposes (Jer. 18:1-6) so that in the end He will see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied.

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## 15:17-21

These simple verses are worthy of consideration because they point the lesson of gratitude and thanksgiving. This has more to do with attitude than with specific actions, although the acts of gratitude will not be missing. The people are taught that the first portion goes to the Lord. This is by no means unreasonable, for the people would be living in the land of blessing, eating the fruit of it and enjoying all the privileges of it. The least they could do would be to express gratitude to God for all they had received and were receiving of His constant daily goodness. This grace of gratitude to God and to man seems to be increasingly absent in a day when affluence, not poverty, has produced a greedy spirit that takes all as if by right. We need to remember that we are not in any sense our own (1 Cor. 6:19, 20) and nothing we have is our own. We are the Lord's, and the setting apart of the first portion or the firstfruits is both an acknowledgment of this and practical expression of it. We must never lapse into the practice of giving to God a part (be it a tenth or any other proportion) of what is left over. All that we have and are is from Him, and His blessings are often ministered to us through the kindness, care and generosity of others, and therefore thanksgiving is an essential part of life, including the life of prayer. Consider Phil. 4:4-7; Col. 2:7; 3:15; 4:2; and 1 Thess. 5:16-19 where thanksgiving and the free operation of the Spirit of God are placed closely together. Some Christian lives are dull and stodgy for no other reason than the sheer lack of gratitude and thanksgiving.

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## 15:22-29

This passage deals with sins of ignorance, but we must be careful with language. To plead in court that you did not know the law, when the law is clearly promulgated and displayed, is neither defence nor excuse. For example, we have no right to drive a car if we do not know the Highway Code. But it seems from v.22 that the concern here is with omissions rather than actual transgressions, although transgressions committed unwittingly (contrasted with deliberate sin in v.30ff) are not excluded. Paul may be referring to this in 1 Tim. 1:12-14. What we have to see here again is the grace and kindness of God who does not crush the broken or extinguish the feeble (Isa. 42:3). Israel had sinned and was under judgment that was severe, and the reaction of the people could have been to lapse into hopelessness and great fear lest they should go wrong again. That kind of fear is not healthy and tends to paralyse us so that we forget that God is the God of our salvation not of our destruction. This provision for the unwitting sinner is one of profound encouragement to go on again with God. Of course we must be careful that our ignorance is not culpable. If it stems from spiritual carelessness we have no excuse. This is why we must constantly bring ourselves under the gracious ministry of the Word and the strengthening worship and life of the fellowship. This is how we walk in the light with God, sensitive to His will and

guidance, and keeping ourselves from what would grieve Him. But, when we have all the benefits of His Word and the guidance and counsel of His Spirit, and still sit lightly to them all, we have no excuse. But remember, He is kind to those who fall.

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### **15:30-36**

We are dealing now with presumptuous sin done in arrogance and with bold defiance. We must be careful here not to fall into the error of passing judgment on God and declaring that He exacts a harsh, unrighteous, sub-Christian penalty on a poor man who does nothing worse than gather a few sticks of firewood on the Sabbath. Keep in mind certain things. The Sabbath commandment is every bit as much part of the moral law as the commandments concerning God's Holy Name, adultery and stealing. The man who would say one of them no longer applies in the Christian era has a colossal case to prove. Remember the need also in all situations to examine our hearts to see whether our sympathies lie with God the Holy One or with man the sinner. Recall the searching indictment in Rom. 1:32 which declares the preferential bias of fallen human nature. Never forget that God considered sin necessitated the death of His own Son to pay its price. Finally remember that in this case the issue is not simply that of breaking God's Law in what appears to be a rather harmless way. This was a people under judgment, rebuke and warning. This was a people being called to radical heart repentance, and this arrogant man quite deliberately bore testimony to the fact that whatever anyone else was going to do he was taking no notice of God. It was a brash, flagrant refusal of a sinner to bow to the rule of God. It was open defiance not of Moses but of Moses' God. Read v.30-31 carefully and you will see that the whole context is that of deliberate disobedience. The man was not just a brazen sinner whose heart was closed to grace and goodness, he was a man who also was a menace to others and likely to lead them away from God. Such a man has no place (cut off) among the people of God. God had spoken and God pronounced the sentence. Dare we say that God was wrong or unrighteous? Pray the prayer of Psalm 19:13.

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### **15:37- 41**

The outer garment of the Jews was a four-cornered cloth which the poor also used as a blanket at night (Ex. 22:26-27). It had a hole in the centre for the head and the tassels were at the four corners (Deut. 22:12). It was one of the tassels which the woman with the issue of blood grasped in the story in Matt. 9:20. In Jesus' day the Pharisees made the tassels extra large because these were the badges or signs of sanctity and separation unto God. Here in Moses' time these tassels were ordained to be some outward sign that would remind the people that they were not their own: they were God's people, marked out for His personal and particular possession (1 Pet. 2:9), and they were called to live lives worthy of His name (Eph. 4:1; Phil. 1:27). It is necessary to remember this, because we forget so soon. In the practical business of life the principles and pressures of the world, the flesh and the Devil operate powerfully upon us and we need to remind ourselves again and again that we are no longer under the jurisdiction of darkness (Col. 1:13). We are under new management in Christ who claims our obedience by right. This is what these Jews were being urged to remember. All the time, even in the days of discipline, rebuke and wandering, they were under the government and care of their God. This brought the challenge of obedience to His commandments but also the comfort of knowing He was in charge and that they were not on their own. They were also told to watch the natural tendency of their hearts to go astray. They must not be complacent in their consecration. They had also to remember the glorious truth of v.41 (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). In the Christian era we do not need the outward "reminders", save that of the Lord's Supper.

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### **16:1-11**

There is nothing new under the sun (Eccles. 1:9). Wherever there is a work of God there will be a work of Satan and its manifestation will have a monotonous sameness. Remember that in all these stories we are dealing with a backslidden people and we must not be surprised by eruptions into open rebellion. What is in the heart can be hidden only for so long and even when it is hidden it is known to God (Heb. 4:13). In the previous chapter we had the incident when one individual flouted his arrogant self-will and was met by God's rebuke (Prov. 29:1

AV). In this incident we have organised rebellion with a disaffected group totalling 250 well-known men. Their tale would be the usual one - "A lot of us are not happy about the way things are going." On the face of it, it was all very democratic, claiming equal rights and privileges but not too concerned about duties, or wanting to put the issue to a vote. The first incident focuses on Korah and the second on Dathan and Abiram (12). There were three grounds of complaint. First they said Moses and Aaron had set themselves up as superior to the rest of Israel (3, 13) and said that they were using the work of God to make a name for themselves. That is a serious and false charge against men appointed by God. They then suggested that Moses and Aaron had unjustly reserved the office of priesthood to themselves denying others their rightful privilege (7-11). This was false, since it was God who regulated service in holy things. Men do not take the jobs themselves, and in the initial stages Moses had been manifestly reluctant (Ex. 4:10-17). The final criticism was that Moses had failed to bring them into the land (14). They forgot the facts recorded in 14:1-10. What would these men have done to the life of Israel if they had not been dealt with?

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### 16:1-11

Korah's challenge was to the spiritual leadership of Moses, in spite of the fact that it was manifest that God was with Moses and was pleased work through him. Of course discontent, which is usually allied to secret heart-backsliding and ambition, refuses to see or to evaluate honestly past leadership and present unction. This is not surprising since the natural human heart resents any discipline or authority. But the source of all this trouble seems to have been envy. Korah was descended from the second son of Kohath, but in 3:30 Elizaphan, descended from the fourth son of Kohath was made prince of the Kohathites. Korah had not got the place he felt he should have had and he was bitter. So were Dathan and Abiram, descendants of Rueben, for their tribe had been displaced by Judah. Previously the firstborn had the office of priest but now that belonged to the Levites, a branch of Moses' own family. These two groups, the Kohathites and the Reubenites, spent a lot of time together because they camped on the same side of the Tabernacle. The scene was set for malcontents with hurt pride to get together and they did, expressing their complaints in the most high-sounding spiritual terms as if they, and they alone, had a genuine concern for the good of the work of God. Moses did two things which marked him out as God's man. He cast the whole matter immediately upon God (4, 16, 28-30) cf, Rom. 12:19. Then he said to them to take the position of priests, to do the work of priests, to stand in the costly loneliness of priests and see if God would accept and vindicate them. By their fruits and by the action of God the issue would be settled.

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### 16:1-11

There is a final lesson here. Moses spoke plainly to these sons of Levi, telling them they had gone too far (7). He used the language the critics addressed to him in v.3. There is good cause to believe that Korah pleaded for the universal priesthood of all the people with the hope that he would be leader among them. Envy and unholy ambition make men desire place and prominence, but the wise man James points out the solemn danger of having responsibility (Jas. 3:1). When Moses warned these men, telling them they had gone beyond what could be tolerated, he was not defending his own position. That did not need defence! He was seeking to warn them that they were straying into realms of spiritual danger. God had blessed them and given them great privilege in spiritual service because they were Levites, They had holy work to do, but they were not content with carrying the Ark of God. They wanted to be higher. Note that it was not the ordinary or common people who rebelled. It was men who had already been given position. Perhaps they claimed they did it for the sake of the people, but many who have begun like that in both secular and spiritual realms alike have proved in the long run to be tyrants not shepherds. There is such a thing as godly ambition, seeking to be the very best we can be for God and for Christ. But we need to remember that it was the bright angel Lucifer who was so enamoured of his position that he envied the very throne of God (Isa. 14:12-14). We must see in this story in Numbers the marks of Satan. It was not the good spirit of God that motivated these men. They had overestimated themselves (cf. Rom. 12:3). The truth was about to be told.

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## 16:12-15

Note how deliberately these two men slandered Moses, his character and his work. It is amazing how some, when they have got on a bit spiritually, forget that but for the work and leadership and patient forbearance of others they would have been nowhere at all. There is sheer perversity in describing Egypt as a land of milk and honey. It may be pressing the verses too far, but it seems that these men challenged Moses' practical leadership, just as Korah challenged his spiritual leadership. Their defiance was no longer private. They made their point by refusing to appear. They were very confident that they were in the right, that the people agreed, and that God would confirm it. This was a costly trial to Moses and he was angry. The wound went deep. Now, anger was a danger area for Moses, and it later cost him dearly (Deut. 32: 48ff.). But here he did the right thing and he did it at once. He took it to the Lord. His words in v.15 are an answer to the slander of v.14b which refers not to a threat of literally putting out the eyes of the men but to a deliberate policy of deception. They accused Moses of hiding from the people that the promises given to them had not been kept, and they further accused him of demanding blind obedience from the people without any reference to God. It was all hellish but God would deal with it.

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## 16:16-27

There is a time to give evil its head and so, by its own working, to expose it for what it is. Moses was burdened but not really in doubt for he recognised the hellish inspiration of what was going on. Korah and his company were called to prove themselves before the Lord. Moses was also deeply grieved, but not angry, when he saw *all* the congregation assembling with these rebellious and presumptuous would-be priests. How sad it is when wolves rise up from within the flock to do Devil's work (John 10:1; Acts 20:28-29). But just as Moses refused to indulge in verbal skirmishes with Korah, so he refused to assail the people with words, whether in rebuke or appeal. He did what the true leader of the flock should always do. He went to God in prayer. No one will know what it meant by way of encouragement that he had Aaron standing firm with him. Moses, like the great Saviour after him, was the intercessor and friend of sinners. It is not easy to pray for those who use you despicably (Matt, 5:44). But note that it was the unmistakable sense of the presence of the Lord (19b) with them that caused them to pray. Moses words seem to suggest that the whole rebellion was in fact inspired by one man, yet in the event others were accounted guilty by association because they had been stirred by the same carnal spirit. The people were warned to separate from the ringleaders. The reference in v.24 may be to a secondary "tabernacle" set up by the dissidents to offer to the people a "more spiritual" gathering or church than that watched over by Moses. In v.25 it seems that Dathan and Abiram stayed in their tents and no doubt loved the publicity and the apparent humbling of Moses who had to come to them. The story develops.

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## 16:28-35

Even the people were beginning to see the real elements of, and significance in, this situation, for they cleared away from the evil men. Nothing deterred, the conceited rebels stood in the doors of their tents, determined to brazen it out. Perhaps by now they were totally blinded and quite sure they were in the right and that God could do nothing other than vindicate them. The climax was calm but dramatic. God removed them out of His sight and out of the sight of the people and away from the work so that they could no longer harm it. It is so simple that it is very solemn. The divine surgery was totally accurate. The evil cancer of pride and ambition was cut out of the life of Israel. No one was left in any doubt. It was clearly God's doing. He showed who were His. "The whole story serves to show how false may be the most apparently popular movements. The voice of the people is by no means always the voice of God .... It is fundamentally true that all men have an equal right to direct dealings with God, and to receive the law of life from Him. But within that law are provisions which give to each man his service, and no man has any right to serve in any way not directly appointed by God. We have no right to choose the place or character of what we shall do." (Morgan) When God gives His work and people a leader, they must be careful not to sit lightly to his leadership. The fact that he is continually answerable to God will make the human leader careful indeed. He must always be able to call people to follow him as he follows Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). If he cannot do that he is on the way out. God will not let His flock stray.

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### 16:36-50

The story is not finished yet. The Devil is nothing if not persistent and people are amazingly stupid and open to deception. Moses gave orders for the bronze censers of the 250 men to be gathered. These seem to have been holy vessels and the fire in them had been taken from the sanctuary, but it had all been an offence to God. The fire was scattered as if to say it had no place in the continuing worship of God, and the metal censers were beaten into covering plates for the brazen altar, thus serving as a permanent reminder of this terrible incident. It should have proved an effective warning sign but it did not. It is scarcely credible that the very next day (41) the people, having got over their immediate fright when the earth opened up, turned against Moses and Aaron. Having heard the voice of God and known His hand in judgment; having been corrected and graciously called back to obedience; having been delivered from danger far greater than they realised, they manifested a perversity and unteachability that staggers. Are we like this? The people show here that they had been more than a little attracted to the idea of escaping from the disciplined leadership that God had set among them. Their sympathies were with the men not with God, because their sympathies were with themselves, and they cried out against Moses, but really against God with the same intensity as their descendants cried, "Away with Him, crucify Him." How this must make us accept the biblical picture of fallen human nature! Only sovereign grace in glorious power can remedy it. Read Rom. 3:9-18; Eph. 2:1-3; Col. 1:21; Jer. 17:9.

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### 16:36-50

Note how quickly the presence of the Lord was made manifest to comfort and encourage Moses and Aaron as well as to protect them. They could well have been shattered by this fierce reappearance of bitter unbelief. Note that the first thing to happen was that the two men were called to the presence of the Lord who wasted no time in signifying that the whole situation was under control. This people was guilty before God. Sin had made its decision and taken its stand and the day of its judgment had come. Yes, it is solemn, but the solemnity cannot shadow the glorious gleam of the gospel that shines here. In the awful predicament of sinners standing under imminent judgment, one man, by the command of God and coming in his representative capacity as High Priest from the presence of God, stood between the dead and the living for salvation. God's representative man made atonement for the people. Do not press the incident too far in application. Not all were saved. Perhaps in being cut off from life some were preserved from going on to live contrary to God and so to store up wrath against themselves in the day of judgment (Rom.2:5-6). Note that the whole movement of salvation is by the initiative of God, coming from the presence of God right into the heart of the desperate but deserved situation of judgment. This is how we see and thrill at John 3:16. God gave His Son that we should not perish.

"He, to rescue me from danger,  
Interposed His precious blood.

"O to grace how great a debtor  
Daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let that grace now, like a fetter,  
Bind my wandering heart to Thee." (Robinson)

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### 17:1-13

This is a complete story, almost self-explanatory, and full of instruction. God's reason for doing this is made plain at the beginning, and the people's reactions are equally plain at the end. They had feelings of awe and apprehension but they seemed astonishingly self-pitying and significantly lacking in any sense of or expression of gratitude for the signal deliverance from judgment they had experienced. Their pessimism and their suspicion of God's intentions, which they had manifested much earlier in Ex. 14:10ff., were answered in Chap. 18. Today's chapter is the final demonstration by God of the appointment and position of the house of Levi, especially Aaron, to holy service. Aaron was by no means perfect, as the story of the golden calf (Ex. 32) and of

the rebellion along with Miriam (Num. 12) makes plain. But this does not affect the issue. God had appointed the man, set him in his place, given him his work to do, and confirmed the fruitfulness of that work in the story of the rod that budded. All the finger-pointing and tongue-wagging in the world did not change this. No one, least of all Aaron, was asked to believe that he was without faults. No one would deny that the man and his faults would be dealt with by God. But the fact remained that Aaron was the Lord's anointed, he had to be recognised as such, and would be both protected and vindicated on that basis (1 Chron. 16:22; Isa. 54:17). If Israel would only accept this, the way ahead would begin to open up with hope and blessing.

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### 17:1-13

The intention of God in this whole incident is expressed in v.5 and v.10. There are many spiritual lessons. God stands by the men He has called to serve Him. He is a faithful God. To His chosen servants whom He has called and trained (think of Moses' long years in Pharaoh's house and in the obscurity of the desert) God gives life-giving unction. By the miraculous working of His power by His Holy Spirit, God gives life where there was no life. It was and is entirely in God's hand. All the men had almond rods but only one brought forth fruit. This is important in Christian service for it will preserve us from indulging in all manner of human ingenuities in order to produce statistics of success. But statistics are not necessarily evidence of spiritual fruit. God grants the fruit (1 Cor. 3:6; 2 Cor. 10:4). Fruit is the test. Never mind people's words nor their claim to inspiration and significance. Where is the fruit? By their fruits those who are of God will be manifest (Matt. 7:15-23). By the grace of their lives men will be seen as men of grace (Gal. 5:22-23). It is not gifts that count but graces. What do some people produce other than words? It is not activities but fruit the Lord looks for. Read John 15:1-6. The only fruit these men of Israel we have been reading about had to show was a constant disturbance of the peace of the people of God and a recurring distraction from holy service. That is never the work of God's good spirit. Of course there is a costly principle which must operate if life and service are to be fruitful. There is a death to die to sin and to self, and a travail to be undergone. Moses knew plenty of both experiences cf. 2 Cor. 4:1-12; Gal. 4:19.

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### 18:1-7

The previous chapter ended with the people dejected and verging on despair, feeling that life with God was going to be precarious indeed. Of course, their thinking was unbalanced, for they conceived of God as the One who simply waited for some fault or sin so that He might judge and punish. This is a lie of the Devil. God corrected their thinking and therefore restored their hope and expectation by affirming His provision for their needs so that they might live and walk in fellowship with Himself. He gave them the priesthood as a gift (7). Neither Aaron, nor his sons, nor the Levites, nor the people had done anything to merit this. It was all of grace and this emphasises the need to preserve the gift and use it aright. This calls for submission and obedience, and the design of God is that He might look on His people with pleasure not anger (5). Some of the fear touching the people's hearts was healthy because it exercised them to be careful to walk in God's will. To enable and encourage them so to walk God provided the priesthood. Aaron and his sons had priestly duties, to enter the presence of God on behalf of the people (1). The Levites were to be servants of the Tabernacle with the restriction of v.3. Aaron and the Levites were set to be servants not only of God and the Tabernacle but of the people, by guarding and maintaining the Godward life of the whole of Israel. The heart of everything is being right with God, and there is no reason why fellowship with God should ever be broken for He has made perfect provision. Read 1 John 1:5-2:1.

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### 18:1-7

Following on from yesterday's comment we begin to see how the focus was significantly on one man, Aaron the High Priest of Israel. The holiest place in the Tabernacle, the very presence of God, was barred to all except one man, and he entered there only once every year and even then not without the blood of atoning sacrifice (Heb. 9:7). Between man and God lies sin, and unless and until sin is dealt with, removed and atoned for, no way to

God is open. God named the sin-bearer who would represent Israel and act on behalf of the people (1). He was *one of themselves*, chosen and appointed by God to bear and to deal with the consequences of sin in the interest of salvation. All this points forward unmistakably to

Jesus Christ, our great High Priest. Read Heb. 4:14-5:4; 7:27; 9:1-14; 10:11-14, 19-22. Only the High Priest could do this work and any other who dared to presume and intrude would pay the price of death. But concentrate on the glorious provision of grace. What a gift this is to sinners! If any man sin, we have an Advocate, a Mediator, an Intercessor perfect in every way, unfailing and unchanging, and He is the gift of God in sheer grace (1 John 2:1-2). His name is Jesus and He shall save His people from their sins.

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### **18:8-20**

This deals with God's provision for the maintenance of the priests. All the devoted things (14) and all the holy offerings (19) brought by the people according to God's instructions and pattern for worship were to belong to Aaron and his house. All this was pledged in a covenant of salt (19) which was an unbreakable and permanent one. God provided all that. Aaron needed but, as all the sacrifices of Israel represent and reveal Christ in some way, we have to see here that in the business of holy service Christ is our total and sufficient provision. He is indeed the bread of life (John 6:48-58). He Himself is salvation, complete and perfect, for service as well as for safety (1 Cor. 1:30). Note that Aaron was to have no set portion of the land as others had. He was denied human and earthly fulfilment so that he might be for God alone. But God is no man's debtor, for in return God pledged Himself to Aaron. In all these details we see how the men called to holy service were provided for and in this way were set free to do their God-appointed work. Within the nation the family of Aaron were not "producers", their work did not contribute to the material well-being of the community, yet there is no doubt at all as to their vital function. Their business was to keep the people in right relationship with God and, of course, when this is allowed to degenerate, as it has done in our day, the whole of society begins to suffer. If only we would learn to make our relationship to and walk with God the heart of our lives, working everything else outward from there, what a difference there would be. Consider Ps. 73:23-28. Was Paul thinking of this passage from Numbers when he wrote Phil. 4:10-13, 19?

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### **18:21-32**

As the priests were supported by the appropriate part of the sacrifices not burned on the altar, the Levites were provided for by the tithes of the people. In general terms this meant the Levites were neither better nor worse off than the people. Passages such as Deut. 14:22-29; 2 Chron. 31:1-21 make fascinating reading. It is by means of this principle of tithing that God provides for His work. When the people of God see the glory of God and the wonder of His salvation and its blessing, they will give from the heart. It is when God is lost sight of that the problems arise and this must be considered deeply by our own denomination, and indeed by all Christian societies, in these days when financial "crisis" is so much in everyone's thoughts. If the level of giving to the Lord was the tithe in these Old Testament days, what should it be now when Christ has come? If 100 families with an average income of £100 per week were to tithe they would provide £1,000 each week for Christian work. Think of the good that could be done throughout the world with that kind of provision. Of course, all this calls for a deep consecration of heart not only in the giving but in the administration, for it is the Lord's provision for the Lord's work and no carelessness, wastefulness or complacency can be countenanced. It is all very practical but not materialistic, for it is centred on God. Some suggest that the provision for the Levites, while sufficient for all their needs, came to them in such a way that there was no possibility of "hoarding". Like the manna, it was day by day provision.

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### **18:21-32**

Read, in conjunction with this, the story of the manna in Exodus 16. It was heavenly and unfailing provision but it called for the obedience of faith day by day. This is how we learn to trust God and to live in constant dependence on Him. The Levites were not allowed to forget this, for they in turn had to give a tithe of the tithe

to the priests. There is no suggestion here of an unjust imposition or a levy exacted simply in terms of law and duty. All of it is related to the sacrifices of the Tabernacle which in their turn pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ. Note in v.29 and 30 that reference is made to the "best" being given to the Lord, and if this is so in the material offerings, how much more should it be so in terms of time, energy, love and enthusiasm. Can it be right to be reading our Bibles and saying our prayers when our eyes will scarcely stay open? Can it be right to bustle on throughout the week so that in God's House we are jaded and unresponsive? This is how we transfer our human discontent into the spiritual realm and we "go off" God's people and His work. This chapter of regulations is a wise, searching and practical one. Of course, it can all become legalistic, materialistic and meaningless, as it did in Jesus' day when the religious leaders became heartless, grasping and hypocritical. Read Matt. 23:1-7,16-24 and compare that with 2 Cor. Chapters 8-9, two chapters that speak of the grace of Christian giving without actually mentioning money. The Lord does indeed love the cheerful (Greek - hilarious) giver (2 Cor, 9:5-8). Besides, it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). But it takes grace to receive humbly and thankfully.

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### 19:1-22

This chapter is best read as a unit. Its three sections are: 1-10, the preparing of the water for impurity (9, 17); then v. 11-13, the way the water is to be used for purification; then 14-22, instances of its use and neglect (20, cf. Heb. 2:3). The whole chapter is obviously about cleanness and uncleanness in the sight of God. It deals therefore with the matter of sin in the lives of God's people. Remember that Israel was to be on the move and at times the camp would not be pitched nor the Tabernacle set up. The ordinary ritual for cleansing would not be operative and this provision was made. It emphasises the need for cleansing, constant cleansing, and the fact that there should be no postponement of the cleansing. The only thing to do with sin is to get it dealt with and washed away as soon as possible. Don't let vain regrets or false humility keep you from the cleansing fountain which God has provided. Go at once to God. Say to Him, "Lord, it is the same sin, and I have done it again." If we confess our sin He is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse us by the blood of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:7; Isa. 1:18). If we see here God's gracious provision for keeping His people in fellowship with Himself and for saving them from the defilement and complication of sin, how much more must we see this in Christ (Heb, 9:7-14). If we were not so slow in getting the business of daily sin dealt with we would be much more free and available for service. What a waste it is to brood over sin when it can be put away for ever! Of course the sacrifice here tells us it is a costly business and the detail tells us that sin can bring many complications. When will we learn?

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### 19:1-22

The Old Testament sacrifices all point to Christ. They were repeated year after year because they were a temporary institution, an interim provision to deal with sin and accepted by God as valid *for the time being* on the basis of Christ's coming and death (Rom. 3:21-26), Much of the uncleanness in this chapter has to do with contact with dead bodies, and this may refer to contact with sin (the sting of death is sin 1 Cor. 15:56) or contact with the present evil world (1 John 2:15-16; 5:19) which, if indulged will leave a mark on the believer's life and produce a deadness in his spirit. The chapter takes sin seriously because of what it is and what it does and we do well to have the same attitude. Sin is like a tiny but powerful virus. Give it a chance and it will work death (Jas. 1:15). The emphasis in the chapter does not seem to be on basic atonement for sin which was carried out on the specific day of each year, but on repeated cleansing in the business of daily life, as spoken of by Jesus in John 13:5-10. In Christ our sins are all forgiven but we are still in the world and get stained. There may be a suggestion in v.12 in the two stages of cleansing that an awakened, convicted soul is not easily set at rest. Cleansing may be instantaneous but restoration of peace of mind and heart may take time. The agents of cleansing are the ashes of the sacrifice and living water. The sacrifice is Christ, the living water signifies both the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39) and the Living Word (Eph. 5:26). The Spirit uses the Word to convict of sin and

to lead to Jesus' blood. The cleansed heart hungers for the Word which feeds and washes and all the while draws us nearer God. This is cleansing and salvation indeed.

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### 20:1-6

We must try to identify the time and place of this happening. In Heb 3:7-11, quoted from Ps. 95:7-11, the words "rebellion" and "testing" are translations of the Hebrew names Meribah and Massah, and refer to the incident in Exodus 17:1-7 and the one in today's verses. Between these two incidents lay virtually forty years of Israel's story and we have thus testimony to the fact that the hardness of heart of the people persisted right through their years of journeyings. They put God to the test as if to see how far they could go without being finally cast off.

We are dealing then with a people who had been disciplined for forty years and they were now once again at Kadesh, the place of the spies (Num. 13:26) where their wilderness journeyings had begun. In the providence of God they were brought back to the place where they had first gone astray by refusing the will of God. What had been their experience in these long years? It was grace in the midst of judgment, for God would not give them up as a people. Read Nehemiah 9:13-21 and see how the people of Israel were always made to recall the amazing story of God's dealings with them. All their past deliverances, all their present possessions and all their future hope was theirs by the grace of God. But God's goodness had not won their hearts, only subdued them, and here the new generation just like the old one, erupted in the bitterness of unbelief because some immediate difficulty had presented itself. They cared nothing for Moses' recent bereavement. They seem to have been still smarting under the sharp Judgment of Korah (16:31ff). Without doubt, difficulty exposes what we really are.

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### 20:7-13

This was a crisis day for Moses. The story of the miraculous provision of water from the rock is a thrilling one, as is Paul's reference to it in 1 Cor. 10:1-12. But the significance of the passage is deeper than the miracle of God's gracious provision for a bitter and undeserving people. We are shown here the evil result of Israel's sin. It broke Moses, God's man. He went right to God in prayer (6). He was not only hurt, he was deeply angry, and when he returned from the Lord to speak to the people his anger was still burning in his heart, not simply because the people were so faithless and graceless, but because of their bitter blaming of him personally for all their troubles. Psalms 78 and 106 give a vivid picture of the long story of Israel's perversity and Ps 106:32-33 tells of Moses cracking under the strain. This was without doubt a work of Satan because if Moses had gone into the land the story might have been different. On the other hand the people might have become too dependent on Moses. The man was not perfect but there was no question as to his greatness and that included his meekness (12:3). As a God given leader he had been a blessing and benediction to the people and the work. But he broke, as many a man of God has broken, not as result of evil men's working but as the result of the pressures of his own people who had crushed him (Amos 2:11-12). Think of how our Lord's closest friends failed him in Gethsemane. They could not do the work, for it was His alone to do, but they could have strengthened Him. Instead they fell asleep, and *He* watched over *them*.

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### 20:7-13

God made two comments on Moses' and Aaron's sin (12, 24) defining it as unbelief and rebellion. In Num. 27:14 it is spoken of as rebellion against God's word. In v.10-11 of this passage the narrative suggests various elements. Moses was angry, he had lost patience, he went beyond his instructions in striking the rock twice, just as we do things extravagantly when we are not in agreement with either the action or the objective. He let fly with his tongue, calling them rebels, as God later called Moses a rebel. If we feel Moses got harsher treatment than the people, we need to remember two things. We are not allowed to sit in judgement on God. We must also recognise that spiritual stature and position involve higher standards. They do not bring concessions. Much is required of those who are given much (Luke 12:48). Moses presumed in passing judgement on the people, gave the impression *he* was giving the water, and in so doing hinted strongly that it was with grudge and anger that

God was blessing them. In this way Moses and Aaron failed to sanctify (RSV) God in the eyes of the people (12). They obscured the fact of His glorious grace. Moses spoke unadvisedly (Ps. 106: 33), cf. James 1:19-20; 3:2, 5-12. Two final lessons are taught by Moses' experience. The first concerns the danger of old sins. When Moses was only forty, this same impetuous, angry reaction caused him to kill an Egyptian and that led to forty years in the wilderness (Ex 2:11ff; Acts 7:23-30). Now the same thing brought him down again, in the area of meekness where he was strongest (12: 3). The second lesson concerns the danger of an uncrucified heart. The time and circumstances come when it blazes out in natural reaction and resentment and God's work is done in the wrong way and with sad results. There is a death to die to self that is the heart of all holy service.

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### **20:14-21**

As the children of Israel prepared to move forward they met the first token of the powers of the world that would oppose them in all their ways. It was not going to be easy. This is something we forget in our enthusiasm when God calls us to holy service. This is what demoralises young ministers and missionaries when, eager to do a spiritual work, they are met with dogged resistance and reluctance that will not yield to the most polite and gracious entreaty. At first Edom was simply non-cooperative but then they became very warlike with a show of strength that was impressive. If it was like this in the initial stages of the forward movement of the work, what could be expected later? This was a salutary lesson that would serve to drive the people of Israel back to their God. If there was to be a future they would have to be right with Him. But note that Moses did not force the issue with Edom (descendants of Esau). There is a time to submit even when those who oppose are manifestly not of God, not in the right, and totally lacking in grace. Moses appealed to Edom on the basis that, in spite of all their costly experiences which may well have been known publicly among the nations, the fact was that God's hand was still significantly upon them. But Edom refused, and this refusal is spoken of in many places through the Old Testament. God did not forget. The short prophecy of Obadiah reminds Edom of how he always "stood aloof" refusing to associate with God's people and being positively difficult. In time Edom's downfall came. God is not mocked.

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### **20:22-29**

Grasp the tremendous human feeling that runs right through this chapter and have great respect and love for God's servants. The chapter began with Moses losing his sister. Did that secret sorrow have some bearing on his angry outburst? After his rebuke by God did Moses wonder if his impetuous nature had had anything to do with Miriam's sin in 12:1ff? Now Aaron's time had come and Moses, humanly speaking, was to be left alone. Did Moses feel he had led Aaron into the recent sin? After all, his brother had always been an impressionable, easily led man. Never forget that all God's great men were truly human, men of like passions, feelings and fears as ourselves (Jas. 5:17). Was Moses wistfully aware that his long cherished hope of entering Canaan was not to be fulfilled? It is not easy to live with your failures, but here Moses was still God's man, still carrying out instructions, still leading the work forward. There was still a lot to do and he was not falling into the trap of allowing the work to suffer just because he himself was disappointed. But there is wonderful grace here also. The emphasis is not so much on Aaron's being taken away as God's providing that Israel, including Moses, would not be without a High Priest. Men might have failed but God would not fail. Aaron might be gone but God's gracious presence for the salvation and blessing of His people would never be withdrawn. It was right that Israel mourned appropriately but not excessively, because a good man and a faithful priest rested from his labours. But when the mourning ended, then the presence of Eleazar in the High Priest's garments of glory would confirm the gospel promise, "Lo, I am with you always."

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### **21:1-3**

Some commentators say that v.1 refers to the time of the spying out of the land (14:45) and v.2-3 to the time 38 years later when Israel was ready to move into Canaan. It seems best to view the verses as referring to the new advance into the Promised Land and following on from the story of Edom in the previous chapter. The news

would have got around that the great company of Israel was on the move and this alone teaches us a lesson. What is going on among the people of God in any given place is watched, spoken about and reacted to, and we are foolish if we do not take account of this. Israel seems to have been taken by surprise and defeated in the first skirmish for the initiative was with the enemy. This brought them to their senses so that they recognised the reality of spiritual warfare. In the encounter with Edom (20:17-21) they had asked simply for non-retaliation or neutrality, not co-operation, and when it was refused Israel took another route. But there comes a time when head-on conflict cannot be avoided. The Canaanites viewed with considerable resentment the advance of this people of God and it became evident that every step would be contested. One sharp lesson drove this home to the hearts of Israel and the vow of v.2 was made. There was to be no uncertainty. Anything and everything that was contrary to and stood against the will of God was to be destroyed, that is handed over to God for judgment. It would be well for us if we had the same radical attitude to the things, powers, persons and activities in our own lives that hinder the full flowering of God's will in us, for us and through us. We need to consider well such scriptures as Eph. 6:10ff; 1John 5:19; Jas. 4:4; and 2Cor. 10:3-5.

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### 21:4-9

The great technique of the Devil is to distract us from God, and he sometimes achieves this by making a spurious appeal to our spiritual sensitivities. If the previous verses indicate that the people had grasped the reality of spiritual warfare, and that God could and would give them the victory, you can understand how they got discouraged. They became impatient because there was not more to show of victory after their radical dedication. They knew they were God's people. It had taken them years to grasp that God had a future for them. They had been casual, to say the least of it, in their dedication thus far, but now that they were of a different and better mind they wanted everything to go quickly, successfully and satisfyingly. But they were aware of the alien atmosphere and attitude of the powers of the world. The road ahead was obviously going to be long and costly. They knew they could not go back but the future was not yet theirs, and their faith failed. Here is where we see that the years of wandering in the wilderness had left their mark. Instead of holding on in faith to see what God was in fact doing with them, they reacted. Their emotions rather than their thinking became dominant and they spat out their bitterness against God, and because Moses was more visible and accessible, they lashed out at him. Had they expected the kingdom to be handed to them on a plate? Did they think they were ready for the spiritual administration of Canaan? When a new stage of the work starts we need to guard our souls. Let it be said again and again, "There is a Devil; watch and pray that you do not enter into temptation." Over-confidence is not only dangerous, it is sin.

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### 21:4-9

One of the significant elements in the story of Israel is the repeated outbursts of unbelief and bitter criticism. Moses must have wearied of them and wondered if this people would ever be a spiritually-minded people able and willing to recognise that they were involved in the significant strategy of God for the world's salvation. It is only when self-looms larger than the needs of the world or God Himself, or both, that this kind of contempt and cynicism erupts. Note how they scorned the miserable food (5) of spiritual provision that had kept them healthy for years. Denigration of past blessing turns swiftly to contempt of present blessing, and it is a token of the spiritual backsliding of the critics not a proof of the dereliction of the work or its leader. Note how the focus of the discontent was on the level of natural appetites and inclinations. This is a great test of our spiritual maturity. If "satisfaction" is the criterion, we will always be brittle and unpredictable. But if service is our deep desire then difficulties will have a very different effect. The great missionary apostle spoke of open doors of opportunity together with many adversaries and this gave both conviction and encouragement to stay there and get on with the work (1 Cor. 16: 8,9). Two lessons are here. The first is that there will always be such troubles and conflicts as these. Jesus said it in John 16:33 and Paul said it in Acts 14:21, 22. We must not be surprised when it comes (1 Pet. 4:12ff). It is to be expected. The other lesson is that on every occasion of such Satanic attacks Moses got down to the business of prayer. Lord, teach *us* to pray.

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### **21:4-9**

The four elements in this passage are sin, judgment, intercession and mercy. With all the reference to serpents (snakes) it is almost impossible not to think of that old serpent the Devil (Rev. 12:9; Gen. 3:1, 13), and the disastrous consequences he brings to the human situation. Israel had listened to the serpent, were bitten by the serpent, and were dying as a result. This incident is taken by our Lord in John 3:14-17 to highlight the salvation that God provides for sinners. Both the judgment on sin and the saving answer to it proceed sovereignly from God alone. God set the way of salvation. There was only one way. The people were told and those who believed and looked in faith, trusting the message and promise of God, were healed and saved. The bronze serpent was lifted up publicly in the sight of all, just as Christ was lifted up on the Cross. "As the serpent, lifted up on the pole, was an image of the very thing which had poisoned the Israelites, even so Christ- had in Himself no sin, and yet was made and crucified in the likeness of sinful flesh', and counted sin (Rom. 8:3). The brazen serpent was a serpent without poison, and Christ was a man without sin. The thing which we should specially see in Christ crucified is our sin laid upon Him, and Him counted as a sinner, and punished as a sinner, for our redemption. In fact, we see on the cross our sins punished, crucified, borne and carried by our Redeemer." (Ryle on John 3:14). The whole incident should have had a powerful impact on Israel. They had learned the judgment of sin, the need for repentance, and God's mighty saving answer. There is no other answer to sin. Look unto Me and be saved is always the gospel (Isa. 45:22 AV).

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### **21:10-20**

What glorious contrasts there are in the story of God's people and how full of lessons they are for us in our day. In the previous verses a people disaffected from God, carping and critical in self-centredness, ended up in bitter weeping and needed the strong discipline of God to bring them to repentance. Here the same people, walking with God in obedience to His will, going forward in spite of wilderness difficulties and dangers, find their hearts so filled with gladness that they sing with joy. They had not yet got rid of their enemies but they sang, for the Lord had prepared for them a table in the presence of their enemies (Ps. 23). What a blessed relief and release it is to get back to the Lord from the futility of backsliding and discontent! You begin to discover again the fountain of life and to express praise in terms of Isaiah 12:1-6. To know that God is with you and that you are with God is life and peace indeed. How sad it is that we should ever introduce bitterness to the wells of salvation experience. Part of the rejoicing here is that God was doing for His people now what He had done for previous generations. He was the same unchanging God. In v.14 the A.V. reads, "'The book of the wars of the Lord, what He did in the Red Sea..." It is a reminder that God is the God of salvation and that His salvation is the great divide between our past and our future. Emphasise the future rather than the present because we are going on with God. We are not standing still, and when Israel got to Pisgah (20) they had reached a vantage point from which they could see the Promised Land.

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### **21:21-35**

We commented in the note for 21:1-3 that the news does get around that a work of God has begun and is advancing. It does not need advertising for it speaks for itself. This does not mean that people will always recognise the work, appreciate its significance or accept its gracious challenge and opportunity. What we see here is that no matter how graciously and diplomatically some people are approached they will instantly take an attitude of resistance and rejection. We saw in 20:14-22 an example of "turning the other cheek", for Israel bypassed the trouble. But here (as in 21:1-3) the conflict was faced and the enemy dealt with. If we are tempted to wonder about the radical warfare and total destruction, and to think that perhaps a less severe settling of differences would have sufficed, we need to remember what in fact is going on here. In material, physical, international and territorial terms we are being told of the essential conflict between good and evil, between God and the Devil, in the world. We have not begun to face up to the facts of life and this is one reason why we are so lax and uncertain about taking our stand on moral and spiritual issues. We are commanded in the New

Testament (Rom, 12:1-2) not to be schemed together with the world for the simple reason that the "world" is not of God (1 John 2:16; Jas. 4:4), We could liken these armies of attack on the people of God to those things, people and temptations that wage war against our souls (1 Pet. 2:11). It will make all the difference to us in practical terms when we recognise that we are waging elemental battle against the personal powers of evil (Eph, 6:10ff), and it will help us to be more patient with people who oppose the work when we see them as dupes of the Devil. It will not make us weak and, when necessary for the gospel's sake, we will withstand to their faces even people we love dearly (Gal. 2:11).

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## 21:21-35

Try to see clearly that as God goes marching on there are three aspects of truth that we must grasp. Whatever the immediate circumstances, we are always dealing with the irresistible advance and establishment of the work of God (Eph. 1:10-11; Matt, 16:18). This involves the inevitable bringing to judgment in history of the whole structure, inspiration and expression of the kingdom of evil. If you have doubts about the depth and intensity of evil in its anti-God disposition, read Rev. 9:20-21. In the most terrible moments of judgment there is neither repentance nor regret, but only resentment. When we come to the word "thus" (so) in v.31 we see the third lesson. The work of God advances by way of conflict, whether corporately or individually. And, as we shall see in the following story of Balaam, it is in this context that men are revealed for what they are in themselves and evaluated in terms of their contribution to or blight upon the work of God. Note in the last verses of today's passage that it was once again the evil men who insisted that there would be confrontation and conflict. Think what peaceful development there could have been but for this intense spirit of resistance, Note also how in this context God commanded the people not to fear evil (34). This is very important and we must never forget it. Evil is conquered. That is the glory of the gospel (Col.2:15). However it may manifest itself, and its range of operation is amazingly wide, the fact remains that evil is not free; it does not have the initiative; its time is limited and even its fiercest threshings are conscripted by sovereign, saving power to serve the will of God. Remember also that when God is bringing sin to judgment He is no respecter of persons and the sins of His people are brought under rebuke as well as the sins of the nations. Indeed, judgment begins at the House of God (1 Pet. 4:17), a solemn thought that provides a key to the understanding of experience.

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## 22:1-6

The story of Balaam is complex and the person and character of the man are difficult to assess. "The object of the narrative is to illustrate the important thought, 'If God be for us who can be against us?' Jehovah holds Israel under His protection and therefore provides that they shall receive a blessing and not a curse. Pharaoh's obstinacy in opposing Jehovah in Egypt is paralleled, at the end of the journeys, by the obstinacy of Balak, and the result is that the divine curse falls on Moab (24:17) among other foes of Israel. ... Balak, king of Moab being frightened by the near proximity of the Israelites, sent for Balaam, a famous soothsayer, to curse them, offering him liberal payment. Balaam came but refused to utter any oracle but that which Jehovah had revealed to him." (McNeill) In today's introductory verses it is interesting to note how fear played such a part in the thinking of Moab (3). It was unnecessary fear for it was no part of God's plan to harm them, as Dent. 2:9 makes plain. We have to see then a stratagem of the Devil seeking to introduce confusion into the divine situation and to do so on what seemed to be a "spiritual" level, for Balaam was recognised as a man who had clear and dynamic relations with God. He was a man with a reputation. He is called a "soothsayer" in Joshua 13:22 AV, a man who both predicts and influences the future. There is a mystery about Balaam as there is about many people who deal with spiritual things. Was this man a true or a false prophet? Is it right to call him a prophet since he was outside Israel? We must be careful, for God fulfil Himself in many ways and He is not the exclusive property of any group or nation. Remember Jesus' words to His over-confident disciples (Mk. 9:38-40). More of this tomorrow.

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## 22:1-6

When a man like this appears on the scene and becomes involved in the work of the people of God; when little that is specific is known about him; and when he seems at first sight to speak of God with some knowledge and experience, there is only one thing to do. We must wait to see what influence that man is going to have on the already established and significantly advancing work of God. Remember that the work under Moses had progressed by the command and enabling of God over a long spell. It was a work with identity, direction, dynamic, and there was no reason to believe that suddenly, without intimation or indication, God would change both the character and the leadership of the work. Neither Balak king of Moab nor Balaam his collaborator had any entitlement to influence this work, and God, the Lord Almighty, unseen but by no means absent, was the One who set Himself to frustrate the evil designs of these men. Considered this way, the story of Balaam is one concerning spiritual warfare as the work of God begins to move forward after a spell of barren failure. The enemy had already tried to stop the work by frontal attack and had failed, so now Moab sought, by the inspiration of the great Adversary, the Devil, to bring a curse on Israel. The instrument to be used was Balaam, a man whose greedy ambition for money, fame and position made him accessible for such a scheme (2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11). As we go through the story keep in mind that the technique of Satan is consistent and he is always saying (as Moab said in v.17), "All this will I give you if you will co-operate with me," Read Luke 4: 1-13.

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## 22:7-14

Do these verses confirm that Balaam was a true prophet of God, waiting on God for every commission? If so we must admire and learn from his open converse with and obedience to God. We may rightly wonder why Balaam listened in the first place to the messengers who were so manifestly instruments of criticism of the work of God. Did the "prophet" need to seek guidance as to what he should do, especially if he knew anything at all about the story of Israel's advance? If he knew nothing about it he should have been all the more careful and was most unwise in giving Moab's messengers any reason to believe that God had sympathy with them. Of course, the king of Moab knew Balaam well enough to know the best way of cultivating favourable response, and "fees" (7) come in different currencies! Without reading too much into the story, note that in v.9 it does not say that Balaam sought the face of God but that God took the initiative and came to Balaam with pertinent questions. God is always well informed, there are no secrets hid from Him (Ps. 44:21; Rom. 2:16; Heb. 4:13), and that should be our comfort in every situation, especially when it seems that He is doing nothing to stem the activities of men with evil intentions. The wisdom of God's ways is often beyond us but we must remember that the covenant of God is unchangeable. However much He may discipline His people they *are* His people, destined for blessing, and nothing can change that (Rom, 11:29). The statement God made in v.12 is conclusive and determines the course of the whole story. What men and devils do is contained and restricted within the Divine intention.

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## 22:15-20

One of the lessons of experience under the providence of God is that sooner or later as the story develops men are revealed for what they really are. Balak was persistent (15) for he was motivated by a contemptuous spirit that refused to see that the work of Israel was the work of God (6). He did not threaten Balaam, but appealed to that part of his nature which was vulnerable (16-17). This is confirmed in 2 Pet. 2:15 and Jude 11. Rev. 2:14 seems to suggest Balaam was not too fussy about scruples. It is to Balaam's credit that, in spite of the impressive deputation of honourable men carrying with them the promises of a king, he refused their enticements. Of course, knowing the ending of the story, we may be tempted to place verses 18 and 19 over against each other and suggest that Balaam was manipulating the situation either to get a bigger price from the king by being reluctant or by seeking to bring pressure to bear upon God to give consent to what was the real desire of his heart. If we are honest enough to recognise that we are often guilty of "double-think" we will see the profound danger that is being pointed out to us here. In v.18 we have the man's official attitude. This is his theological position and it is indeed sound. But his heart, and the decisions proceeding from it, is not where his

theology is, for we find him in the next verse praying for guidance when the will of the Lord has already been declared. But Balaam had not accepted the will of God in this matter. He meant to be true to God but on the basis that he was a man who had had many dealings with God he tried to take liberties with Him and to seek divine approval for something he was already committed to do.

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## 22:15-20

Balaam was a man whose words were right but whose heart was wrong. His heart was divided and consequently he was unstable (Jas. 1:8). He was determined to get the best of both worlds, holding fast to God and keeping the favour of ungodly, unbelieving men at the same time. But, as Jesus said, you cannot serve God and Mammon (Matt. 6:22-24). You have to choose. Balaam began with a declaration of uncompromising loyalty to God but this had to be reconciled with the course of action he was secretly committed to and for which he sought God's blessing. It is like starting a romance, organising a meeting or setting in motion a great campaign, and then praying for guidance and crying for blessing. Far too often we act first and *then* say in such spiritual language that we are praying about it. Note very carefully what happened to Balaam. God answered the man's heart desire *not* his verbal prayers. Officially what he wanted was God's will but in fact he wanted his own will. Now, since he was set on going a certain way, God not only gave permission, He commanded the man to go. Balaam went without reluctance, blinded by self-deception and insensitive to the complications he was about to introduce into his own experience and the dangers he was going to bring upon the people and the work of God. The frightening thing about being out of touch with God is that spiritual blindness comes upon us. It is only in God's light that we can see light (Ps. 36: 9). How tragic to go forward quite unaware of the fact that the Lord is no longer with you. That was the fruit of Samson's carnal and fleshly indulgence (Judges 16:20). Balaam was now set on a course of action in which he would be compelled to live with the fruit of his own choices.

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## 22:21-30

Balaam set off on the way he really wanted, apparently blissfully unaware of his danger. Perhaps he would say as we often say, "If this is not God's will He will stop me." But if we will not listen to God when He speaks in His words God must then speak to us in His actions and we now begin the story of how Balaam was to experience complication, hurt and public ridicule. He was out of God's will but God had not forsaken him. God met him as an adversary and withstood him in order to rebuke him so that there might be repentance of heart. Almost at once Balaam should have been asking why circumstances were proving so difficult, but no such questioning is apparent. God found it easier to open the mouth of an ass than the eyes of the blind prophet. Certainly the despised animal was more perceptive of spiritual fact than the man. Balaam's condition is very alarming. He is the kind of man who can listen to sermons and tell whether the preacher is "sound" or not but who never hears the voice of God to his soul. That kind of man becomes "gospel hardened" as he sits under spiritual ministry, for the Word is not being received in faith (Heb. 4:2). Note how, all unknown to Balaam, God was hemming him in. The man never thought that God was in this situation. To him it was all just animal perversity and stupidity. Balaam got more and more angry as his dignity was offended by this apparently inexplicable behaviour of a beast that was normally docile, obedient, and easy to handle. God startled this man three times in quick succession but Balaam never thought the fault lay in himself, and that the interpretation of events lay in his relationship with God.

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## 22:31-35

It is a frightening thing indeed to have your eyes opened and to discover that you have God as your adversary. It is disturbing to realise that God looks on your heart (1 Sam. 16:7) and knows your inmost thoughts (Ps. 139:2, 23). The truth about Balaam is that he was quite prepared to pronounce a curse on a people marked out for blessing by God and to do so for no other reason than personal advancement. All this Balaam had in his heart while he maintained an outward appearance of impeccable consecration to God. His life was a lie. In his actions he was lying to God, just as Ananias and Sapphira did in Acts 5:1ff. In their case the judgment was swift and

total. In Balaam's case God dealt somewhat differently, but in both cases God demonstrated the truth of His promise in Isa. 54:17: no weapon against God's holy people can prosper for long and every tongue that speaks falsely will be brought to condemnation. The fact is that the Lord is against those who do evil (1 Pet. 3:12), not just in remote, theoretical disapproval but in active resistance. Balaam was shaken deeply but that is not the same as repentance. His refusal of responsibility and his persistence in his own secret attitude is seen in the words "if you are displeased" in v.34. Balaam was really saying to God, "If what I am planning is wrong, force me to go back." This foolish prophet still hesitated to do what was clearly right and God simply sent him on his chosen way with the solemn warning in v.35 that however free he might feel himself to be he was under restraint in what he spoke. When you think of the spiritual rightness attributed to the ass, you cannot help thinking of Paul's words about being fools for Christ's sake (1 Cor. 4:10). The wise are sometimes not very wise in things that really matter (1. Cor. 1:18-29).

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## **22:36-41**

Balaam was compelled by God to go on his chosen course and to learn by experience the folly of his ways. For some, this may take a long time and it may be very painful. God was still with Balaam but not for his blessing nor even necessarily for his restoration. Why do we always assume that backsliders will be restored? Does the fact that they do not return signify that they were never the Lord's in the first place? These questions must not be given an easy or a harsh answer but the warning passages of the Epistle to the Hebrews must be reckoned with (Heb. 10:26-39). Already in today's passage Balaam began to sense the costliness of being perverse before God. The king of Moab was scarcely polite and made it plain that he regarded Balaam simply as someone who could be of use to him. There is a suggestion here that Moab would cast off Balaam as soon as he had served his purpose, just as Satan cast off Judas and left him with the ghastly darkness of betrayal (Matt. 27:3-5). Balaam in turn seemed more than a little annoyed in v.38 for he did not care to be treated like this. After all he was a man of some reputation in relation to the things of God and should be accorded some honour. At the same time Balaam knew that God was angry with him and had hemmed him in such a way that he could not speak what God had ordained. Poor pathetic Balaam was beginning to feel he had lost both worlds. He was not in favour with God, and Moab regarded him as just a convenient tool. Perhaps it was at this point that Balaam began to harbour a grudge against God that caused him in the end to use deceit to lead God's people astray. Hell has no fury like a false prophet exposed.

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## **23:1-12**

Here is the first of four oracles or utterances made by Balaam under the constraint of the Spirit of God. In some ways the first few verses tell of a charade. Balaam went through all the actions of a mighty man of God seeking the face of God for guidance, while all the time he knew he was not right with God. Perhaps in v.5 Balaam was trying to keep

himself in the right, by insisting that the sacrifices were the king's and not his, but of course, the backslidden prophet was well and truly involved since both men were sharing in this religious performance of plurality of altars. But even a sevenfold sacrifice will not propitiate God when a man is going contrary to His will. To obey is better than sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22). Why Balaam went to a solitary place is not clear (3) unless he wanted his dealings with God to be private, for obvious reasons. But there was to be no private answer. What God had to say was to be shouted from the housetops, or at least in the hearing of the king of Moab and his court. This is something Jesus spoke about in Luke 12:3. How much safer it is to walk out in the open with God (1 John 1:7) than to creep about in shadowy secrecy with too much to hide. To be open faced with God is liberty indeed (2 Cor. 3:18). The king of Moab was astounded by the turn of events as indeed Balaam was, for he spoke in a state of ecstasy. God put His words in the man's mouth by the Holy Spirit and, whether he wanted to or not, he said exactly what God ordained he should say. Apart from anything else, Balak was exposed for what he was, a man intent on cursing the people of God. He had challenged God and he lost.

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### **23:1-12**

The fact that Balaam spoke by direct inspiration of the Spirit does not make him a holy man nor does it in any sense make him out to be not as bad as we have suggested. Think of the story in 1 Sam. 19:18-24 where the Spirit of God came mightily on Saul and his servants who were positively antagonistic to God's will. The mere fact of ecstatic, inspired or prophetic utterance does not in itself signify particular spirituality. We are to put the spirits to the test (1 John 4:1), for there are seducing spirits (1 Tim 4:1) just as there are false prophets. But even when the Spirit is the good and mighty Spirit of God, it does not follow that the men who speak are God's good servants. It simply signifies that all men and all demons and the Devil himself are compelled to serve the purpose of the Almighty God of salvation. Both Jesus and Paul refused the testimony of demons even when they spoke the truth (Acts 16: 17-18). In our story here Balaam may well have been staggered when he realised the vast content and significance of the message he had spoken by the Spirit in God-given words. It is indeed a tremendous utterance. It exposes evil for what it is (7). Those who do wrong cannot hide from God. The message goes on to declare the impossibility of cursing a people who are called out by God to be a people apart, a people for God's own personal possession (1 Pet. 2:9-10). Whether looking from the top of the mountain and actually seeing part of the camp of Israel or seeing it in a vision, Balaam grasped something of the vast expanse of the plan and purpose of God, and in v.10b he seemed to cry out, "Oh for a place and an abiding share in that work." Balaam could have had that but for the fact that he chose to sit on the fringe of things and go his self-indulgent way.

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### **23:13-26**

Here we have the same preparation, the same determination and the same over-ruling from God until Balak (25) wanted Balaam to be silent and neutral. This, of course, could not be, for God was urging on the whole situation to serve His purpose. It was out of the hands of man altogether and Balaam had to go through with it, no doubt wishing he had never got involved with Moab for the fees he was getting were being hard earned. The wages of sin are high indeed, and it is time we were all learning not to get involved in things and situations and with people that are not right with God. We do not need a detailed exposition of each glorious verse of this second oracle. Its message is clear. This was a God-made, God-held, God-governed and God-guided people. Their God was with them and He who had done mighty things for them in the past would do so in the future. They must prevail and neither men nor devils could prevent it. They were a people who might be opposed, might be made to suffer, and be disciplined by their God, but they could not be cursed nor would they be forsaken by the God who had pledged Himself to them in holy covenant. This is always the confidence of the people of God. The God of their salvation, who began the good work in them, would bring it to completion (Phil. 1:6). Since God is for us, what does it matter who is against us (Rom, 8:31)? God alone the one who opens and shuts doors (Rev.3:7). Read 2 Sam, 23:5 and Gen. 28:15. Think of Luther's great hymn, "A safe stronghold our God is still." He speaks of a world seething with devils, yet declares they cannot harm us for the Word of the Lord will scatter and slay them (2 Thess. 2:8). Our God is a God to be trusted and we are a people kept by His power (1 Pet, 1:5).

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### **23:27-24:11**

The blind arrogance of unbelieving, wicked men is something to be wondered at. For the third time Balak set his scheme in motion in the hope that God would fall in with his desires (23:27). It is difficult to decide if the king of Moab really believed that it was God who was frustrating him (what kind of God did he believe in?) or that it was simply Balaam being perverse or incompetent. Some people just cannot get God into their thinking. Everything is reduced to mere human factors. Balaam, on the other hand, was now more consciously and specifically aware of God (24:1), and instead of seeking guidance he went to have a look at the actual encampment of Israel. What he saw of the ordered encampment of the tribes moved him deeply, and the Spirit of God, who had so moved him, came upon him mightily as at other times. Again we emphasise that this does not make Balaam a "spiritual" man even though what he spoke was glorious spiritual truth. Think of another bad man, Caiaphas, who spoke truth by the Spirit of God (John 11:49-53). Balaam's words here should convict

us that we tend to have far too narrow and impoverished ideas about the holy work of God. Granted it does not yet appear what we shall be (1 John 3:2) but by faith we should be beginning to see the lineaments of glory in what God is doing before our eyes. We are all far too conditioned by immediate statistics and evidences. We must learn to look at the present situation as if it was a signpost and so be directed to look at the things which are unseen and eternal (2 Cor. 4:16-18; Heb. 11:27). This is what the great prophets of hope did for the people when they needed encouragement (Haggai 2:1-9; Zech. 2:4, 5, 8).

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### **23:27- 24:11**

Having described the people and work of God in glowing terms in respect of its present state and its future prospect, Balaam finally gave a profound spiritual assessment of the significance of the presence of such a work in the world of men (9b). The outworking of the purposes of God will be to some a blessing unto salvation and to others a token that will seal them unto judgment (2 Cor. 2:15-16). Right from the first contact with the things of God some will begin to manifest signs of reprobation. At the same time, those who do right, by God's word, work, and people will be blessed in their blessing, even though they may not all come to salvation. Think of how society and life would degenerate and decay if there were no Christians or Christian works and influence. This, in fact, is the situation in our own day, as a new generation grows up knowing little or nothing about God. There is another deep lesson which the king of Moab was in the process of learning. Every voice, hand or will that is raised to fight against the work of God will be brought low. This is the confidence of the throne of God (Ps. 2:1-11; Heb. 10:13) and it must be ours also. At the same time we must not fail to note the persistence of evil and its contemptuous slander against God Himself (11b). This is the constant lie of the Devil. He always says that God's laws and God's will deny men their rightful fulfilment and reduce their lives to narrow frustration and devaluation. This is not so. It is the way of transgression that is hard (Prov. 13:15AV), while the way of the godly man flourishes (Ps. 1). How wonderful it is to realise that God's will is not only good and perfect but totally acceptable (Rom. 12:1- 2AV).

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### **24: 12-25**

The opening verses here make it clear that Balaam was capable of plain speaking when he was roused, and he answered Balak in no uncertain terms. His motivation may well have been angry resentment rather than moral and spiritual righteousness, but still he spoke truth concerning the final victory of the people of God. Balaam spoke a torrent of spiritual truth and he described himself (15-17a.) as a man who had met God and heard His word. This is true, but while Balaam had been subdued and his plans to curse Israel circumvented, the man himself had not yielded in faith and submission to God. The next stage of the story makes that plain. Spiritual language can conceal unbelief and be a cloak for devilish intentions. But in the present moment, over-ruled and inspired by the sovereign Spirit of God, Balaam gave a great prophetic word concerning Christ who was to come, referring to the star out of Jacob (Matt. 2:2) and to the sceptre that should rise out of Israel (Gen. 49:10). The emergence of this great King would be the judgment of organised evil, and the powers of evil would be dispossessed. No matter how secure evil may seem to be it has no permanence and this is one of the reasons why the Devil and his agents flail around with such fury at certain times (Rev. 12:12) Balaam's final word brings a sober biblical challenge which he himself ignored. Who shall stand when God appears? Consider Malachi 3:1-3; 2 Pet. 3:8-15; 1 John 2:28. Where will the Balaams be who have sold out to the world and its empty glory? Where will those be who have refused and resisted the word and work of God? Be ready! Give diligence. Those who are in the battle should look to the end for it is sure and certain victory.

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### **25:1-5**

In the previous chapter Balaam stated that he was going back to his own place (24:14-25) but it appears from later in the story (31:8,16; cf Rev. 2:14) that he remained in association with the evil king of Moab and continued his evil influence against Israel. Balaam was indeed a devilish man and, having been frustrated by God and publicly shamed, he was determined for revenge. He could not harm Israel by curses (and so get

reward and advancement from Balak), so he inspired Moab to get his women to entice the men of Israel into marriages that were forbidden by God and in this way bring the anger of God down on Israel. It is difficult to say whether the spiritual or physical harlotry came first. Certainly the whole thing began on what seemed to be an innocent level, but as feelings, affections and desires became more and more awakened and involved the whole thing became a major snare of the Devil. The involvement got deeper and stronger, and the longer it was left unchallenged the worse it got until the whole of Israel (3), including innocent people, was yoked to Baal. How careful we must be in our associations and involvements, because once we are involved and deep feelings are awakened we are virtually trapped and the longer we allow indecision to operate the harder it is to take the rigorous action necessary to extricate ourselves. Consider well Jesus' words in Matt. 5:27-31; 6:21, 24; and the words in 1 Cor. 10:14-22; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; Jas. 4:4; 1 John 2:15-17. Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

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### **25:1-5**

We are studying solemn things in relation to our spiritual warfare and service. Where your treasure is your heart will also be, and where your heart is your thoughts, emotions, body and spirit go, taking with them your energy, love, loyalty and service. Watch a man's life and you will soon see his god. It is the thing, person or activity which matters most to him, and which will always have priority and the best of his vitality and enthusiasm. It will be the last thing in his life to be disciplined or denied. Was it not Martin Luther who said he was more afraid of the great Pope Self than of all the other Popes in Christendom? The "dearest idol" is usually "self" expressed in some form or other. When it expresses itself in ways that become a snare to the people of God and a stumbling block to them and we refuse to heed God's warnings (Matt. 18:6-9), then He must take action. This is the significance of the stern and holy action here. It is not merely judgment but holy surgery in radical amputation in order to save the life of the body. It could be stated as plainly as this: God will not share your life with sin and He is prepared to hurt you deeply in order to separate you from it, for your own sake and for the sake of your children after you. When Christ came to put away sin (Heb. 9:26) it was not a mere theological or spiritual exercise, it was a practical step to put the cursed thing away from the life of the people of God, so that they might walk in newness of life and in sweetness of fellowship with their God, and so serve Him, glorify Him and enjoy Him. God is not prepared to allow His holy and glorious purposes to be polluted, not even by His own children.

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### **25:6-18**

It is clear from v.8b that a plague had been sent upon the people of Israel as a direct judgment upon their evil doings. This had produced a great spirit of sorrow and weeping and the people had gathered at the door of the Tabernacle (6b). That is, there was the beginning of a turning to the Lord and a turning away from their evil ways. In this context and at that very time Zimri (14), son of a prominent and high standing family, decided to demonstrate his independence of action and his refusal to toe the line, even for God. Some commentators suggest that the tent referred to in the man's action was not a private dwelling but a big, arched tent erected by the Israelites for the specific purpose of joining with the Moabites in their lascivious worship of Baal. This would give some idea of how far astray Israel had gone, how public and arrogant was their behaviour, and how deliberately contemptuous was their rejection of God. Perhaps they defended it all in terms of psychological freedom and religious liberation, as is the custom in our own day. The current copy of an accepted evangelical magazine deplores the indifference of Christians to moral standards and their low valuation of the marriage bond. If people who name the name of Jesus and speak evangelical language begin to do what is commonly called "wife-swapping", we have a situation in the 1970s that is almost identical to this story in Moses' day. This man Zimri cared nothing for what he would call "convention" but which was in fact God's law. He flaunted his sin and rebellion and made it plain he had no intention of obeying God. Could God let this public action pass?

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## 25:6-18

It needs only one fool of strong personality to lead a whole congregation adrift from God. It could be that Zimri was considered a "great fellow", full of personality, and no doubt many would regard his actions lightly and if not defending them would certainly excuse him. This is how the rot sets in. This is the kind of man who leads others astray and though *possibly* able to retrieve himself from disaster (though not always) leaves the people he has influenced broken, bewildered and lost. Zimri never thought he would be challenged, or at most thought his rebuke would be verbal and a token of protest and discipline. It was not so. He was dealt with openly, swiftly, radically and without remedy. He died in his sin without even the opportunity to cry for mercy, if such a thought would have crossed his mind. There was one man, Phinehas, the godly son of the priestly house, whose holy zeal was matched by moral courage and decisive action. Seeing Zimri's sin, conscious that the issue was far more than one man's rebellion, and seeing the blight of judgment that had already taken toll in Israel to the extent of twenty-four thousand deaths, and being jealous for the House of God, the glory of God and the future of the work, he took action. The lingering cancer of evil was cut from the body of Israel. You can well imagine that Phinehas would be a man feared and hated as well as loved and respected for what he had done. But God vindicated His servant and gave to him His covenant of peace. It is difficult to know exactly what this means but undoubtedly there is peace when we do right by God and deal with sin.

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## 25:6-18

The heart of Phinehas' action and the significance of it is stated in v.13b. He made atonement for the people, brought them peace with God and broke the yoke of sin (3). What the men of Israel had begun as indulgent pleasure became a yoke of bondage, and this is our Lord's teaching about sin (John 8:34; cf. Rom. 6:16). The only deliverance from the guilt and power of sin is by the action of God's anointed priest and there are no half measures. There is a death to die and in due time Christ, our great High Priest, put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself (Heb. 9:26). "The covenant of peace, which was made by the blood of the Cross, and all the blessings which belong that covenant, stand fast with Christ, and are secured to His spiritual seed." (Ellicott.) This was the blessing promised to Phinehas and his children because he was zealous for the house and honour of God and in this he is a type of Christ (Ps. 69:9; John 2:17). The reference to perpetual priesthood may indicate that Phinehas had proved himself a man who could be trusted with the stewardship of holy things because his concern for the glory of God was far greater than his concern for his own acceptance among the people. To such a man God promised the peace that can keep the heart and mind in every circumstance (Phil. 4:7) and so set the life free for service. It is the peace that comes when the heart is stayed upon Jehovah (Isa. 26:3AV). It is the peace promised by Jesus to His disciples in John 14:27, peace that can rule in the heart and preside over all the surging emotions that the Devil seeks to torment us with (Col. 3:15) when we are set to do God's will, regardless of the cost. It is the peace of those who have finished the work God has given them to do (John 17:3). It is peace even in the midst of warfare, for the battle is the Lord's not ours.

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## 26:1-51

Since this is a chapter of names and numerical statistics most people will be content to read v. 1-4, 51. Moses and Eleazar are instructed to take a second census of the people. If we compare this with chapter 1:1-4 we see that Israel is back at the point recorded forty years earlier. God had not been diverted from His sovereign purpose and with the determination of grace He began again. But note that since it was men upwards of twenty years of age who were counted, we are dealing with a new generation, all of whom had grown up or been born since Israel refused to enter the land at Kadesh Barnea. Those with a mathematical turn of mind can check for themselves the similarities and differences in the lists here and in chapter 1. Those of a trusting disposition will accept the statement that the tribes are listed in a different order, seven of them had increased in number and five had decreased. In some cases the difference is small but the Simeonites were down by 37,100. We wonder why. The passing years do bring changes and the same people do not always remain in the forefront. On the other hand, numbers and size can be very great distractions and very false measurements of spiritual significance. Yet it is amazing that the total number here is a mere 1,820 fewer than the number forty years

previously. God's work is neither diminished nor weakened by waiting. But do not fail to remember that only two of the earlier generation who came to the borders of Canaan were still living parts of God's work (64, 65). This is solemn, especially when we in our day can look back and remember those who once walked with us, whom we regarded as pillars of the work, but who have faded and disappeared.

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### **26:52-65**

The future belonged to this new generation and the work was to be divided among them in rightful proportion (52-56). These were the people who had grown up in the wilderness in the days of God's rebuke. They had His presence and His promises and yet in a real sense they did not enjoy His blessing as God would have desired. These were the days of Israel's barrenness which was clear for all to see. These were days when they were a discontented and insignificant people, as the story of Numbers has made plain. In one sense many would have written them off, as some congregations have been written off as having no future, and there was some justification for such an assessment. But God in His grace spans the generations and now we have this people, far from perfect, about to be led forward into God's future for them. This is grace indeed. This is also testimony to the unbroken continuity of the purposes of God, and this is something we need to grasp very firmly indeed. What will our future be? "When the Israelites were suffering persecution in Egypt they 'multiplied exceedingly' (Ex. 1:7, 20); but after their deliverance from Egypt they rebelled against God, and 'He consumed their days in vanity, and their years in trouble' (Ps. 78:33) ....Here there is comfort and warning to the church and every soul in it - comfort in time of affliction, and warning in days of prosperity." (Bishop Wordsworth)

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### **26:52-65**

Consider Joshua and Caleb. What were they doing all the forty years of wanderings? They were waiting for God's day to come. Like their fellows they had stood on the borders of Canaan and had been aware of the enemies and the costly conflict that awaited the advancing Israelites. But they had also seen with the eyes of faith the vision of God's land and God's work going on into the ever more glorious future. Their hearts responded and consented to the command to go forward, but it could not be, because of the refusal of the vast majority of the people. Being part of Israel they had to share Israel's rebuke, but all these years their hearts had neither been lured away by the deceitfulness of sin nor been filled with unworthy fears regarding God's capacity and willingness to bring them to victory in the land (Num. 13:30). It must have been sore indeed for them to watch the fading away of a whole generation of people to whom such hopeful possibility had been presented, but their hearts remained loyal to God and they still looked in faith for the day of entry to come as God had promised. If ever there was an elect remnant bridging the gap from the past to the future through a derelict present, it was Joshua and Caleb. But there is more here than just the faith that holds fast to God. These men, especially Joshua, were being prepared for service far beyond their expectations. Joshua was the man who was being disciplined and prepared for work that even Moses could not do. He was to lead the people in to conquer the land (Josh. 1: 1-3). Being the man he was, he would see to it that he made full use of his time of training so that he would be ready for God. It is sinful to waste spiritual apprenticeship.

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### **27:1-11**

The land was to be portioned out according to the census of men in the previous chapter and these five women came forward with a special plea. Their father had done nothing specifically to provoke the Lord but had died the common death of all men during the years in the wilderness. He had no sons to carry on the family name in Israel. Now, the land was God's (Lev. 25:23) and to be given in trust to the various families for them to use and to serve under God. None were to be excluded, none to be deprived of their rightful place and function in Israel. This was Ahab's sin against Naboth later in 1 Kings 21:1-3. The lesson seems to be that there must be no crowding out of the weak and defenceless by powerful self-interest, a principle sorely needing to be observed in the world of business, and in the life of the church. There is no warrant here for insisting that women, just like men, should be entitled to enter the priesthood or the ministry. The lesson is simpler and clearer. God takes care

of and makes provision for those who cannot take care of themselves and charges the leaders of Israel to see to it that justice is done. The further lesson is that we must see to it that neither brother nor sister is denied the privilege and service that God has planned for them. No one is to be ousted or made to feel inferior let alone useless. We are members one of another (Eph. 4:25) and we need to remember, especially if we feel we are more richly endowed than others, that our own place among the people of God is the gift of sheer grace (1 Cor. 4:6,7) and. at all times, we are our brother's and sister's keeper.

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### **27:12-14**

Here is a man being told by God that his day was done and that the time for his death had come. There is a quiet simplicity in God's explanation of why Moses would not actually enter the land and an equally serene acceptance of the fact by Moses. The fuller account of this incident, given in Deut. 34:1-12 is very moving. The story in the Gospels of Moses and Elijah meeting with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration signifies that the death of the great man was not the end of him nor in any way a cancellation of his greatness. We have seen in Numbers wonderful testimony to this man with whom God spoke face to face. He was the God-ordained, God-trained lawgiver and shepherd of Israel. His story tells not only of his spiritual stature and integrity and his confidence in God, it tells also of God's trust in Moses. His life had been in three clear sections of forty years each. For the first part of his life he was instructed in all the wisdom of Egypt and so trained for statesmanship (Acts 7:22). He then spent forty years in the desert separated from the main stream of the life of Israel (Acts 7:23-29). He was already aware of God's hand on him but he had to learn obedience to the yoke of God so that his natural impulsiveness would be brought under discipline. After all, ill-considered action would be harmful in the extreme in leading a people to their spiritual destiny. The final section of his life was forty years of leadership of the people of God from the Exodus to Sinai for the giving of the Law and then in all the institution of the holy worship of the Tabernacle, and the journeys in the wilderness, right to the borders of Canaan, What a man! How sad that, after all he had borne, in one season of pressure his old rash impetuosity flared up and he spoke unadvisedly (Deut. 32:48-52). How often we need to say, "Watch and pray."

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### **27:15-23**

Although Moses was not allowed to enter the land he was commanded to view it. It was as if God was reassuring His servant that his work had not in any sense been a failure but just as he had come forward at God's appointed time (and his preservation at birth had been a miracle) so someone else had now to come forward and enter into Moses' labours, carrying them forward to and through the next stage. Not only was there no resentment against God's dispositions, there was in fact in Moses a wonderful care for the people who had caused him such hurt in so many ways. He asked God to provide a shepherd for them so that they would be cared for. Moses knew their need and knew also that they were a people precious to the Lord with a great destiny of service. Their long-term leader wanted the very best for them. Can you imagine Moses praying for his congregation? Can you recall Samuel assuring the people who had rejected him that he would never stop praying for them (1 Sam. 12:19-25)? How we all need to be made Christ-like so that as ministers, teachers, leaders and parents we might be conformed to His likeness (Rom. 8:29). Let this mind be in you which was also Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5ff). This must be our prayer:

"Lord speak to me, that I may speak  
In living echoes of Thy hope  
As Thou hast sought, so let me seek  
Thy erring children lost and lone.

O use me, Lord, use even me,  
Just as Thou wilt, and when, and where;  
Until Thy blessed face I see,  
Thy rest, Thy joy, Thy glory share."

(Havergal)

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### **27:15-23**

Moses endured as seeing Him who is invisible (Heb. 11:27) but he also endured because he saw the greatness of the purposes of God over against the smallness of any given leader. No man is indispensable and the greatest and godliest leaders recognise that the work is not, and must not, be made dependent on them. Moses' day was ended, the work moved on, and God's successor was ready. He was Joshua, a Spirit filled man who had taken second place for forty years. Note that there was no suggestion on Moses' part to appoint one of his own family nor even a man of his own choice. He committed the matter to God in prayer and then in obedience to God he ordained and commissioned Joshua in the sight of the people. Joshua was a man who had followed the Lord fully, yet had to suffer the privations of the wilderness with Israel. But he kept his heart true and free from bitterness. There seems to have been no carnal ambition in him, no pressing of his claims for recognition or promotion. He served Moses as personal attendant and close colleague. He had proved faithful in spiritual duty and was not without experience in holy things (Ex. 24:13; 33:11). He knew spiritual warfare and he knew his army job well (Ex. 17:8ff). He had been born in Egypt, shared in the Exodus (Num. 32:11ff), and was able to remind the people of what the life of bondage and idolatry had been like (Josh. 24:14). But for all his experience and capacity he still had to be called to this specific service and ordained to it so that he and all the people would know that he was a man with authority because he was under authority. He was in no sense a free agent. He was called to obey. He had a massive task before him but he had a caring God who spoke wonderfully to his heart. Read Joshua 1:1-9.

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### **28:1-2**

This chapter and the next could be dealt with in two ways. First, we could consider the careful detail of all the offerings in order to see their significance as types of Christ and as foreshadowing's of His sacrificial and saving death, but such a study rightly belongs to the Book of Leviticus. Secondly, we could consider the two chapters in the immediate context of the story in Numbers and understand them in relation to God's instruction to His people as they prepared for imminent entry to Canaan. Israel was facing a crisis of opportunity which would involve a long and costly campaign of spiritual warfare. God prepared His people, not in terms of technique or even boosting of morale, but in respect of spiritual worship. It was the new and younger generation that was being called to holy service and there were no new or novel methods brought in. They were directed and commanded (it is not optional) back to the old paths of God centred and God-honouring spiritual worship. Read Jeremiah 6:8, 14,16-21,30. At the heart of the failure of the previous generation was neglect and rejection of God's law, that is God's revealed and stated way of how His work is to be done. They had been guilty of replacing God by man and a setting of man's ideas as the norm and guide rather than God's clear principles of service. Note in today's verses the repeated emphasis on "my" and "me" . Here is the great emphasis: God first, because God is all. Man's chief end is to glorify God and the fact that great enjoyment comes to man in that process is secondary. God stands pre-eminent, and we must learn to worship and bow down before Him.

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### **28:1-2**

It will help here to read Hebrews 9:6-14, and 10:1-4. That will keep us from being too absorbed in the mechanics of sacrifices. In the RSV the phrase "pleasing odour" replaces the AV's "sweet savour" which is much superior in terms of the sound of the language and the spiritual significance. The emphasis on sweetness signifies pleasure, not only to the Lord but to the people who bring the offerings. They come to God, not primarily for what they can get but in order to give the worship that is due to His name. This is something we must guard. It is right that we should come to cast our burdens on the Lord (Ps. 55:22), to taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps. 34:8), and to find that rest promised for those who are weary with burden-bearing (Matt. 11:28-30). Of course God wants to bless us and to give us bountifully of all His good things for our benefit and enjoyment (1 Tim. 6:17) but we must never lapse into the attitude that God exists to serve us. That way, our spiritual exercises become mere manipulations of the Almighty to further our own ends. We offer to the Lord,

in token sacrifices (v.2), our whole beings, for we are His not our own (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Yet the doing of it is sweet for us as well as to God for His will is good and acceptable and altogether satisfying (Rom. 12:1-2). But note also that word "due" (RSV) or "appointed (NIV) for there is obligation and duty involved in spiritual worship. It is not sufficient to come when we feel we want to come or in the way that particularly appeals to us. This can lead to individualism run riot and to a breaking up of the body of the fellowship of believers. All must be in due season so that we render to God what is His by right.

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### **28:3-15**

Throughout this chapter the emphasis of the various sacrifices seems to be sacrifice for sin's forgiveness, food for the hunger of the soul, and water to quench the thirst. Each and all of these glorious spiritual facts is summed up in Christ. He is everything (1 Cor. 1:30). The objective of all the sacrificial provision is that the people might draw near to God and walk in holy fellowship with Him since He is their God and they are His people. The sacrifices are very detailed, covering every situation, morning, evening, daily, weekly, monthly and yearly. Their message concerns the tremendous importance of being right with God and keeping right with Him all along life's journey. This, and nothing else, is the dynamic of service. The constant temptation for the church is to concentrate on organisation and administration, with schemes to increase efficiency and to encourage effort. All this falls to the ground if the heart is not centred on God. Even in the evangelical church people tend to concentrate on every possible thing and only then, with the remnants of energy and interest, to turn to prayer and worship. You cannot build a house to last without foundations, and you cannot set an army on a spiritual crusade without spiritual worship that shuts up the people to God and for God. No doubt some would regard these sacrifices with all their cost in time and energy to be unnecessary and unjustified intrusions into life with its busy demands. But God knows best and it is those who wait upon the Lord who renew their strength and who keep on going on after many have given up (Isa. 40:28-31).

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### **28:16-25**

Everything belongs to God (Ps. 50:10; 145:15-16; Haggai 2:8) and we simply give to Him what He has first given to us. As the sacrifices are consumed by fire the smoke ascends to heaven and leads the eyes of the people away from themselves to God above, the glorious Saviour of His people. Everything in life should really bring to remembrance the greatness and goodness of God, and these sacrifices are ordained to be specific occasions of remembrance and at the same time a means of grace to the hearts of the people, just as the Lord's Supper is. On the Sabbath (9) and also on the first and seventh days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (18, 25) there was a complete stoppage of work, and specific mention is made of the Feast of the Passover which had been in abeyance for thirty-eight years. Here is a people being led back to the foundation principles of their salvation and life in the redeeming work of God. Over against the non-activity on the appointed days there stands the activity of the High Priest making atonement, doing the work the people could not ever do for themselves. How emphatic is the message: "By grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." (Eph. 2:8) Justified by faith we have peace with God, we stand in grace, we rejoice in hope, and in that hope we face and cope with all the experiences of life (Rom. 5:1-5). The call to Israel was not simply to get right with God but to keep right with God, to keep short accounts with God, and to let nothing come between them and God. So long as they remembered this they prospered, but when Israel broke faith with God, quite soon in their advance, the whole work and warfare was blighted (Josh. 7:1).

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### **28:26-31**

Did Israel weary, as we may well be wearying, of all these minute and exacting regulations? It was necessary instruction to engrave on the minds and hearts of the people the twofold lesson: sin is serious and salvation is glorious. We are dealing here with the set feasts in the Jewish year as they are given in Lev. 23. The Passover speaks of redemption and deliverance. The Feast of Unleavened Bread emphasises the urgency of obedience and preparation. The Feast of Weeks, or first fruits, or Pentecost (Ex. 34:22; 23:16) is the harvest festival of

thanksgiving to God for all His provision. In this festival the first of the fruits of the harvest are given to the Lord. This seems to teach that we should lay aside the first portion to be for God and then the rest we may administer and use for maintenance and service According to Paul we are to lay by on the first day of the week as God has prospered us (1 Cor. 16:2). We always tend to think of what we have as being "ours" and from that we give the tithe to the Lord, but in fact everything is His by right and He gives to us the nine-tenths for our blessing and service All we have, even life itself, is given to us in trust to use for God, and even the simple act of dedicating our offerings in the Lord's House on the Lord's Day is an opportunity to reaffirm that we are His, lock, stock and barrel. Since this feast is so closely linked to the harvest we must not fail to see how effective it must have been in causing the people to consider their ways and to evaluate their spiritual condition. Fruitless lives or lives only meagerly productive have a story to tell. Consider 2 Chron. 6:26-27; 7:12-16; Haggai 1:5-7. Never forget that blessing can be withdrawn (Amos 8:11-12). There is a cynical way, humanly and spiritually, of speaking of "being thankful for small mercies". God's mercies are big indeed for we are not worthy of the least of them (Gen. 32:10).

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### 29:1-6

The Feast of Trumpets is the first of the three celebrations belonging to the seventh month. This blowing of trumpets "according to Jewish writers, was continued from sun-rising to sun-setting." (Ellicott) The noise alone would prevent Israel from forgetting the summons of God. The trumpet of the Lord sounded and called the people to deal with God, to make a joyful noise to the God of their salvation. The remainder of the chapter deals with the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles, and this suggests that the trumpet sound called the people to rejoice in that atonement by which God reconciled His people to Himself and provided a way of access into fellowship with Himself. It also reminded them that they were in fact a pilgrim people journeying to a better and promised land. How necessary this trumpet summons is. We need to be brought back again and again to the ground of our salvation and we need to remind ourselves that here we have no continuing city.(Heb. 13:14) .We must not settle down. Everything for us is in the future, although that does not cancel out the blessing, privilege and opportunity of the present. Indeed it is the assurance we have of the future that gives dynamic and direction to the present. No one with any real knowledge of the Scriptures can fail to be reminded here of the last trumpet, for "the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more." This was something very real to the New Testament apostles, as 1 Cor. 15: 52-58 and 1 Thess. 4:13-18 show. It is clear that to men of faith the sound of the trumpet of the Lord is glorious and reassuring because it speaks aloud of the personal presence of the God of salvation and the completion of His glorious purposes. These are themes we must think of more often and we return to them tomorrow.

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### 29:1-6

Every time we sing the metrical version of Psalm 89:15-18 we should thrill to the trumpet of the Lord for it is a blessing to the Lord's people and it gives them heart to go on in their way rejoicing. The basis of that rejoicing is the facts concerning God. The trumpet is a memorial of creation, for in Job 38:7 38 the phrase "shouting for joy" is the same in the Hebrew as "blowing of trumpets". It is also a memorial of the giving of the Law at Sinai (Ex. 19:16-20), and the people would never be allowed to forget that their God is the God who speaks. That speaking voice is referred to in Rev. 1:10 and later in Revelation we have the trumpets sounding to set in motion the various stages of God's great plan of salvation and judgment. The trumpets do not only remind us of the past, they point to the future with expectation, and seem to emphasise that the truth about the God of salvation should be made known in a way that is loud and clear. The trumpeters were heralds of God and that is what we are called to be, ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:19, 20) proclaiming the message of reconciliation. Since this feast is followed by that of Atonement, the trumpet message could well be interpreted as saying, "Behold the Lamb of God." In Numbers 10:1-10 we have seen already the details of this feast. It was an invitation to come into the presence of God (3); to move at the command of God (5-6); a summons to warfare in the name of God (9); and a call to worship with our eyes upon God (10). It was indeed a great feast. Of course it

has its challenge as well as encouragement, for in terms of witness we must remember that if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound no-one will listen (1 Cor. 14:7-8).

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### **29:7-11**

This brief reference to the Day of Atonement needs to be studied along with other fuller references to it in Scripture. This day was the most solemn in Israel's year (Heb. 9:6-14). The detail of the atonement is in Lev. 16 and deals with the Godward aspect. The story of the "scapegoat" (Lev. 16:15-21) should be read in conjunction with Isa. 53:4-5, 7-10a. Then in Lev. 16:29-31 we have reference to this day as a day of affliction (Lev. 23:26-32), and this is the emphasis here in Numbers. It is particularly concerned with the manward side of the atonement and calls on Israel to recall the shame, guilt, cost and the inexcusability of sin. It was meant to inculcate a genuine sorrow for sin. While we recognise that this can degenerate into morbid preoccupation with sin, at the same time the whole of Leviticus, with its wonderful teaching concerning God's desire to live in fellowship with His people, tells us that casualness with regard to sin is no part of the life of a believer. There seems to have been in Israel at the command of God a deliberate withdrawal from the joys of life in God for the specific purpose of a day of penitence. We have much to learn here. Think of David's profound penitence in Psalm 51 or of Paul's increasing awareness of his unworthiness until he classed himself as chief of sinners (Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 1:15). There was nothing morbid or inhibiting about Paul's sense of guilt. Indeed it made him glory all the more in the wonderful grace of God. There is something healthy in the confession of the old hymn, "I'm only a sinner, saved by grace."

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### **29:12-40**

This long passage gives the details of the sacrifices to be offered on each of the seven days of the Feast of Tabernacles. It is not an exciting passage to read. What significance do we give to the fact that one part of the offering (the young bulls) reduces in number day by day? Does this signify the passing away of the ritual sacrifice when the perfect sacrifice comes? Is that the point of the number seven on the seventh day? The chapter ends by pointing out that these are the statutory and compulsory offerings, there is nothing optional about them, but they do not necessarily complete the freewill offerings of the people. Dare we say that the minimum is prescribed but there is no limit to what any man or woman may give in glad offering to the God of salvation? There is in fact a wonderful release and yet a sweet sense of responsibility in recognising that all we have belongs to the Lord. Of course, He does not give it to us in order that He might perversely snatch it back and leave us in need. He has blessed us with all spiritual blessings (Eph. 1:3ff) and He has given us all things human and material to be received with thanksgiving and to be enjoyed (1 Tim. 6:17). And there is every reason to believe that He will give us all He can safely give us for He is not a mean God. He opens His hand liberally (Ps. 145:15-16). When He withholds He still cares and, through the soreness, He extends our usefulness in service (2 Cor. 12:7-10). This may not be apparent to us at the time but we must learn to trust Him. It is faith that prays the prayer in Proverbs 30:8-9. It is faith that commits its way to the Lord that He might bring it to pass (Ps. 37:5).

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### **29:12-40**

We take two days for this final study on the feasts because we have made it something of a comprehensive study and application. Yesterday's comments were not a digression, for this Feast of Tabernacles is associated with the ingathering of the harvest (Lev. 23:33, 39-43) which is the visible evidence of the good provision of God for His people. If we link this with Deut. 16:13-15; 31:9-13 we see that the twofold emphasis of this Feast was joyous thanksgiving and the reading of the Law. Remembrance, thanksgiving and rejoicing are basic elements of Christian life and must be cultivated so that our journeyings as strangers and pilgrims will be marked by joy rather than by preoccupation with the undoubted cost. Here we have no continuing city (Heb. 11:8-9, 13-16; 13:14; 2 Cor. 5: 1-5) but it is not the negative homelessness that dominates but the assurance of an eternal home to which we journey confident of safe arrival (1 Pet. 1:3-5). We cannot think too much about

this. We look back to our redemption, and this is joy indeed, for our sins are all forgiven and we are on our way to heaven (Isa. 38:17; Jer. 31:3, 34; Micah 7:18-20; Psalm 103:12). We look to our life now and we are journeying with the assurance of God's presence (Ex. 33:14; Matt. 28:20). This also is joy and peace. We look to the future and to the sureness of the end and the victory, and we refuse to be sorry for ourselves, because we are people of direction, dynamic and destiny who belong to the God who is able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless in His presence with exceeding joy (Jude 24, 25 AV). Christians should be the calmest and most confident people in the world because our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20). Little wonder Israel is commanded to keep the appointed feasts. They were reminders of the faithfulness of God (Joshua 23:14; 1 Kings 8:54-61). In John 7:37-39 we have the words of Jesus on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. It is indeed a glorious gospel feast.

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### **30:1-2**

Do not lose sight of the main theme of Numbers. From Chap. 26 onwards we are reading the detailed story of how God prepared Israel for entering Canaan. The preparation is that of the heart, for only as the heart is right can God come down to dwell with His people to enliven them in pleasure and purpose. To be right with God is the dynamic and life-blood of service, and to this end God the Lord provides grace sufficient for His people (2 Cor. 12:9; Deut. 33:25AV). It is all very wonderful, yet solemn. In chapter 26 the emphasis was on the continuity of the work of God. It may at times be out of sight but it is never broken, even when the link between past and future consists of only two men such as Joshua and Caleb. In chapter 27 we learn that God is no respecter of persons for Moses the leader was replaced. To accept that no man is indispensable is at first a sore thought but then it is a relief. Better to be replaced than to become a burden and a hindrance. In chapters 28-29 we have been learning the centrality of spiritual worship, which is possible only on the basis of sacrifice, and the message of the whole Bible is, "Behold the Lamb of God." Against this background we begin to see the need for this teaching on vows, which can be summarised simply. Vows are not to be broken. Think of baptismal vows, membership vows, vows on appointment to office within the congregation. If a man goes back on such vows has his wife any assurance that he will not go back on his marriage vows? Breaking faith is a serious business. Remember the wise words of Eccles. 5:1-7. More of this tomorrow.

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### **30:1-2**

It is significant that the subject of vows is dealt with immediately following the feasts which speak of all the goodness of God. We are under debt to grace and we are not worthy of the least of God's mercies (Gen. 32:9-12AV; Luke 15:18, 19). In view of this the Psalmist asks what is the right thing for him to do and concludes that he must pay his vows as part of his public testimony to the Lord (Psalm 116:12-14). This he does as he rejoices in the cup of salvation. On the other hand in the story of Jonah, the servant of God was in such a petulant and rebellious frame of mind that God had to bring him to darkness and distress before he would do right by God and fulfil his vows of commitment (Jonah 2:1-10). In Acts 5:1-4 we have the story of calculated deceit by which two professing Christians tried to get a reputation for consecration by means of a vow they had no intention of keeping. In Deut. 23:21-22 the people are urged not to be slack in keeping their vows but at the same time the voluntary nature of vows is made plain. There is no compulsion. God admires honesty and the simplicity which goes with it. A man's word should be his bond and he should stand by it without needing to be constantly backing it up with oaths, guarantees and holy words (Matt. 5: 33-37). Our words must be truth, free from innuendo or suggestion, and equally free from culpable secretiveness which intends to harm. As this chapter goes on we will see that a guard is set against vows made under duress, stress or emotion. Such unwise vows (cf. Jephthah in Judges 11:30, 31) are subject to regulation and cancellation. We are dealing with vows made public and spoken, not with secret intentions.

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### **30:3-16**

God knows how vulnerable we are to the insinuations and tormentings of the Devil, and He sets careful limits to

and guidelines for vows. Yesterday's verses stated the position of the man very clearly and without qualification but now the position of the woman is spoken of in a most instructive way. These verses make clear that a vow may be taken with willingness and sincerity of heart, believing this to be the course that is pleasing to God. Then someone with the right to influence our actions, be it father, husband, doctor or the clear call of duty, prohibits or forbids the carrying out of our resolve. In such a case we must submit to rightful authority without any sense of guilt (although there may be disappointment) and God will forgive and we go in peace (5, 8, 12). If those who have jurisdiction over us remain silent on hearing of our vow and intention then we are free to go on with it and the vow is binding (4). "Sometimes God's silence is consent. You made your solemn dedication in His holy presence: there was no answering voice, or rush of emotion, or witnessing seal; He held His peace from day to day. But in that silence He established all your vows, all your bonds." (F B Meyer). Just as God has sovereign right to hold us to our vows so, as the Head of the house, be it as father or husband, He has the right to free us from our vows, so delivering us from the folly of our own actions. What a comfort it is to be supervised and shepherded in this way. To be told by Scripture that we are not our own and can never be free agents in the ordering of our lives is in many ways a deep and comprehensive challenge (1 Cor. 6:20). We are indeed called to glorify God in all that we do and to do it with thanksgiving and grace (Col. 3:17). But at the same time to know that someone is in charge of us in every aspect of life is comfort indeed. In due time we will "bless the hand that guided and bless the heart that planned", even though in the immediate circumstances of life we may resent the ordering of His providence.

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### 30:3-16

We must note here, as a final lesson, the emphasis on family life and the right ordering of it. But first note that no provision seems to be made for the single woman. Is this unfair? In the New Testament the woman is counselled to ask her husband (1 Cor. 14:35). But what if she has no husband? We give two answers. In the Bible the unit is always the family rather than the individual, and this exposes the folly of the extravagant individualism that mars so much of evangelical life today. We are part of a human family and in Christ part of the spiritual family and we must not forget either. The second thing to remember is that the single person is not without a personal Lover who will stand by her in utmost tenderness and loyalty in every possible situation (Isa. 54: 5; 62:3-5; Hos. 2:19-20). It was Jesus Himself who said we would not be left as orphans (John. 14:18). We have hardly even begun to know the tenderness of His personal care for us, but believing it we shall learn more of it. The final lesson of these verses is that "They reveal the Divine conception of the necessity for the maintenance of the unity of the family. In no family must there be two supreme authorities; and here, as always in the Divine arrangement, the headship is vested in the husband and father. It can easily be seen how, were this otherwise, through religious vows discord and probably disruption in family life would ensue. The measure in which modern society has departed from this ideal, is the measure of its insecurity." (Morgan) That quotation has great relevance to the family which is the church. There is a false clamour for "democracy" which is often little more than a refusal of authority and leadership, a desire for power and influence, and a basic lust that every man should be allowed to do what is right in his own eyes without being questioned by an., Whatever else this is, it is not "spiritual".

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### 31:1-2

At the end of a long and glorious life of spiritual service Moses was given one final thing to do and it was a work of judgment. Its purpose was to avenge Israel (the people and work of God, both of which are holy in His sight) and to avenge God. Both had been dishonoured by the powers of evil. This kind of chapter with its story of grim slaughter allows us to speak of the modern reaction against all forms of punishment, especially the death penalty. It has reached the stage when even discipline is regarded by some as sub-Christian. There is an obsessive preoccupation with the interests of the wrongdoer and a virtual ignoring of the suffering of the victim. The present day attitude seems to be that the only justification of "punishment" lies in the reformation of the evildoer, and in a secondary way in the deterring of others from wrongdoing. But when we transfer the theory of punishment from the realm of the exaction of penalty by the righteous law of God into the realm of the

arguments of the humanists we have problems. Unless a man deserves to be punished why should he be made an example to others? That is not justice and it could lead to the position of justifying the punishment and even death of an innocent man so long as this deterred others from turning to evil. As for the reforming aspect of punishment, why should a man be changed if he does not want to be changed? What right has any authority to insist that a man be changed unless that man is a danger to society? That brings us back to the idea of "just or righteous retribution", which is the theme of these verses. We are dealing with justice based on the character of a righteous and holy God and carried out by the command and power of that God.

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### 31:3-18

In this grim passage do not fail to see the very high value that is set by the Bible on the whole matter of sexual purity. This is New Testament teaching, as Paul's searching words in 1 Cor. 6:12-20 make plain. The theme is righteous judgment. Indeed throughout the whole Bible we find the theme of the judgments of God always operative among men and nations. We must not relegate judgment to the final day of judgment, although that will surely come. It is appointed (Acts 17:30, 31; Heb. 9:27). In this chapter judgment is being carried out against Moab and Midian because they were the instruments by which God's Israel had been soiled, corrupted, harmed and hindered. But if we refer back to chapter 25 we see that Israel had already been judged in this matter, for God is no respecter of persons. Indeed He is swifter to judge His own people because, having the light of the knowledge of the truth and the experience of God's past blessings, there is no excuse for them. Judgment begins at the house of God (1Pet. 4:17). At the time of chapter 25 it seemed that only Israel was being punished but God remembers. He waits, in the mystery of His grace, to grant opportunity for repentance, but His judgments are sure (Deut. 32:35 which in the A.V. reads, "Their foot shall slide in due time"; cf. Ps. 94:1-4; 2 Pet. 3: 7-9). God's present, operative, historical judgments are a fact of experience. The movement of God's purposes towards their establishment and victory involves the necessary judgment of all evil. The instrument of that judgment is the people of God acting in obedience to God. And, to carry the teaching through to the New Testament, we emphasise that the work and word of the gospel in the life and witness of the church is always two-fold. It works salvation and condemnation and is an effective instrument for life and death. On the one hand it saves and on the other it exposes and confirms unbelief (2 Cor. 2:15-16; John 15:18-24). God is indeed the One with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13) and He is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29).

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### 31:3-18

We are not dealing here with a sudden, uncontrolled spasm of human vengeance, for vengeance belongs to God alone (Rom. 12:19). We have noted in v.1-2 the close identification of God with His people, so that whoever touches Israel touches God (Zech 2:8; 1 Chron. 16:22). Only God is allowed to smite His own people although He uses human and earthly powers to do so. But these powers in turn are brought to judgment for their own wickedness. In Numbers and Deuteronomy we find the Midianites, Moabites and Ammonites spoken of as a collaboration of evil powers set bitterly and permanently against Israel to withstand every advance of the people of God. We see then that we are dealing with a basic and elemental conflict between good and evil, God and the Devil. This is no slight disagreement between friends but total opposition of enemies. We could trace the story of these tribes right through Joshua and on to the time of Nehemiah (2:10). The astonishing thing is not the judgment of God but His longsuffering. Yet there is something inexorable about it all. Go back to Gen. 15:16, God does not snuff out evil in its infancy but allows its development to demonstrate its inexcusable wickedness and to serve as a sanctifying fire for His people, Read well Exodus 23:20-33. Then notice in today's passage (15-16) the reappearance of the same temptation that had brought judgment on Israel in the time of Balaam. This is why the surgery of judgment was necessary. The infection was deep. Will God's people never learn that evil is not to be trifled with? It is not just for our own sakes that we must be holy unto the Lord, separate from sin, but for the work's sake. Here in Numbers God is already looking ahead to the Cross and to the glorious salvation to be accomplished there. Israel was the instrument and nothing was going to be allowed to stop the work. The Devil tried all the way through the Old Testament, right to Herod's slaying of the innocent babes, but he failed. We are reading here of some of God's stern methods.

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### 31:19-24

There is so much in the Bible about purity, sanctification and separation that we ignore these issues at our peril. All who had been in contact with evil, even while carrying out the will of God, had contracted ceremonial defilement and had to remain outside the camp for seven days. Everything had to be purified, but the cleansing process was determined by the nature and texture of the article to be cleansed. Fire was the agent for what could stand fire, and water for what could not stand fire, although the metals had to go through the water of purification after the fire. The emphasis is on thorough cleansing of all that is to be used in God's service (2 Tim 2:20-21). It is cleanness not cleverness that is required for fruitful service. We must see to it. Our faith will be tried sometimes by fire (1 Pet. 1:6, 7) but God will not suffer us to be tempted or tested beyond our profitable capacity (1 Cor. 10:13). God remembers our constitution (Ps. 103:14) and cleanses us at times by the gentler process of washing. But both the fire and the water speak of the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word and by the disciplines of providence. Of course we must not forget the blood of Jesus Christ which keeps on cleansing us from sin (1 John 1:7), What provision God makes for us so that turning our backs on sin we might walk with Him in fellowship and service.

"One thing I of the Lord desire  
For all my way hath miry been  
Be it by water or by fire,  
O make me clean."

(W C Smith)

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### 31:25-47

These are the regulations for the dividing of the spoils of war and a similar instruction is found in Joshua 22:7-8. Later in 1 Sam. 30:21-25 David made this principle of sharing a statute in Israel. "It was reasonable that those who had encountered the perils and hardships of war should receive a larger share of the spoil than those who had remained in the camp. It was equally reasonable that the latter should not be left without some substantial benefit from the victory miraculously achieved over the enemies of the Lord and of His people." (Ellicott)

What we have here is a demonstration of the essential unity of the people of God, with each member having a place, a function and a reward. Just as you cannot have a satisfying banquet with gorgeous tables and cutlery without the pots, pans and unseen hard work in the kitchen, so you cannot have the public and successful carrying out of the work of God without the secret service of prayer, work, preparation and support behind the scenes. Even when the unseen workers are overlooked or even devalued, God does not forget and He sees to it that every faithful servant will have his reward. Read 1 Cor. 12:12-27, taking special note of v.21-22. The question of differentials has caused untold confusion in the realm of wage bargaining and yet it seems a biblical principle here and in 1 Tim. 5:17-18. The issue of place and position has always caused tension among the Lord's disciples in all ages (Mark 9:34). It would be good for us if we could remember that all we have belongs to God and all we are is the gift and work of His grace. All we can ever really call our own is our sins and if we truly know the Lord we will not want to boast about them.

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### 31:48-54

Israel's army on this occasion had been 12,000 men of war (5). From the record in Judges 6:1-6 we see that Midian remained a powerful people and conclude that only a section of the Midianites was dealt with by Moses' army. But in spite of these statistics it is truly a miracle that not a single casualty fell in Israel's army. So great was the gratitude of the officers that they brought their own personal booty as a thank-offering to the Lord. This was a great acknowledgment that all blessings come from the Lord alone, and since all good gifts that we enjoy so richly belong by right to the Lord we should never find ourselves in the position of being mean or miserly in what we give to the God of our salvation. The Lord does indeed love a cheerful giver and we need to read more often than we do the great chapters in 2 Cor. 8, 9 dealing with Christian liberality. Perhaps the easiest thing to

give is money, although it hurts many to give anything but the minimum. Time is more precious and a more costly sacrifice, but to give ourselves to God and to others (and both are needed) is the offering that is truly pleasing to the Lord. It is not just the fact that we are not our own that should inspire and impel our giving, but a spirit of thankful gratitude to God for all His mercies. After all we are not worthy of the least of His mercies (Gen. 32:1 AV), yet He continues to shower them on us. A thankful heart is not only a release from the blight of a grasping, worldly spirit, it is also the inspiration of prayer. Think of these things as we dedicate our offerings in the Lord's House. The story of our lives is as much a miracle of grace as Israel's victory against Midian. If Old Testament gratitude was like this, how much more should ours be, we who live in the light of the sacrifice of the Cross.

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### **32:1-5**

The readings of the past few days have emphasised the deep and urgent need to be right with God and to do right by God. This is the only way to live in peace, hope and fulfilment and to serve creatively in the ongoing work of God. Israel had already learned the sore lesson of open and obvious apostasy and compromise (Chapter 25) and had been warned against the snare of old sins. No doubt they were a people who would have claimed now to be set on serving the Lord. But what do we find? Not an onrush of enemy armies, nor a blatant turning to gross and ugly sin, nor an open denial of and apostasy from the faith on which they were grounded and by which they lived, but something far more subtle. The Devil knows his job and he knows the exact areas in which we are open to temptation. Read these verses very carefully and see how totally materialistic they are. The reasoning of these men was based entirely on their cattle and the pasture available. In worldly terms their case was excellent and without flaw. The only thing missed out was God. There is no reference to the God who had saved them and by whose grace they possessed the cattle. Nor is there any clear reference to or acceptance of the fact that they were not a group with an identity of their own but an integral part of the united people of God. There seems to have been no embarrassment in their approach to Moses nor any awareness that they had been snared by the spirit of the world. So much did the material things of life and business impinge upon them that their hearts were detached from God, and they did not seem to be aware of it. This is exactly what happened in the case of Lot in Genesis. He gave all diligence in considering the amenities of the area in which he bought his house and then had to live without a spiritual home, with disastrous consequences.

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### **32:6-15**

Moses was a faithful shepherd and spoke plainly to the tribes Gad and Reuben, charging them first of all with spiritual neglect in seeking to hold back from their share in the spiritual warfare that was to come, and then stating the baneful influence of their attitudes on the rest of the people of Israel. It is a terrible spiritual crime to dishearten and hold back another believer from following the Lord in glad obedience of heart. Moses saw clearly how Gad and Reuben could well infect and influence the other tribes and so start a major defection which would corrupt the next significant stage of the work of God before it had ever got started. How the Devil must have laughed, and how furious he must have been with this "old-stager" Moses who had run things his own way for so long. Of course Moses had not been "doing his own thing", but simply obeying God's orders all along the line and his counsel here is wise indeed. He reminded Reuben and Gad of the past and called them to learn the lessons of history. This is something we need to do today, especially in the wide-ranging debate on the methods of evangelism. Modernity is not necessarily a good thing and the methods and patterns of the past, having been tried and proved, must not be abandoned lightly. Moses, who would have given anything to have crossed the Jordan to share in the fuller work of the future but was forbidden, warned the men in v.8 and compared their attitude with that of their fathers forty years previously. Look at his words in v.14 and compare this with Stephen's words in Acts 7:51. But men moved by the spirit of the world will not listen to the words of God-authenticated leaders. That speaks for itself.

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### 32:16-27

The men of Reuben and Gad were bold and persistent, confident in their own spiritual integrity. They pursued their case with many pleas and assurances. There is just a possibility (although this is speculation) that they knew of Moses being barred by God from entering the land, and, assuming that this must be because of his faults and flaws, known or unknown, they felt entitled to question his leadership and wisdom. Be that as it may, they came to Moses with great protestations of continuing loyalty in the realm of spiritual dedication and service. They assured their leader that there was no thought of contracting out and once they had built sheepfolds and fortified cities for their families they would be available for any call of duty and would see it through to the end. It all sounds familiar. How much time and energy would be needed for getting their barns built, their homes equipped and their investments in livestock organised? That could take a life time and many people are so busy in this way that they are beyond retirement age before they are readily available for God. Think of Jesus' words in Luke 9:57-62 which highlight the competition that goes on for a man's heart and life. Think of Jesus' earnest words, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness," and let everything else come to you in the good providence of the God of love who orders all our ways. It may be that when Reuben and Gad spoke the words of v.17-18 they were being quite sincere, but they knew neither the frailty of their own hearts nor the narrowness of their spiritual understanding, nor the watchful enmity of their neighbours. The plan of the two tribes may have seemed feasible to them but what would the situation be for their children after them?

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### 32:16-27

Continue the closing thought of yesterday's reading and, looking on to the next generation, consider the warning in v.23. It does not necessarily mean that our sinful wrongdoing will be found out by others and made public, although that is a real possibility. It means that our sins will find *us* out and come home to roost in our lives and circumstances *and* in those of our children and their children after them. The society we now live in and dislike so much is what our fathers made for us, and in our folly we are making it even worse for the younger generation, because we follow the sin of these two tribes by allowing ourselves to be infected with the spirit of materialism and worldliness. Is it not true that spiritual drifting produces more casualties than spiritual rebellion? How many godly families have simply religious, decent children and then worldly unbelieving grandchildren? It is so easy to drift from the living heart of the work of God until you are virtually a passenger and spectator on the fringe of it all. This is how it worked with Reuben and Gad. Read Joshua 22, where the two tribes were commended for keeping their vow to fight in the war, but note carefully how their separation from the main body of Israel was already taking place. It is not enough to have a "copy" of holy religion (Josh. 22:28) and the parents were already aware of the danger of their children drifting and forgetting. The history books of the Old Testament tell how when Israel's enemies came against them the most vulnerable and the first to be attacked were Reuben and Gad on the east side of Jordan. They had chosen their own way and they had to live with it.

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### 32:28-42

The scheme was agreed, settled and sealed in the presence of God by the priest. Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh settled in Transjordan. Some commentators say that not only was this a wrong desire on the part of the tribes concerned but it was also a wrong decision on the part of Moses. They point out that there is no mention of Moses seeking God's guidance. But it is a fact of experience that if men will not listen to reasoned, spiritual argument they cannot be kept from going their own way and there is a time for allowing people to do so. Elisha did this with the young prophets in 2 Kings 2:15-18. Sometimes leaders have to consent to things they know to be unwise and bereft of God's blessing and allow experience to teach wisdom to the presumptuous. Of course, as in the story of these tribes, the consequences often do not appear immediately and this gives people a false sense of security (Eccles. 8:11-13) and without justification they assume they are still men and women of spiritual integrity. "The whole event should teach us that no merely selfish desire for early and easy realisation of peace and prosperity should ever be permitted to interfere with the declared will of God.

No policy of compromise can ever justify a coming short of Divine purpose. Peaceable settlements on the wrong side of the river are the inspiration and causes of conflict in subsequent days." (Morgan) When will we learn that we are living and working in the interest of the future? We must never sell out the future for mere present satisfaction. That would make us like Esau (Heb. 12:12-17).

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### **35:1-4**

These verses begin the itinerary of the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to the plains of Moab, and the story occupies the whole of this chapter. Some forty-one stages are detailed but no doubt these are only the significant ones. Moses appears to have kept a diary of the journey and these introductory verses make a significant point. The Exodus was not an "escape" in the sense of running away from a power greater than themselves and to be feared. It was a "going forth", a triumphal march as v.3 makes plain, the kind of march that declared publicly that they went forward on the basis of an unquestioned and total victory which God had accomplished for them on the night of the Passover. It was not only the Egyptians who had been struck down but their gods. The driving and inspiring spirits behind the secular power of Egypt were cast down and their inferiority demonstrated in a signal way. It was on the basis of a spiritual battle fought and won in the "heavenly places" that the work began and continued, and we need to remember this, for it is true of ourselves (Eph.6:10-12). In Daniel 10:12-14 the "spirits" behind world powers are spoken of. In 1 Cor. 10:18-21 Paul speaks of real spiritual persons and powers behind idolatry. In the whole of the Book of Revelation we are shown the dimension of the war between the Dragon and Christ, and in Col. 2:15 we are told of the principalities and powers of the world being conquered and disarmed. This being so, whether we speak of Israel's wanderings or our own experiences there is no real reason why we should succumb to the threats and blandishments of evil men and evil powers. The truth about Satan is that he is conquered. Put it plainly. Jesus is stronger than Satan, and is in no way afraid of him.

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### **33:5-37**

It would take a long time to look up references, in Exodus and elsewhere, to all these place names but it would be a profitable exercise. It would cause us to review our own past pilgrimage and remind us that we too are pilgrims and strangers on a God-planned journey to a glorious destination (Heb. 11:13-16). When you think of the various stages of the journey, think of Jesus' words in John 14:1-3. They do not simply refer to heaven but to the picture of an Eastern caravan on a long journey. When the captain decides that the people have gone far enough for one day he sends his appointed scout on ahead to find a safe and well-watered resting place for the night. Just think: we never journey alone, and we must learn not to drive ourselves to the point of exhaustion for that would simply lay us open to the assaults and temptations of the Devil. We must learn to rest. Note how there is recorded here the fact that there were wells of water at Elim (9). The verse makes no mention of the bitter murmuring of the people at Marah but emphasises the blessings of the twelve springs and seventy palm trees. All the journeyings had not obliterated in any way the memory of these past blessings that were so sweet. We need to look back and to count our blessings and in seeing what God has done we will encourage our hearts in the Lord. In this detailed diary there is no mention of all the sins and failures of the past because God is the God who blots out our transgressions and refuses to remember them (Isa. 43:25). "When we get to heaven and study the way-book, we shall find all the deeds of love and self-denial carefully recorded, though we have forgotten them; and all the sins blotted out, though we remember them." (Meyer) Think of Jesus' words in Matt. 25:34-40.

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### **33:38-49**

Because there are several passages of Scripture to refer to we take two days to consider these verses which continue the review of the past journeys of the children of Israel right to their last camping place in the plains of Moab, just across the river Jordan from the city of Jericho. Mention is made of the death of Aaron (cf. 20:22-

29) and, much as this was a loss and a cause of mourning in Israel, it is made plain that it was no accident. His work was done, his time was ended, and the Lord called him home. In past days the Salvation Army spoke of its officers being promoted to glory and we must think of Aaron in this way. We must think of ourselves in this way and teach our children conviction regarding the life to come. Then, when faced with death, none of us will fear, nor will we sorrow as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13-18), for to be absent from the flesh is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6-8) and to be with Christ is far better (Phil. 1:23). Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death we must remember that death can only shadow, it cannot claim or harm us, since Christ has conquered death (1 Cor. 15:51-57; 2 Tim. 1:10). Of course we must still give an account of our stewardship and faithfulness (1 Cor. 4:2). There is such a thing as reward and loss in heaven as 1 Cor. 3:10-15 and 2 Cor. 5:10 make plain. The right way to live the life of faith is to live so that we will have no regrets when the time comes to meet our God. The Psalmist is wise when he asks the Lord to help him to think of the end and to number his days (Ps 90: 9-12). Time is precious and not to be wasted. There is nothing here to make us morbid nor is there any need. We are confident in our hope but so much time is gone already and we do not know what time is left. It will best for us if we are looking forward hopefully rather than looking back with regret. God is a God of grace and with Him is plenteous redemption (Ps. 130:7 AV).

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### **33:50-56**

The whole of Israel's future depended on the obedience of faith. They were to do what God said, in the way God told them to do it, otherwise there would be both short-term and long-term consequences. This obedience of faith is totally reasonable. It requires men of faith to believe that God knows better than they do and that everything He commands and does is righteous (Gen. 18:25). The warning given here of no compromise or association with the Canaanites is a solemn one that we must understand. Much of the worship of these inhabitants of Canaan was crude, obscene and carnal in a vile manner. God understood, in a way that Israel failed to acknowledge, the lure, pull and fleshly appeal of these idolatrous practices. Sin and evil can so often appear fascinating, stimulating and altogether desirable that our critical faculties are stunned and we are unable to discern the sinister and destructive power of evil that is in them. When the people of God get involved in such God-denying things it is never their primary intention to depart from God. But in fact and practice the devilish design is nothing less than to steal God's people away. This is why God warns His people. If they are not prepared to be serious and radical with sin, then the sins they allow to remain, regarding them as intriguing interests rather than destructive devils, will prove to be a continuing affliction through the whole of their experience. When will we learn not to play around with sin? There is no need. There is no profit, and even the pleasure is short-lived and highly priced. Note the last verse. God kept His word and in due time Israel was carried captive out of the land into Babylon. God will not allow even His own redeemed children to spoil His work by their stupid sinning.

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### **33:50-56**

One further practical lesson has to be learned. These verses make plain that conflict will always be the mark of a true work of God as it advances, for it involves two kingdoms that cannot ever be reconciled. The Devil's quarrel is not primarily or ultimately with us as individuals. It is his kingdom against God's kingdom, and God's triumph necessarily brings about the downfall of the whole world kingdom of evil. The dimension of the warfare is seen if we take seriously 1 John 5:19 AV. The whole world order lies in the wicked one and the glorious gospel campaign is ever to cast down all his strongholds. This warfare is spiritual but it is expressed in these Old Testament stories in physical and geographical terms. Do not fail to see that the whole costly campaign was started and fought out on the basis of the victory that God had already given to His people. He had given them the land. They had to advance in faith to take it, subdue it and rule it for God's continuing purpose. The guiding principle must be: no compromise with anything that competes with God. And what is more we must recognise that, by the very nature of the warfare, the further the work of God advances and the more established it becomes, the more the Devil will fight against it whether by fierce onslaught or by crafty stratagem. The work is twofold. It involves a knocking down, a rooting out and an unlearning of old

ways, together with the positive taking possession, the building up and the fashioning of the entire pattern of thought and desiring in the renewing of our minds (Jer. 1:9, 10; Rom. 12:1). Never forget Jesus' words about tribulation in the world and about how the world will love its own but hate what is Christ's (John 15:18-23; 16:33).

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### 34:1-12

This whole chapter could provide for those so equipped a detailed lesson in geography, not least to compare the dimensions given here with those promised to Abraham in Gen. 15:18. Those so inclined could speculate as to the relevance of these details to the contemporary Middle East situation with its struggles about territorial rights. Such a debate is too wide for these daily readings but what we can learn is that the whole of life, not just personal life but the life history of the world, lies within and under the sovereign will and purpose of Almighty God. It is God's world, not man's and there is no fulfilling of its destiny apart from Christ through whom and for whom the whole order of creation was brought into being (Col. 1:15-17). Another thing we see here is the amazing condescension of God in being so meticulous and particular in marking out in an unmistakable way the territory He had prepared for His people. He did not want them to live in debilitating uncertainty. But there is a third spiritual lesson here. We, like the people of Israel, must learn the boundaries and limits of our lives so that we may know how far we may go and also where we must stop. We must not hold back, neither must we barge ahead thoughtlessly and precipitately beyond the measure of faith (Rom. 12:3). The possibilities of life are limitless in the hope of our calling, and the riches to fulfil the possibilities are provided (Eph. 1:18). But while we are here on earth we must learn to accept the limitations that God has set for us. To insist on something God has forbidden is to transgress, and is an attitude of life that embitters, makes barren, and even destroys.

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### 34:13-29

The detailed division of the territory was made by God's decision and allocation. It was sovereign but no doubt it had relation to the size and need of the various tribes. God does not work blindly and His perfect knowledge of the different tribes, their temperament and capacity, and His purpose for them in their development and service were also incorporated in the divine decision and disposition. Nothing is by chance, and this is a profound spiritual lesson of great practical import. If God sets us in a place where our first reaction is one of distaste for both the place and the people we are set beside, we must set a guard on our souls. Don't let our words be complaint, "Why should this happen to me?" Rather let us ask the question, "What has God set me here for and what has He prepared for me?" This is tremendous comfort. But at the same time we accept that people do get out of the will of God. We read of it here concerning Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh. They had made their choice and it was now ratified. As we pointed out in earlier readings they were the first tribes to be captured and carried away. Some decisions have long-term consequences. Some can never be rectified. Sometimes Christians who have got out of sorts and have wandered far from where they once were spiritually have a long way to retrace their steps in penitence to where they first went astray. We are in God's hand. Read Proverbs 16:1-9, 33 and Job 23:14. How we need to keep our eyes on God. This was the error of the Pharisees and Jesus said of them that they *had had* their reward (Matt. 6:2, 5, 16). Think of how we say to some people in certain situations, "You've had it".

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### 34:13-29

Here now is a list of the names of the people to whom God entrusted the immediate carrying out of His will and work. He trusted them, frail and fallible creatures that they were. It is natural that Joshua and Eleazar, the spiritual leaders of the people, should be mentioned first. But they, like all the others, were under the direction of the Lord. There was no free-lance independence. In the list beginning in v.18 the first to be mentioned is Caleb who now reaped the long-term reward of his earlier faithfulness. We know nothing about the rest of the men, save that they were the individuals selected by God from each of the tribes. But why these men? Why should the issues of equity and spiritual administration be entrusted to them rather than to others? Is it because

they had proved themselves over a spell of time, as Caleb had done, to be worthy of trust? We cannot answer the questions but we can point the lesson. If we are called to serve the Lord in specific duties we must be ready, willing, trained and of sufficient capacity. No one will ever feel worthy or competent and this causes us to cast ourselves on God for His constant and sufficient grace; there is no greater snare than self-confidence. These were men for God. "The names provide interesting insight into Israel's name system, e.g. Shemuel, name of God; Elidad, God has loved; Hannel, favour of God; Elizaphan, my God protects; Paltiel, God is my deliverance; Pedahel, God has redeemed, etc," (New Bible Commentary). We may not have God in our names quite in that way but if our lives are centred on the great redeeming God who saves and blesses His people, then we are at the beginning of being trusted with the holy things of God on which He sets such high value.

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### **35:1-8**

The Levites were no longer a secular tribe but set apart for holy service. They were given no territorial possession in the land but God made provision for them. Having been set apart for holy ministry God ordained that they were to be provided for out of the possessions of the other tribes in proportion as each was able to give. They were given forty-eight cities throughout the land and outside these cities a specified area of land was earmarked for their flocks and herds. Those who are mathematically minded can try to draw a diagram of the situation but it is difficult to know if the area of land was the same in each case or if it varied according to the size of the city. In the larger cities in the more populous tribes there would be more Levites and a greater need for provision. The significant thing is that the Levites could not all be engaged in holy service in the central sanctuary of the Tabernacle, although there would no doubt be a rota of duties as indicated in Luke 1:5, 8-9. When not at the Tabernacle these men, set apart by God for holy service, were scattered throughout the whole land so that there was in every area some spiritual witness. In Deut. 33:10 the Levites are spoken of as having a teaching ministry that would bring the whole people under the instruction of God's Law. It was a full-time rather than part-time ministry and it had to be maintained by the offerings of the people. This is the New Testament pattern and principle that Paul defended even though he chose to be independent of it (1 Cor. 9:11-15). But let the final emphasis be on the fact of God's concern that His people should not be without spiritual ministry. The Levites' privilege brought great responsibility as Ezek. 34:1-10 makes plain.

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### **35:9-28**

The cities of refuge, six in number, were so positioned through the land, three on either side of the Jordan, that no-one was ever more than about thirty miles from one of them. Many people interpret this as a type of Christ, who is the sinner's only safe shelter and to whom he can flee from the judgment of God. The same kind of interpretation can be put on the references to the death of the high priest in v.25, 28 and 32, where the death of the man appointed to be the representative of the people in the presence of God blotted out the past and ushered in a new beginning. The man who had fled could then be restored to the inheritance he had forfeited by sin. These are necessary and wonderful thoughts but they are not really of the essence of the passage. The man who fled to the city of refuge had the assurance that his case would be investigated with justice and impartiality. It was not a case of a man simply escaping from the consequences of his wrongdoing. The deliberate murderer was to pay the price (16-21). The accidental or hasty killer could fly from the next of kin of the victim, whose duty it was to avenge the wrong, and in the city of refuge he had the right of thorough investigation into all the circumstances. This was the duty of the whole congregation of Israel and it tells of a very high standard of corporate responsibility for the moral as well as the spiritual condition of society. Note that even if the man was declared free from the death penalty he still had to remain in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest. This was his only safety. The whole passage emphasises the value God places on human life. It also searches deeply into our motives for action. This has a great deal to do with our guilt or innocence.

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### **35:29-34**

Here again the emphasis is on the impartial justice of God. "These people were naturally fierce and vindictive.

The law of God had made life sacred, and the punishment of taking life had been solemnly declared in the words: 'Who so sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.' Yet it was quite possible that in connection with the taking of human life there might be extenuating circumstances. For premeditated murder there was no forgiveness, and for the murderer in such a case, no city of refuge was provided." (Morgan) This raises for some all sorts of questions regarding the present system of justice and of course the mental condition and responsibility of the offender. That is a big debate, not for a daily study note. But at the same time we must see clearly the divine reasoning behind this strict pattern of justice. It was in order that the land should not be polluted or defiled, for it belonged to God and was His dwelling place (33, 34). Nowadays we hear much about environmental pollution and preservation but this is never related to the moral impurity and the carnal indulgence of the nation. It is not just our rivers, countryside and streets, nor even the air we breathe that is being polluted. The whole atmosphere of the land is being infected with the sinister disease of moral decadence and part of the terrible consequence is that very few seem to have the motivation to speak against it, let alone take action. In the next decade the issue of law and order must become paramount and God will not hold us guiltless if we fail to do our part in keeping the land from being polluted.

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### **36:1-13**

We need the background of chap. 27:1-7 to understand this passage. The original provision was to guard against crowding out the weak and defenceless and to make sure that no man or woman was denied their place or identity in the work and fellowship of the people of God. But individual rights, privileges and fulfillments may not be allowed to unbalance the work of God, as would happen here if the daughters of Zelophehad married into other tribes and took with them their family territory. The more this went on the more distorted from the original God-given pattern would the division of the land become. We see here how every personal consideration and all basic changes in status and function have to be subjected to God. We must seek the mind and will of God in the entire administration of our lives and, particularly in the realm of human affection and relationships, we must guard against imbalance. It is all too easy to agree with people and to go with them in their chosen way because we like them. But sometimes love for them requires us to challenge or chide them graciously, lest they go astray from the good will of God and lead others astray with them. It is interesting to note here that the original decision in chapter 27, made in the right frame of mind and seeking humbly the will of God, has now to be qualified and made more specific. There is no denial of God's guidance, no rebuke of Moses for not legislating for every contingency right from the start, nor any rebellion or complaint about God's sovereign right later to state what should be done and how His people should live. It was simply a matter that as the years passed, the situation changed, the girls wanted to get married. When God's guidance was sought, it was given.

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### **36:1-13**

This is an intriguing passage for it reveals that the relationships of love and marriage among the people of God were matters belonging to the whole fellowship rather than just to the individuals concerned. The heads of the fathers' houses must have become aware of relationships beginning and they felt that this was a matter to take to God in prayer. There is no reason to suppose that the girls objected, for after all they belonged to the people of God and were concerned that God's will should be done in their lives. We are beginning to learn in this realm something of the blessing as well as the safeguard of knowing the mind of the fellowship for is it not true that a people living, working and worshipping together in mutual love and trust will together know the mind of the Lord in the matter of major decisions? It takes great boldness of heart to act or hold back from acting against the opinion of those who love us and pray for us. We have so much to learn about that kind of sharing that brings all activity into God's presence without in any way denying or even transgressing into that holy realm of personal and private feeling and decision. It is most instructive to read in Acts 13:1-4 how the missionaries were sent out. It was not their volunteer spirit but rather the call of God which both the individuals and the fellowship recognised and ratified. Some missionary societies now ask that a candidate's application should be forwarded by the church, but all too often the decisions are made before the church is approached. It was not so in this

passage. As soon as the issue arose as a possibility (v.3 ..if..) the mind of the Lord was sought.

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### **36:1-13**

Since this situation involved possessions, property and relationships, as well as the work of God, it seems good to take the opportunity to apply the lessons. Once certain decisions are made the area for manoeuvre and change can become very limited. We take on commitments up to the limit of our capacity and our long-term liability is such that we are compelled to pursue our present course indefinitely. We not only assume that the Lord will not call us to a new form of life and service, we can also be so burdened with commitments that they become a distraction from and competitor to wholehearted spiritual service. We may wish it was otherwise but we can see no escape. If this confusion, and possibly regret, can arise in the realm of possessions it can also come in the area of personal relationships. We have often spoken of the biblical principle that a believer must not marry an unbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14) but in the story of Zelophehad's daughters this was not the issue. They were marrying within Israel but they had to keep to their own tribe. This is not just a matter of compatibility but of God's plan for individual lives. Two Christians marrying is not, necessarily Christian marriage, and there are in fact Christian marriages that are unhappy and holding together only in a superficial way. We do look for compatibility in two people who will complement each other but we, especially the people involved, can see and assess only as things are evident at the present moment. What of future development in character, capacity and spiritual maturity that the marriage will be instrumental in bringing about? How can we know? Do what they did here. They sought the mind of the Lord and the girls got married in the will of God. We pursue this theme tomorrow.

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### **36:1-13**

We emphasise the last verse of the chapter which shows a people living in submission to the will and command of the Lord. This was how they faced their future so full of opportunity and demand. Now the Bible says that the will of God is to be delighted in because it is not only good and perfect, it is acceptable (Rom. 12:2 AV). This means that it is in the sovereign choice and plan of God that all our lives are ordered. In the will of God the gift of marriage is given to some and withheld from others, and, while there may be many reasons for this, we must believe that all is dictated by the grace of God. It is a fact of experience that there is a scarcity of Christian men (and that is not the same as males who are Christians). There are Christian men who refuse to grow up or to take a responsible attitude to life. We see women of grace and character, with a wealth of love to give, and yet they do not get married. Many married couples are greatly insensitive to such people and add to their hurt. But if we concentrate on the human situation with its inevitable comparisons there will certainly come envy and bitterness and that is destructive. We may not know why God is dealing with us in a certain way, denying us what we feel we need so deeply and giving that very thing to others who do not seem to need it in the same way. But we must trust. We dare not believe that life's development is accidental or indiscriminate. We are in the hand of a Father who loves us beyond our knowing and we must leave the mysteries of life with Him. The whole of 1 Cor. 7 is a treatise on this theme and often misread but it does say that each has his own special gift (7) and all are to lead the life God has assigned to them (17).

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### **Summary**

To conclude our long series of detailed studies in Numbers we seek to summarise the lessons, and to help us we read 2 Chron. 6:36-42; 7:12-22, although these passages refer to a time far on in Israel's history in the land of Canaan. In Numbers we have been at the end of a sorry spell of forty years when Israel had lived under the rebuke of God. But certain lessons had been learned. God had redeemed His people and apart from this fact and God's purpose for them they would have lived and died in slavery and been forgotten. Of themselves they were nothing. All they were was because of the free electing grace of God. Secondly, God had taught this people by word and action and in spiritual and moral laws had sought to make them conscious of their high and holy

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calling and to persuade them that they had a significance and a destiny beyond their own generation. Thirdly, God had persevered with this people even when they sat lightly to His words, presumed upon His blessing, refused to grow up in the obedience of faith, and actually turned back from obedience to His will. Although He rebuked, disciplined and punished them, He did not cast them off. God was faithful to His covenant and after thirty-eight years He began again with a new generation. To time-table this for ourselves it would mean (when these notes were first written) from 1986 to 2024 would be years of spiritual wandering with no significant move forward in the work of God. There is no need for it to be so. God is faithful and has promised all-sufficient grace. We have learned that the people were being prepared for the conflict of spiritual warfare, because the future had to be laid hold on in the name of God. Keep in mind that we are always working for the future, our children's and grandchildren's future, as well as our own. That should not over-burden us, for it is God who gives us the victory. But how we need to watch and pray lest we enter into temptation. The issues are great, and our confidence is in the great and faithful God.

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