

THE BOOK of NUMBERS

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THE BOOK of NUMBERS

The Book of Numbers is so named because of the double numbering or census of the people (chapters 14 and 16). It gives the journeyings of the people of Israel from the time of their departure from Sinai until they arrived on the plains of Moab, on the borders of the Promised Land. The book covers a period of about thirty-eight years.

1) 1:1

A passage in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 10:1ff) crystallises the story of Numbers for us. The Old Testament story, the Apostle tells us, is designed in the providence of God to be an example for us in the Christian life, and the things we read here are so apposite to that life that they can be taken as direct and certain parallels (cf also Romans 15:4). The fact, however, that these things are written for our instruction, does not mean that the book of Numbers is not true or accurate history. Its historicity is not in question; but its purpose is something greater and more important than the recording of the historical process: it is divine revelation, the unfolding of redemptive history in the context of God's dealings with His Old Testament people. As Paul makes plain, Christians may find encouragement and instruction for spiritual life through the reading of the Old Testament and, discovering the principles by which God dealt with His people, apply them in practical ways to their lives. Looked at in this light, the study of the Old Testament ceases to be merely an exercise in historical research having little relevance to daily living, and becomes the living word of God to men in practical situations. It is certain that in our study we shall find all kinds of situations in these far-off days showing forth principles of action, conduct and thought which are highly relevant for our time. There would be no point in studying it otherwise; it is not the cloister but the battleground that is the proper environment for the reading of the Old Testament.

2) 1:1

A word or two must be said to put the book of Numbers in its proper setting. The Bible is one book, and its theme is one. There is an underlying unity in it, from Genesis through to Revelation, and we do not understand any particular book until we see it in relation to the whole. Artists are said to know the kind of frame to put their pictures in, and only a particular setting will bring out their hidden beauties and suggestions. This is true also in relation to the Scriptures. It is not possible to study Numbers 'in vacuo'. We need to see where it belongs, and how it is placed in the over-all picture. Christ once said to the Pharisees, 'Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life'. Then He added, 'They are they, which testify of Me'. Until we grasp this key, we shall never understand the Scriptures aright; the story of Christ begins long before Bethlehem. He is the eternal Son of the Father, the Second Person of the Trinity, and belief in the Trinity commits us to the truth that He operated in history before His Incarnation. This is the point of Paul's words, about 'the Rock which followed them, and that Rock was Christ'. Christ was there with the children of Israel in the wilderness, the unseen Presence that guided and directed them in all their way.

The Old Testament, then, is about Christ - we do not mean by this the abstruse and improbable allegorising of certain passages or texts, but in the broad sweep of the story from beginning to end. The Old Testament is the history of the 'promised seed' (Genesis 15:5), the seed of Abraham who was to become the Redeemer of the world. Significantly, Matthew begins his gospel with the words 'Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham'. This serves to gather together the whole story of the Scriptures from Genesis through to the New Testament, into one underlying basic theme, with Jesus Christ at its centre. Until we grasp this we will understand neither the book of Numbers nor any other book of the Old Testament as we are meant to.

3) 1:1

Historically, so far as the story of God's people is concerned, Numbers follows Exodus: indeed, its first verse follows hard upon Exodus 40:2ff, with no more than a month elapsing between them. A brief recapitulation of the 'story' unfolded up to this point may be useful: In the beginning God made man in His own image, made him for fellowship with Himself, and ordained Him for a destiny bright with hope and promise. But sin entered the world; tragedy overtook the divine creation, and whereas in the beginning all was light, now sin entered and brought darkness. But God said, so to speak, 'I must bring light again into this darkness'. And in the fulness of the time, there came One who said, 'I am the light of the world'. Now, the whole of the Old Testament is a time of preparation for the coming of that One. As soon as man fell into sin, God gave the promise of redemption: 'The seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent.' That is the primal promise, and from that seed, there comes the growth of the great Tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

4) 1:1

By and by, in the story of Genesis, God concentrated His attention on one man. He said, 'To put My plan into operation, I need a Man'. And He laid His hand on Abraham, making farreaching and amazing promises to him: 'In thee and in thy seed shall all families of the earth be blessed', and subjecting him to the pressures and disciplines of His grace. It is the story of the clay in the hand of the potter. God takes this lump of clay and begins to shape it into a vessel of His mercy. And the whole Old Testament is concerned with the shaping of that lump of clay. As the story goes on, presently the man of God's choosing becomes a family; miraculously, and contrary to nature, he becomes a family; and that family by a strange concourse of events is brought down into Egypt, and begins to multiply there. Brought into bondage and serfdom by the Egyptians, God raises another man, Moses, to be their deliverer. Nor is it surprising that the man He raises up should suggest to our minds the One who was to come. The whole record glitters and gleams with suggestions and illustrations and adumbrations of the greater reality that was to come. It is certainly not fanciful to think that we see shadows of Christ in the Old Testament story. These are the edges of His ways, just brushing the side of the canvas, so to speak, or the stage of history, before His time.

5) 1:1

That providentially constituted and preserved nation God in time brought out of Egypt and on its way to the Promised Land; and, having first begun to deal with a man, Abraham, He now begins to deal with the seed of Abraham, this great multitude, called Israel, according to promise.

The nation begins to be disciplined at Sinai. It receives the law; it receives the whole elaborate system of sacrifices; it receives the cloud and the fire to lead it and guide it. Then, having received the whole institution of the tabernacle and the sacrifices, they were ready to move on, because God's plan for, and promise to, Abraham was to give him the Promised Land, so that, eventually, in the fullness of the time, having been established there, they might produce the Promised Seed, the Saviour of the world. The mystery of the Incarnation is the culmination of the drama begun in the call of Abraham. Unless we see that the Christmas story is integrally related in this way to the book of Numbers, there will be no kind of relevance in our study. But when we do see it, the study of Numbers becomes tremendously important as vital living truth from beginning to end.

Numbers, then, is the next instalment, so to speak, of the story of God's dealing with His people, the continuing discipline of Israel and the shaping of the vessel in the hand of the Potter.

6) 1:1

Briefly, the story of Numbers is as follows: Israel is preparing to leave Mount Sinai on the road to the Promised Land. It was a journey of some weeks, perhaps two or three months at the most, if they had taken a direct route. They proceeded towards the border, to a place called Kadesh Barnea, where spies, one from each tribe, were sent in to reconnoitre and report back to Moses. The majority report of the spies was against going forward, in spite of the known will of God for them to go in and possess the land, and in spite of the protests of Caleb and Joshua, two of the spies who saw beyond the difficulties and hazards they would undoubtedly have to face, the opportunities set before them by a faithful and enabling God. The pessimistic report won the day, and the people murmured against the Lord, Who in anger turned them back and refused to let them enter in. For nearly forty years they were made to wander in the wilderness, till that entire generation died off. The main part of the book therefore deals with the experience of divine discipline in the wilderness, 'in the crucible of God'. The end of the book shows Israel 'not out of the bit' geographically, and further forward but a sadder and wiser people. Numbers is a book that need not have been, a story that need never have been told.

7) 1:154

We come now to the text, and in this chapter to the numbering of the tribes, an operation which, as we see from a comparison of 1:1 with 10:11, took nineteen days. The object of this exercise was to list the numbers of men twenty years of age and upwards who were 'able to go forth to war' (3). This indicates a military purpose. The God of Israel was mustering His people for advance into the Promised Land and into the fulfilment of His sovereign purposes for them. In 515 we have a list of those summoned to help Moses in making the census. These were all tribal princes (4,16). The census was carried out on the same day that it was commanded (1719), and the results are recorded in 2046, the tribes numbering in all over 600,000 men under arms. One obvious point to note in 2046 is the unequal strength of the various tribes. Numbers are not insignificant from the human point of view, and there may well be some point made by this particular disposition of the tribes. The remarkable passage in Genesis 49, where the dying Jacob gives his blessing to his sons, and makes some very shrewd and penetrating comments on them, may be a key to understanding the significance of these figures. The tribe of Reuben, for example, numbering 46,500, is one of the smaller tribes, yet Reuben was Jacob's firstborn. But Reuben was not to excel (Genesis 49:4), a reference in all probability to the birthright which by his sin (Genesis 35:22) he forfeited. It is more than likely that there is a connection between Reuben's sorry history and the subsequent insignificance of his tribe. It is a matter of history that neither king, nor judge nor prophet is ever recorded from the tribe of Reuben.

8) 1:154

To continue the thought in the previous comment, it is also worthy of note that the great, outstanding figures of Old Testament history (as indeed also in the New Testament) belong in the main to a few tribes such as Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, rather than to the others. Moses was of the tribe of Levi; Joshua was of the tribe of Ephraim; Caleb was of the tribe of Judah; Gideon of the tribe of Manasseh; Samuel of the tribe of Ephraim; David of the tribe of Judah; Saul of Tarsus of the tribe of Benjamin. It is impressive to realise that the tribes that stemmed from progenitors who sinned grievously and heinously threw up no great figures, no men of renown. There is such a thing as the entail of sin, as there is an entail of grace, an influence for good and evil can spread to the third and fourth generations and often far beyond. No man lives unto himself. We are making our future now, far more than we know, and it may be the future of our families also (cf Isaiah 58:12, 'Thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations').

9) 1:154

In the census of the twelve tribes Levi is not numbered, the tribe of Joseph being divided into two, Ephraim and Manasseh, to make up the twelve (the numbering of the tribe of Levi in chapter 3 was not for military purposes but in that the firstborn of the other tribes might be matched one by one with the numbers in the tribe of Levi). In 4754 the omission of Levi from the census is now explained. The Levites were set apart for the spiritual service of the sanctuary. Two points of considerable interest and importance arise from the peculiar position of Levi in the divine economy. The first is this: Paul invites us, in his attitude to the Old Testament Scriptures, to look for spiritual lessons relating to the Church in the history of Israel, and thus encouraged we may say this: in any company of God's people, He sets some apart for the work of the sanctuary. This is the unquestionable proofmark of an authentic congregation or people of God. Furthermore, it is clear that this 'setting apart' was an integral part of the life and experience of Israel there was nothing 'special' about it, on the contrary, there is almost a 'matter of fact'-ness, even an inevitability, about it. This is taken up by the Apostle in Ephesians 4:8ff, where he says, 'When Christ ascended up on high, He led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men... and He gave some to be apostles, some prophets...for the perfecting of the saints...'. This is precisely the principle seen here; God setting apart some in the fellowship for specific spiritual service. In any company of God's people, if they are an authentic people of God, this will happen in their midst.

10) 1:154

The second point to note in the special position of the Levites is this: the service they were to render to God owed nothing to numbers. It is impressive to realise that when they were counted (3:12ff) their number amounted to only 22,000, which is less than half most of the other tribes, even the smallest. Quality, not quantity, was to be the criterion. Their strength lay not in numbers, but in their being separated unto God in purity of life. Given this, one with God is always a majority. One recalls the story of Gideon and his three hundred men in Judges 7, when God deliberately cut down an army of thirty two thousand to a mere handful, through whom the hosts of Midian were defeated. 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts' (Zechariah 4:6). God chooses the weak things of the world to confound the mighty (1 Corinthians 1:27). There were only twelve apostles, but they turned the world upside down.

11) 2:1-34

This chapter delineates the organisation of the camp of the Israelites and the order of their forward march. The purpose of God in having numbered the people and arranged them in this way has been variously assessed, in military, or in purely utilitarian, or in religious terms. It is clear that the mode of Israel's advancement on their journey to the Promised Land was laid down by God: this is how they were to journey, and this was the order of the pilgrimage. But it is just as clear that they were drawn up in battle array, because they were to be God's instruments of judgment against the heathen nations of Canaan, who had filled up their cup of wrath to the brim, having lived lives of such degradation that they were fit for nothing but judgment. This is the real meaning of the wars of Israel in the Promised Land: they were wars of judgment, and Israel was the rod of His anger against the wickedness of the Canaanite civilisation just as, centuries later, God raised up the Assyrian and Babylonian powers to be the instruments of His chastisement against His own sinning people.

This double emphasis upon pilgrimage and warfare is borne out by the interesting reference in 4:23 to the sons of Gershon of the tribe of the Levites, where the phrase 'to perform the service' translated literally reads 'to war the warfare'. There is a real sense in which even the Levites, who were set apart for the service of the sanctuary, were involved in a holy warfare; and this is one of the reasons why this particular arrangement of the tribes can be spoken of both in military and in religious terms, and why by analogy we may speak of the Christian life as both a pilgrimage to the Promised Land and a warfare for the kingdom of God. Both are true, and both are foreshadowed in this chapter.

12) 2:1-34

It may serve to illumine our understanding of the seemingly prosaic and rather humdrum record of tribal dispositions given in this chapter to think of the modern analogy of troop movements in wartime. Many who served in the Forces during the Second World War were frequently tempted to feel that there was neither rhyme nor reason in the way in which they were moved hither and thither across the face of the earth, without any discernible pattern being evident to them. But at the top, at General Staff HQ, such movements were not only plain but purposeful: they were making a disposition of troops for battle, and they needed particular troops at particular points at particular times for the over-all strategy of victory. We should look at the arrangements set forth in this chapter in this way, in relation to the underlying and unifying purpose of God in the unfolding of the Old Testament history, of which the book of Numbers is but one episode in the great over-all conception of divine initiative. Thus viewed, every individual movement takes on a completely new significance.

And how much this has to say to us today, in our own situation in Scotland. If there is, as we believe there is, a divine strategy at work, should we not be prepared - and committed - to see all we do, and all that happens to us, in this wider light, rather than be preoccupied with in-turned, even parochial views of ourselves?

13)2:134

As to the specific arrangement and disposition of the tribes, they were set out as follows: on the east side, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun, totalling 186,400 men; on the south, Reuben, Simeon and Gad, numbering 151,450; on the west, Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin, with 108,100; on the north, Dan, Asher and Naphtali, with 157,600. Within this enclosure there was the Tabernacle, at the centre, with the three subdivisions of the Levites positioned on three sides (17, and cf 3:23, 29, 35, 38) the Kohathites on the south, the Gershonites on the west, the Merarites on the north; and on the east, Moses, Aaron and his sons. Such was the disposition of the tribes in encampment (it helps to draw out a diagram of all this). On the march, they were to be in the following order: leading the host came the tribe of Judah, accompanied by Issachar and Zebulun (39), following them, Reuben, accompanied by Simeon and Gad (1016); next, the Tabernacle in the midst of the Levites (17); following the Tabernacle, Ephraim accompanied by Manasseh and Benjamin (1824); and bringing up the rear, Dan, accompanied by Asher and Naphtali (2531). It will be seen from this arrangement that the vanguard and rearguard of the host had the strongest forces, 186,000 and 157,000 respectively, with the smaller tribal groupings within them, and the Tabernacle in the centre. The lessons for spiritual life in this military disposition are not far to seek, and we shall need to look more at some of them.

14)2:134

To each tribe then there was given a place and a function, and each was in his divinely appointed place. It is not difficult to see shadows of New Testament patterns in this. Paul says, 'Let every man abide in the same calling, wherein he was called' (1 Corinthians 7:20) and 'ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular' (1 Corinthians 12:27). The words in 17, 'every man in his place' provide the direct link with these New Testament references. The Danites, for example, were right behind in most of the march; yet they were good fighting men, and therefore particularly fit for that position. They were needed there, to ward off surprise attacks from the rear. The whole pattern presents a vital picture of a spiritual reality. Here is the people of God on the move, with the Ark of God in their midst, the Word of the living God at the heart of everything, as it were, directing all the operations, and sending forth its influence in grace and power. And a church with the Word of God at the heart of its life is a church that will advance purposefully, because it is a church that has life and influence. Later in the story, we shall see how when the Canaanite tribes heard of the advancing host of Israel, their strength was turned to water within them, because they knew that in the midst of them there was a real and living God, a mighty God Who did exploits for His people (Joshua 2:10,11).

15)2:134

The concept of a church advancing with a living power at its heart is one that is sorely needed today. It can hardly be doubted, from all available evidence, that it is the presence of the living Word among the people of God that gives meaning, direction and purpose to their corporate life. And if there is anything calculated to encourage and hearten in the Church situation of our time, it is the steady recovery of the Word in power and authority in more and more churches and gatherings. It is a familiar biblical pattern: at a later stage than the history of Numbers, with the raising up of Samuel the prophet after a long time of drought, barrenness and dearth, in which the word of the Lord was precious (i.e. a scarce commodity) and there was no open vision in the land. At that moment, when the lamp of God was flickering in the Temple, God laid His hand on the young Samuel. And presently it began to be noised abroad that the Word of the Lord was with him; and in a quarter of a century it took all of that time the whole national situation was transformed. This is the message of the chapter. It is when God and His Word are in the midst of the Church that it moves forward like a mighty army. Plant the Word of God in the heart of the Church's life, and once again it will move forward with some purpose. Life for Israel was to be related to the Ark, and submissive to its principles. Not only so: the Ark was to be protected, and reverence shown it. The divine institutions were to be honoured, and the divine order maintained, according to the pattern shown in the mount. God's warfare was to be fought in God's way. It was because Israel later became disobedient to this that she failed to go forward. Is not the lesson for us clear and plain?

16)3:14

The next two chapters describe the special position of the Levites. In 3:151 the nature of their calling and the purpose of their being set apart are described, while chapter 4 delineates the service that the various branches of the tribe were to perform.

These introductory verses about the sons of Aaron serve to explain why Eleazer and Ithamar, Aaron's younger sons, figure in the narrative of Numbers rather than Nadab, his first-born, and Abihu, his second son. Nadab and Abihu, we are told in 4, 'died before the Lord, when they offered strange fire before the Lord in the wilderness of Sinai'. For the details of this solemn incident, see Leviticus 10:1-7. Their sin was a manifold one, as Ellicott points out: (a) they each took his own censer and not the sacred utensil of the sanctuary; (b) they both offered it together whereas incense was only to be offered by one; (c) they presumptuously encroached upon the functions of the high priest, for according to the law the high priest alone burnt incense in a censer (cf Leviticus 16:12,13; Numbers 17:11); (d) they offered the incense at an unauthorised time, since it was apart from the morning and evening sacrifice.

All this is true: but the operative phrase in the incident is 'strange fire' ('strange' here has the force of 'unlawful' or 'common'). The presumptuous priests committed sacrilege by filling their vessels with common fire instead of taking it from the holy fire of the altar, which was always to be used in burning of incense (cf Leviticus 16:12,13).

17)3:14

We have already seen in the last chapter the emphasis on the importance of a proper order of proceedings. This is a theme that runs throughout not only the Pentateuch, but indeed throughout the Old Testament as a whole (cf Exodus 25:40; Numbers 8:4; 1 Chronicles 15:13; 16:40; 28:11,12,19; Hebrews 8:5). It is this that explains the severity of the judgment that came upon the sons of Aaron. Their infringement was conscious and deliberate and, doubtless, accentuated by the fact that they were among those who ascended the mount of God with Moses (Exodus 24:1, 9). The lesson of the incident, underlines the seriousness of departing from God's way and God's command in His service. It is a lesson of timeless and perennial significance. There is a service of the sanctuary and a service of the Lord that He is not prepared to own, which owes its inspiration not to the holy fire of the altar of the gospel, but to other sources and other fires and, be it never so sincere, never so earnest, never so dedicated, it is bound to come to grief. To serve God acceptably, we must light our flame at His altar. Let this be our inspiration and our dynamic. This is a word of considerable relevance today, when the need for new, modern methods in 'getting the gospel over' to our generation is repeatedly emphasised. We need to beware lest a question of methodology become one of theology. It would be easy to stray from the divine order through a desire for innovation for innovation's sake, and thereby lose contact with the divine fire which alone can give true inspiration.

18)3:14

James Denney has a notable passage in a sermon on the Temptations of Jesus, entitled 'Wrong Roads to the Kingdom', which underlines this lesson very graphically: 'There is always a tendency in the Church to trust to methods which appeal rather to the senses than to the soul, or which are believed to be reaching the soul though they never get past the senses. How tempting it is to trust such impressions, as though the coming of the kingdom were really secured by them. No doubt such things make an impression and have an influence; but they are not the influence and the impression through which that kingdom of God can come for which Jesus lived and died. How little He had of all that the Churches are tempted to trust in now. How little there is in the gospels about methods and apparatus! The trust of the Church in other things is really a distrust of the truth and unwillingness to believe that its power lies in itself, a desire to have something more irresistible than truth to plead truth's cause; and all these are modes of atheism. Sometimes our yielding to this temptation is shown in the apathy which falls upon us when we cannot have the apparatus we crave, sometimes in the complacency in which we clothe ourselves when we get it and it draws a crowd. This is precisely the kind of crowd which Jesus refused to draw. The kingdom of God is not there, nor is it to be brought by such appeals. It is not only a mistake, but also a sin, to trust to attractions for the ear and the eye, and to draw people to the church by the same methods by which they are drawn to places of entertainment. What the evangelist calls 'the word' - the spiritual truth, the message of the Father and of His kingdom - spoken in the Spirit and enforced by the Spirit, told by faith and heard by faith - is our only real resource, and we must not be ashamed of its simplicity.'

19)3:5/3

This section recounts the appointment of the Levites as servants to the priests, and they are placed under Aaron's orders - being dedicated to the service of God as substitutes for the firstborn of the people. The significance of the Lord's claim on the firstborn of Israel, and His choice of the Levites instead of them, is somewhat complex, and we must discuss the substitution of the one for the other before we can draw out the lesson that it undoubtedly contains for us. In Exodus 1 we read how the Lord claimed the firstborn of Israel for Himself, following the Passover in Egypt, when all the firstborn of Egypt were slain by the angel of death. This much is clear and without complication. But now (1113, 44ff) the Lord announces that instead of the firstborn He will take the tribe of Levi for Himself. In 40ff we are told how this substitution and changeover took place. The question that arises is: Why this change? And why Levi? Well, the selection of one tribe rather than a heterogeneous mixture of the firstborn from all twelve tribes may in fact have been purely a matter of practical expediency. They would be more easily identifiable and more easily managed than a selection from the twelve tribes could possibly have been. With the Levites, God had, so to speak, a unit ready made, and able to work harmoniously together.

20)3:5/3

The firstborn were, as has been well said, in the most direct sense the beneficiaries of the death of the (Passover) lamb, and thus in a special way the Lord's possession. They must be given to Him: in the case of animals this was done by death; and in the case of human firstborn, it was done by the substitution of the Levites, on a one for one basis, and - for those who could not be accounted for in this way (see 46 the 273 who were in excess of the number of the Levites) by purchase (47ff), in that they were redeemed by silver, the price being paid in ransom to Aaron and his sons.

But why Levi, rather than another tribe? One possible reason may be found in a consideration of an incident recorded in Exodus 32:26-29. Levi had been most zealous for the honour of the Lord at the time of the worship of the golden calf. When Moses stood in the gate of the camp and uttered his famous challenge, 'Who is on the Lord's side ...?' it is recorded that all the sons of Levi rose magnificently to the challenge and came out decisively on the Lord's side. Here, at a critical moment in the history of the people of God, and at the point of challenge and destiny, they gathered themselves to Moses. May not this be the special reason why God chose them? They had been put to the test, and proved, in much the same way as Caleb and Joshua were later tried and proved, by the way they reacted on their return with the spies from the foray in the Promised Land (Numbers 12-13), when they said, 'We are well able to go in and possess the land'. In both cases, they 'made their future' in terms of qualifying themselves for the assumption of responsibility in the work of God in days that were to come.

21)3:1439

The substance of this central section of the chapter concerns the numbering of the tribe of Levi, and the appointment of tasks to the individual groups within it, who are represented by the families of Gershon, Kohath and Merari. These were the families that formed an inner circle round the Tabernacle, with the Gershonites on the west, the Kohathites on the south, and the Merarites on the north (with Moses, Aaron and his sons on the west). To the Gershonites (2126) was given the care of the whole Tabernacle fabric (its actual structure was the responsibility of the Merarites, 36). The original account of the arrangements for the construction of the Tabernacle in Exodus 25ff may be usefully consulted, especially 26:16, also 1 Chronicles 15 (and cf also Numbers 4:2128). In 2732 the responsibilities of the Kohathites are said to be the care of the sacred contents of the Tabernacle, the Ark, the table, the lampstand or candlestick, and the vessels of the sanctuary. They were therefore, entrusted with the most important and valuable items of the sanctuary. Why they, the family of the second son of Levi, should be given this preference is unknown, although in the next chapter (4:2ff) they are placed first, as also in 1 Chronicles 15:5. To the Merarites (3337) was given the custody and charge of the 'boards of the tabernacle, the bars, the pillars, the sockets, and all the vessels thereof.'

22)3:405 I

These verses record the interesting transaction by which the Levites were substituted for the firstborn of Israel, and to which reference was made in an earlier Note. On the basis of a one for one exchange or substitution of Levites for firstborn, 273 firstborn remained unaccounted for. These, as has already been said, could not be simply left, but were to be redeemed with silver, and the price paid in ransom for them to Aaron's sons. This foreshadows the idea of substitution as we find it in the New Testament doctrine of atonement, and it may underlie Peter's words in 1 Peter 1:18. The important thing in this transaction was the Lord's claim upon the firstborn, which was a symbol of His claim upon all the redeemed people. He had redeemed them all out of Egypt, so that they were all His, by right of redemption; but He claimed the firstborn for Himself as a symbol of this fact. This is analogous to the claim He made on the tithe, or tenth, of His people's goods and possessions, which was a symbol of the fact that everything they had was His, and that what they retained could not be regarded, as of right, their own. The firstborn (and by analogy the Levites) belonged to God by virtue of substitutionary atonement having been made for them in the Passover Lamb. They had been spared the visitation of death through the sheltering blood, the marks of which on the doors of Israel indicated that death had already knocked upon them. The Lord's claim upon them therefore is meant to signify that they really 'died' in the Passover judgment, so that they were 'not their own', but 'bought with a price'. It signified that, in this sense, they had no real right to be alive at all. Life for them was purely in the grace of God. This is the significance of the claim on the firstborn. In the New Testament this 'symbol' of belonging to the Lord comes into its own, and enlarges to the whole redeemed community. The body of believers is called 'the general assembly of the firstborn' (Hebrews 12:13), that is, every believer, incorporated into the body of Christ, is in the position of the firstborn, claimed by God, given to God, sealed unto Him, in being redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. We are no longer our own, but the Lord's, a holy priesthood offering up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5; cf also 2 Corinthians 5:14,15).

23)4:149

We come in this chapter to the delineation of the service that the various branches of the tribe of Levi were to perform. That the separated life of the Levites was not only not narrow and restricted but, on the contrary, a full and rich one (God Himself was their inheritance) may be seen from the reference to their function in Deuteronomy 10:8, 9. They were to 'bless in His name'. As having nothing, they possessed all things; as poor, yet they made many rich (2 Corinthians 6:10). It is within this context of a rich, full life, which is both life-giving and fruit-bearing, that we are to set the lessons of this particular chapter. Here we see just how rich, and how, in the providence of God, it was to be life-giving and fruit-bearing. The chapter itself is quite simple and uncomplicated. The sons of Kohath, Gershon and Merari each had particular work appointed to them, and within each family special tasks were apportioned to individuals. The precedence of the Kohathites has already been commented upon (see earlier Note). Perhaps pride of place was given to them because Aaron and Moses belonged to this branch of the family (cf Exodus 6:20; 1 Chronicles 6:13). This may also serve to explain the disproportionate number of verses allocated to the sons of Kohath (120), compared with those describing the service of the sons of Gershon (2128) and the sons of Merari (2933). The description of the various duties follows a uniform pattern throughout (in spite of the disproportionate place given to Kohath) beginning in each case with the divine command to make a census (2, 22, 29), and followed by a delimitation of the period of levitical service (3, 23, 30).

24)4:149

An interesting point arises from a consideration of the period of service for the Levites, here represented as being one of twenty years, from the thirtieth to the fiftieth year. This is however represented differently elsewhere: in 8:23-26 the span is from the twenty-fifth year to the fiftieth; while in 1 Chronicles 23:3, 24 two different figures are given, thirty years and twenty years respectively. Different constructions have been placed on these variations, but the most satisfactory explanation would seem to be that differing conditions required a change of age as time went on. If, for example, David discovered that the elaborate arrangements that he made under the guidance of the Spirit required more men than the narrower age range would provide, he would naturally lower the age limit to include a larger number. Or, for example, if the duties proved to be less onerous and heavy than he had originally anticipated, perhaps younger and less experienced men could be employed to do them. With regard to the upper age limit, there is unanimity. Retirement from service was to be at the age of fifty. Nowadays, when life expectancy is so much more than it was even a hundred years ago, this age limit seems to us unnecessarily low, although in fact the wheel seems to have come round full circle in our highly sophisticated age, when men are often regarded as too old even at forty for new employment!

25)4:149

There is a principle of some importance at work, however, in the variation in the age of entry into the work of the Levites, and it is this: There is no question of any legalism at work, or any question of standing by the letter of the law as if it were unchangeable. Rather, there is evidence of adaptation of the letter of the law, to observe the principle enshrined in it. It is true that ancient usage does give a sanctity to old custom, but ancient usage ought not to make old customs inviolable. What was good enough for one age may not necessarily be best for another, and the principle is surely more important than the letter of the law. The important thing to realise is that the service performed by the Levites was responsible service, requiring responsible people worthily to fulfil it. This consideration may in fact underlie Paul's injunction to Timothy, 'Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil' (1 Timothy 3:6). Whatever the age for the service of the kingdom, this consideration should always be important. The spiritual parallel does not lie in any literal approximation of age for service, and this is not the lesson the Holy Spirit means us to learn. Rather, what is borne witness to is that there is a need in Christian service for people who are mature and in a position to have become trained and equipped for that service. This is a needful reminder in a day in which it becomes increasingly common for people to suppose that, given willingness, anyone can work the work of God, without training, without equipment, and even without a particular aptitude. Goodwill in itself is not enough for the work of the kingdom of God, and no one who is not prepared to submit himself to the disciplines of spiritual training, with all that this involves, will be able to fulfil that service. It is not by accident that Paul uses metaphors and imagery from the athletic field and the field of battle in describing Christian service, nor is it without significance that the word in 33 (translated in the AV as 'host' and in the RSV as 'service') has as its root meaning 'warfare' and 'warlike'.

26)4:149

The appointment of the various tasks to the three families foreshadows a principle that comes into its own in the teaching of the New Testament doctrine of the Church as the body of Christ. It is doubtless true that a superficial reading of this chapter might seem to indicate that the service of the Kohathites was more important than that of the Gershonites, and that of the Gershonites, in turn, than that of the Merarites. Although, however, in one sense this may be true, in another and still more important sense, no distinction can be made, for in fact the work is done, and each family simply makes its contribution with equal force and importance. The one could not exist without the other. This is seen very clearly in the spiritual realm, in Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 12:14-25, in the wonderful analogy of the body. The contrast between the various members of the body reveals differentiation of function, not inferiority. Indeed, Paul stresses that when certain members seem to be feebler than others they are in fact more necessary. Just as those that are thought to be less honourable are all the more necessary; the contrast is seen not so much between two members of the body which are both visible, as between say, the head and the heart, the one seen, the other unseen. In a building, which is more important, the tower, the frontage, or the foundation? There are important lessons here. For one thing, we are reminded that there is spiritual work to be done that is unseen, as foundations are unseen; and spiritual people will not object to not being in the limelight. They are not like Diotrephes, who 'loveth to have the preeminence' (3 John 9). It is, alas, possible to want to do God's work so as to be seen of men; it is possible, almost unconsciously to covet the showy, demonstrative place in Christian service. The unostentatious tasks are sometimes not very attractive to the Christian!

27)4:149

In connection to what was said previously, there is a significant statement in 32. The words 'by name' are referred both by the AV and the RSV to the objects, which the sons of Merari were to carry. But the NEB reads, 'you shall assign to each man by name the load for which he is responsible'. That is to say, in the so-called lowest grade of service, individuals are appointed and taken notice of by name. This is the importance, which God attaches to what seems to us to be more humble and menial work. The fact is, all work in the kingdom of God is royal service, however unostentatious and, from the human standpoint, menial and lowly.

The distinction between differentiation and inferiority is one that is borne out very clearly in the contrast presented by two parables of Jesus, that of the talents (Matthew 25:14ff), and that of the pounds (Luke 19:11ff). The parable of the talents reminds us that gifts may differ from one person to another, as one has five talents, another two, another one; but the parable of the pounds is not referring to gifts, but to equal responsibility in face of equal stewardship in the gospel. Here, to each believer is given the same sacred deposit (cf 1 Timothy 6:20). We each may have different tasks, and for these tasks we are given different gifts and enduements. But to each is given the solemn responsibility of doing his appointed task with all his heart and all his might. In Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 12:28, all alike are responsible equally to God for honourable work, and all need the same enduement of the Spirit to make them faithful. Bezal (Exodus 31:2ff) was anointed by the same Spirit, for the carving of the vessels of the Tabernacle, as was Moses for the leadership of the people.

28)4:149

A similar distribution of gifts and responsibilities is seen in the Acts of the Apostles, where we have not only the mighty preaching of Peter and Paul, but also the associated caring and pastoral ministries of people like Barnabas, Aquila, Priscilla, Dorcas and Phoebe. It can hardly be said that these faithful believers were prominent and in the limelight, as Peter and Paul were; nor, indeed, did they covet aimlessly and uselessly, the latter's gifts. They were content to fulfil their own. The words of Anna Laetitia Waring's lovely hymn come readily to mind in this connection. After warning against the danger of:

'The restless will
That hurries to and fro,
Seeking for some great thing to do,
Or secret thing to know,'

the hymn ends with the significant couplet: 'Content to fill a little space if God be glorified'.

This is the mark of the wise and discerning Christian. It is all a question of finding one's place and one's task, staying in it and doing it with all one's might. That is the way - the only way - to contribute one's proper share to the wellbeing of the Body.

29)4:149

This seems to be the force of the injunction given to Moses in 1820. He was to see to it that they all kept their various places, and did not trespass on those of others. This is not merely a preventive role; it is also, by implication, a positive one, namely, that of seeking to direct people into their proper spheres, where they will 'find themselves' in the service of the Lord, that thus hidden aptitudes and beauties may be brought out in them, so contributing to the well-being, and therefore to the spiritual vitality, of the whole people of God. In this remarkable Old Testament picture, the work of each was necessary and essential before the Tabernacle could function at all as it was meant to do in the economy of God. And it is so also in the Christian Church. When believers spend fruitless time coveting others' place and work, failing to do their own, not having found their own proper sphere, the whole work of the Church is stultified and hindered. The outreach of any Christian fellowship will depend on whether its individual members are fulfilling their God-given stewardship in the power of the Spirit, a stewardship that may at times seem quite unrelated to the business of winning men to Christ, but necessary nevertheless. If we are the body of Christ and members in particular, we must needs find out our God-appointed place and task, and be and do what He wants us to be and do. Happy is the man who has found his true place and who fulfils with a glad and faithful heart the work that God has given him!

30)5:14

This chapter deals with three issues, and three specific types of evil, which must be dealt with if God's blessing is to remain upon the people: leprosy (14), guilt and restitution (510), and infidelity between husband and wife (1131). It is important to view these regulations in their proper context, because of the possibility of misunderstanding them and missing the point they are making. It would be easy, for example, to take this word about lepers out of its context, and set it in contrast with passages in the New Testament which tell of Jesus' compassionate acts of cleansing, and say, 'How different is the New Testament attitude to that of the Old, and how harsh the spirit that this passage breathes in comparison with the gospels.' But this is an entirely false attitude, and one open to fatal objection. It would be just as easy to take isolated passages of Scripture and put them together in contrast to reach the opposite conclusion, viz. that the Old Testament is much more compassionate than the New (compare, e.g. Acts 5:1ff, or 1 Corinthians 5:1ff, with the cleansing of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. No; we cannot say, on the basis of these verses before us, 'Does the God of the Old Testament have no care for lepers?' The compassion shown in the Old Testament and in the New alike reveal the attitude of God in His love and grace to the poor and needy - and that is the same, in every age, and in every dispensation. The firmness, however, and the stringency, shown here (as in Acts 5 and in 1 Corinthians 5) refer to the discipline of God among His people. And the question is not whether or not God has a care for the afflicted; it is that of keeping the people of God pure and undefiled. This has already been underlined in earlier chapters, in the idea of the separated character of the people, called to be distinct, in a spiritual non-conformity with the world. This is God's great concern, to preserve the identity of His people as separate unto Him. The image of purity was to be preserved at any cost in their corporate life. Only thus could Israel be a light to lighten the Gentiles.

31)5:14

In the previous Note, reference was made to the stringency of the enactment about lepers, being an evidence not so much of harshness as of the divine discipline necessary to maintain the image of purity in the corporate life of the people, and we referred to a New Testament parallel in the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. There is a sense, of course, in which discipline is harsh, and that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. The truth is, in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, summary judgment had to fall on them at that particular juncture. The young church was newly born, and this evidence of ugly, deadly hypocrisy and double-dealing was a threat to its very life, a virus that would undoubtedly, if it had been left unchecked, have done untold and permanent harm, possibly paralysing the church's witness and forever preventing it from becoming what it finally became in the ancient world. Is it impossible, then, to see the same pattern in the Old Testament, in God's dealings with His people, in His desire to have a pure instrument of His purposes, especially since having a pure instrument would in the end lead, not to the exclusion of the lepers, but their cleansing and blessing? For this disciplinary exclusion was a means to an end, the end being seen in its fulness in the ministry of Christ and the word of the gospel. In Acts 5, a new accession of divine power followed the divine discipline - this is the ultimate justification for striving for a church purged and cleansed from the leprosy of 'other things' in its life, for it is never such an influence in the world as when it has been most separate from it.

32)5:510

These verses deal with the question of guilt and restitution, and the regulations laid down here supplement Leviticus 6:17 (which see). In both passages what is in view is the damage done and loss sustained through wrong dealing between man and man. In both, such wrong acts against a fellow man are regarded as sins or 'breaches of faith' against the Lord. In both, the demand for restitution to be made includes the addition of a fifth part of the original principal. What is new here is the additional provision that if the wronged person has no kinsman (8) the restitution must not nevertheless be left unpaid, but should go to the priest who, as the Lord's representative, stands in the place of the injured party, in much the same way as the State does in modern law. Only thus would the act of atonement be completed. This is in fact the law of the trespass offering. 'Trespass' differs from 'sin' in that trespass involves injury to another, whether man or God. All trespass is sin; but all sin is not trespass.

This ordinance provides another illustration of the way in which the Lord's people were to be kept and their character maintained, if the divine Presence was to continue among them. This purging and purifying of the fellowship is reflected in various ways in the Old Testament itself, as for example in the story of the sin of Achan in Joshua 7, and the paralysing effect it had on the forward march of Israel. The lesson is the same as in 14: the people of God cannot prevail in the work of the kingdom as long as there is sin in the camp. It must be dealt with.

33)5:510

We should also note the twofold emphasis, on confession and restitution. Confession is putting things right with God, restitution putting things right with one's fellows. Both are necessary, in the making things right, i.e. in making atonement. In this regard, we may observe that the Mosaic law is considerably in advance of our own. Restitution does not figure at all in our criminal law. If one's house is burgled, and valuables stolen, if caught the thief will receive a prison sentence, but we may never recover our lost property, and the court will not help us with compensation. We may take the criminal to the civil court and sue him for damages, but the process is so cumbersome that it could take years for the case even to be heard.

It may be opportune at this point to add a word or two about confession, as a general guide. The Bible does not encourage indiscriminate confession (which can sometimes be unhealthy and morbid). Sins committed against God should be confessed to God, sins committed against one's fellow confessed to him, and sins against the fellowship, confessed to the fellowship. Any marked crossing of these general boundaries is to be deprecated, since it is quite possible to become over-preoccupied with sins, especially other people's. We should also remember that the peace of God will not come with mere confession, if it lies within a man's power to make restitution and he does not do so. Sometimes, alas, restitution is hardly possible, and this can be a matter of life-long regret. If I steal another man's goods, I can pay him back; but if I steal his good name, by vilifying him to others, this is something I may never be able to rectify. I may have done him permanent harm and hurt; I may have broken his heart. I can never make restitution there. Is not that a frightening thought?

Ah, give me, Lord, the tender heart

That trembles at the approach of sin.

34)5:1131

This passage is one that is full of interest - full, also of difficulties and problems for us. The gist of this 'trial by ordeal', as it may be called, is fairly straightforward, although some care is needed in following it. The subject relates to a particular type of defilement that constituted a threat to the peace and wellbeing of the fellowship of Israel within the camp. Two possibilities are envisaged: either, a woman has been unfaithful to her husband, but the sin has been hidden and secret, and there are no witnesses; the husband suspects, but cannot prove (12:14a); or, the woman is innocent and the husband is jealous and suspicious without cause (14b). Clearly, it is a matter which cannot be determined by conclusive evidence. In such a situation, it is God Who must judge between them; and the ritual is laid down for the priest, as the representative of God, to perform, to determine whether the woman is guilty or not. The husband must bring to the priest a meal-offering of jealousy, a meal-offering of memorial bringing guilt to remembrance; the woman must take an oath of purgation, and drink a potion described as 'the water of bitterness that causeth the curse'. If innocent, she would come to no harm from drinking it, but if guilty, it would have dire consequences (21, 27). Ordeal indeed, and it must surely raise questions in our minds, which we will need to discuss further.

35)5:1131

One's first instinctive reaction to this ritual, grim as it reads, is to think of it in terms of its belonging to some ancient, primitive custom that can have no place in our thinking today. It is sometimes said that the practice was common to Israel's heathen neighbours, and of animistic origin. But commitment to a belief in the inspiration of Scripture really forbids us any escape route by such an interpretation. We must needs hold to the view that it is an enactment given by God to His people, however difficult it may be to interpret. One commentator points out that it is nowhere stated that this test was intended to be used after the people settled in the Promised Land (nor is there any evidence that it was ever so used). In view of this, it is reasonable to suppose it to have been a provision intended only for the wilderness and invested with divine power for the particular circumstances of that time. It may help us to appreciate this more if we think of another divine institution of those days which we would not employ nowadays: the casting of lots. As Proverbs 16:33 says, 'The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord'. It would be easy to dismiss this as the operation of mere chance or luck (a case could certainly be made out for saying so if it were used today!), but this would be to ignore the divine dispensation involved, making it for that time the appointed means for discerning the Lord's will. In the same way, this trial by ordeal was designed to make known the divine verdict on a situation which could not otherwise be determined.

36)5:1131

The lesson that this ritual teaches us, apart altogether from the relevance or otherwise of the ritual for today, is that of the sanctity of the marriage bond and the fateful consequences of any act or attitude by which it might be endangered or put at risk. It is not a light thing that something so sacred in God's sight should be assailed, and we should learn from this passage just how seriously He regards any departure from total faithfulness within the marriage relationship and chastity outside it. What is clear is that the health, wellbeing and indeed safety of the whole nation was held to be imperilled by such an act, hence the full and detailed account of the procedure to deal with it. This is the realism of Scripture: it sees, although our careless modern age does not, that the erosion of the sanctities of marriage and of deep and intimate personal relationships cannot but undermine the foundation of society, simply because marriage and the family have such a fundamental place in the structure of human existence as created by God. The chapter closes on a dark and grim note, with the guilty woman bearing her iniquity (31), and we need another note to offset what would otherwise be a message of despair. Thank God, there is forgiveness with Him - the whole system of sacrifices unfolded in Leviticus proclaims this - and even in this sombre and tragic area there can be both reconciliation and healing and new hope, as the beautiful story in John 8:112 makes plain. But it is well that the seriousness of the sin should be shown in this chapter in all its ugliness and horror.

37)6:112

The repeated insistence and emphasis on the idea of 'separation unto the Lord', seen already in the instruction about the service of the Levites in the Tabernacle and in the legislation about the lepers in the camp, is underlined even more impressively and forcibly in the laws concerning the Nazarite vow. This vow was a vow of separation. The word derives from 'nazir', meaning 'to separate'. It was a vow that could be taken for a specific period, as here, or for a lifetime (as with Samson, in Judges 13:16). The latter does not seem to be in view in these verses. The relation between the temporary vow and the lifelong one is an uncertain one, and commentators find the subject a perplexing one and it is obvious that Samson's case presents some peculiar features when compared with the regulations set out here, only one of which - that of the long, unshorn hair - seems to have been important for him. At all events, the vow envisaged here is the temporary one, which involved principally three conditions: abstinence from intoxicating liquor (3, 4) abstinence from the cutting of the hair (5), and abstinence from contact with any dead body, involving ritual defilement and uncleanness (68). We shall look at these conditions further.

38)6:112

Abstinence from wine and intoxicating drink was the first condition of the vow. The purpose of this prohibition was probably twofold. On the one hand, the abstinence would ensure full clarity of the mind when engaged in the service of the Lord, on the other, the extension of the prohibition to include the eating of grapes, whether fresh or dried, or from partaking of anything connected with the vine, seems to indicate that these were regarded as symbolising all sensual enjoyments by which holiness could be impaired. The commentator Delitzsch quotes a phrase from Hosea 3:1 (RSV) which speaks of 'cakes of raisins' as referring to 'dainties sought after by epicures and debauchees' and cited by the prophet 'as a symbol of the sensual attractions of idolatry, a luxurious kind of food, that was not in harmony with the solemnity of the worship of Jehovah'.

The second regulation, that no razor was to come upon the head of the Nazarite, is thought to have been originally the most important of the prohibitions. The free growth of the hair is called in 7, 'the diadem of his God upon his head' (Delitzsch), and as such would stand as a symbol of strength and abundant vitality (cf 2 Samuel 14:25, 26), signifying that all the natural gifts and growth of the body were the Lord's. Calvin is content with the explanation that 'God would constantly exercise them in the faithful performance of their vow by this visible sign'. The third prohibition is dealt with in greater detail than the others (68), and its meaning will be our theme next.

39)6:112

Avoidance of defilement by contact with the dead brings us into the realm of ritual. The enactment is a very strict one, as may be seen from 6 (cf the regulation laid down for the high priest in Leviticus 21:11). Even accidental or unintentional contact with the dead (9) was regarded to have nullified the consecration, and a new beginning had to be made (12). Calvin distinguishes two points in the prohibition: as to why the touch of a dead body was a pollution, he says that 'because by death is represented God's curse, the wages of sin. The Israelites were thus admonished to beware of dead works'. As to the question of mourning, he adds that 'those who profess the special service of God should set an example to others of magnanimity and submission'. As the first regulation of the vow restrained the Nazarite from indulgence of the senses, so now a remedy is applied in the realm of sorrow. 'Although all ought to seek to indulge it moderately, yet something more is prescribed to the Nazarites, that, as if disentangled and stripped from earthly affections, they should go further than the rest of the people'. One wonders whether this may be what lies behind our Lord's seemingly stern and forbidding answer to the disciple who said, 'Suffer me first to go and bury my father', in the words 'Follow Me; and let the dead bury their dead'. This is challenge to discipleship indeed, but it can hardly be controverted that our Lord's words breathe the spirit of the Nazarite vow, whether He had them in mind or not.

40)6:1321

On the expiration of the time of the vow, the Nazarite was to offer a burnt offering, a sin offering and a peace offering, with the customary meal, or cereal, offerings (cf Leviticus 2:4). The significance of the peace offering and the burnt offering is, Calvin thinks, obvious, in terms of thanksgiving on the one hand, and the discharge of pious duty on the other; as to the sin offering, he adds, 'here we clearly perceive, that however cheerfully and earnestly men endeavour to offer themselves altogether to God, yet they never attain to the goal of perfection, nor arrive at what they desire, but are always exposed to God's judgment, unless He should pardon their sins.' Delitzsch underlines this when he speaks of the sin offering as 'an expiation for the sins committed involuntarily during the period of consecration.' After the offerings were presented, the Nazarite shaved off his hair at the door of the tabernacle, and burned it on the sacred fire (18). This is the completion of the surrender to God symbolised in the vow. Finally, the priest made a wave offering of a portion of the peace offering and the meal offering, which thereby became holy, and the perquisite of the priest. Thereupon, the Nazarite returned to normal living and to the drinking of wine.

The spiritual lessons of the vow are several. It is expressive of a condition of life consecrated to the Lord, resembling the sanctified relation in which the priest stood to Jehovah, and differing from the priesthood solely in the fact that it involved no official service of the sanctuary, and was not based on a divine calling and institution (although the lifelong Nazarite position was, cf Judges 13:7; 1 Samuel 1:11) but was undertaken spontaneously for a certain time through a special vow.

41)6:121

It is not difficult to see the Christian application of the Nazarite vow, for the matters it speaks of are integral to the Christian life as a whole, all the time, and witnesses to a vigilance that must never be slackened. The message is one of consecration and separation - not from wine as such, only, but from anything and all that panders to the senses and desires of the flesh; not hair as such, but all natural gifts and energies must be baptised into the death of Christ, and sanctified and hallowed for His service; not separation from dead bodies as such, but from all that partakes of the life of sin, so that we may live unto God. Nor are we left in doubt in the New Testament as to the things that pander to the flesh in us, as Galatians 5:19-21 makes clear. The apostolic injunction in Romans 12:2, 'Be not conformed unto this world' stands in direct descent from the Nazarite vow in this regard. As to the need for all natural gifts to be baptised into the death of Christ we need to remember, with Milton, that God does not need man's gifts. Some natural gifts are of no use to God in spiritual work, and they need to be given over to Him, that He might put them 'in cold storage' indefinitely. Christians sometimes speak of laying their gifts on the altar for the service of the Lord, and God is sometimes pleased to use these gifts. But is laying the gifts on the altar on our part conditional on God being prepared to use them? Some gifts tend to pander to the flesh in spiritual life and become a snare in spiritual service, and must therefore simply be set aside. The point about laying something on the altar is surely that it is placed there beyond recall. If God gives it back, well and good; if not, we can have no complaint.

42)6:121

The question of whether there is a place in the Christian life for a temporary vow is an important one. Paul himself seems to have taken such vows on occasion (cf Acts 18:18, 21:18-26), and we should bear in mind that echoes of the Nazarite vow seem to ring in Paul's teaching also, as for example in 1 Corinthians 6:13, 'the body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body', and 1 Corinthians 10:31, 'eat or drink... to the glory of God'. The apostle's teaching about 'the good things of life' is a good starting point: 'I will not be brought under the power of any', he says about the things that are lawful (1 Corinthians 6:12), and later in that same epistle he speaks of those 'that use the world, as not abusing it' (1 Corinthians 7:31). These statements, and others in similar vein, are an indication of Paul's detachment from 'things'. But how is the believer to be sure that this obtains in his case at any given time? How other, than by applying a temporary discipline to his life, and doing without them for a time, to reassure himself that underlying the daily routine of life he is, after all, really devoted to God? We must be careful, of course, not to have truck with any forms of legalism here, but it would do us all a great deal of good if this kind of discipline figured in our lives from time to time, to keep us on our spiritual toes. We can so easily deceive ourselves. Consider, for example, the good, legitimate pleasures and joys which God gives us to gladden our hearts. Do they take an undue place in our lives? Would it not be good to test ourselves here, to make sure that we are not in fact displacing God from His rightful place? If we did apply some such temporary vow, and kept away from these good, legitimate, gladdening gifts of God for a time, and found ourselves utterly preoccupied with them, in the want of them, it would be some indication, would it not, of just how much store we had been setting by them, without realising it, and of how little we could afford to do without them - how much, in fact, they had a hold upon us?

43)6:121

Paul was able to write from his Roman prison, 'I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need' (Philippians 4:12). A true detachment was the distinctive mark of his life. It is here that we see the point of the Nazarite going back to ordinary life after the fulfilment of the vow. It is possible for the believer to have the full enjoyment of the legitimate gifts of God without being worldly or preoccupied with them, because they mean precisely nothing to him in the deepest sense (he is 'in the world' but not 'of the world'), just as it is possible to be physically cut off from them all and still be worldly at heart. This is an area of life in which Christians require to think more honestly than they are often prepared to do. David speaks in Psalm 131 of behaving and quieting himself as a child that is weaned of his mother, and adds 'My soul is even as a weaned child'. This is the point. The question that the Nazarite vow poses for us is: 'Are we weaned from our dependence on things, or do they hold us, whether we have them or do not have them? A man can be outwardly separate from the world, and yet have the world in his heart, just as a man of the world may be fully weaned in spirit from all these things.'

The most important lesson, however, to be learned about this vow lies in its being a symbol of lifelong separation unto God. This, in fact, is the challenge and summons of the gospel: consecration is not an optional 'extra'; it is the only logical response we can make to the mercies of God in Christ (Romans 12:1, 2).

44)6:2227

In the light of the comments in the previous Notes, the last verses of the chapter assume an enormous significance. The priestly, or Aaronic, blessing 'gives terse and beautiful expression to the thought that Israel owes all to Jehovah, who shields His people from all harm, and grants them all things necessary for their welfare' (Gray, ICC). That it should be found at this point in Numbers has excited controversy among scholars, who question whether this is its original position; but its spiritual significance is surely that it is the man who is wholly separated unto God who can bless others in the name of the Lord. In spiritual life, it is ever lives that are separated unto God that tell for Him. It was because Joseph, Samuel and Samson were separated unto God that they were made a blessing to the people. Just as it is by the obedience of One that many are made righteous (Romans 5:19), so also it is by the separation of the few that the many are blessed, and the face of the Lord is made to shine upon men, and the light of His countenance lifted up upon them. The Nazarite vow calls us to a separation unto God that will make our lives and our ministry fruitful in the economy of God for the blessing of others. There was another Nazarite, Who once said, 'For their sakes I sanctify (separate) Myself', and in so doing He has poured this wonderful priestly benediction and blessing upon a lost world.

45)6:2227

The commentator Delitzsch has a footnote at this point in which he refers to Luther's exposition of these verses. Speaking of the threefold nature of the blessing, he goes on: 'Luther refers the first blessing to 'bodily life and good'. The blessing, he says desired for the people 'that God would give them prosperity and every good, and also guard and preserve them.... The second blessing he refers to 'the spiritual nature and the soul', and observes, 'Just as the sun, when it rises and diffuses its rich glory and soft light over all the world, merely lifts up its face upon all the world ... so when God gives His word, He causes His face to shine clearly and joyously upon all minds, and makes them joyful and light, and as it were new hearts and new men. For it brings forgiveness of sins, and shows God as a gracious and merciful Father, who pities and sympathises with our grief and sorrow'. The third also relates to the spiritual nature and the soul, and is a desire for consolation and final victory over the cross, death, the devil, and all the gates of hell, together with the world and the evil desires of the flesh. The desire of this blessing is, that the Lord God will lift up the light of His word upon us, and so keep it over us, that it may shine in opposition of the devil, death, and sin, and all adversity, terror, or despair.' Some blessing indeed.

46)7:19

The offering of gifts by the princes of Israel recorded in this chapter took place on the completion by Moses of the erection of the Tabernacle at Sinai, and was one of the last events prior to the departure of the people of Israel from Sinai. It is an extremely long chapter, falling into two unequal parts, 19 and 1088, with a final sentence (89) describing Moses' fellowship and concourse with the Lord within the Tabernacle. The events recorded in it do not follow chronologically upon the previous chapters. The setting up of the Tabernacle took place on the first day of the first month of the second year (Exodus 40:17), and this date is already past, in Numbers 1:18. Historically, it should follow Leviticus 8:10,11. It is placed here, according to Delitzsch, 'at the head of the events which immediately preceded the departure of the people from Sinai, because these gifts consisted in part of materials, that were indispensably necessary for the transport of the Tabernacle during the march through the desert'. The princes, who are mentioned in the same order as in 2:329, make a sacred offering, each identical to the other, consisting of six covered wagons and twelve oxen (3). These are received from them by Moses who gives them to the Gershonites and Merarites for use in connection with the service of the Tabernacle, and particularly for its imminent departure on its wilderness journeyings (49). The composition of the offerings in each case is a silver charger, a silver bowl, both filled with fine flour mingled with oil for a meat offering; a golden spoon full of incense; a bullock, a ram, a lamb for a burnt offering, a kid for a sin offering; and two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, five lambs for a peace offering. The offerings are formally presented by the princes on twelve successive days (1283). The total amount offered by them is finally recorded in 8488.

47)7:19

The offerings by the princes seem to have been a spontaneous act following upon the completion and anointing of the Tabernacle. It almost seems to be implied, from what is said in 45, that Moses awaited some indication as to whether their offering was in order (they had already been very generous in their offerings for the construction of the Tabernacle Exodus 35:27). On learning that their generosity had been prompted, in fact, by God, Moses received the gifts to be applied to the purposes of the Tabernacle, and delivered them over to the Levites in accordance with their respective duties. The distribution was not an equal one, but in line with their particular offices. The Gershonites received one third of the wagons for their duties (cf Numbers 4:25-26), whereas the Merarites, who had much heavier burdens to bear (cf 4:31, 32) received two-thirds. The Kohathites received none, since their duties did not require them (cf 4:1-5). Their place was to attend to the sanctuary, which was to be borne on their shoulders for which task they were provided with poles. That the offerings of the princes were generous to a degree is evident; that they were sufficient for divine purposes is just as clear, and this is some indication of how much the princes were under the inspiration and control of the Spirit of God in their large-hearted giving. With such a spirit, the work of God could not but prosper!

48)7:1088

There is some question as to how precisely the offerings were carried out, but it would seem that all the various gifts were presented by the princes at the same time as the wagons and oxen (10); after this, a more formal presentation and acceptance of the gifts was made by each prince on successive days. The order in which the offerings were made follows the order of the tribes in chapter 2, as they were set out on all sides of the Ark of the covenant. This, as we saw, was to be their marching order and indeed their battle order. The association of service, worship and battle is an interesting one, and may be intentional on the part of the writer.

It will be remembered that the place where these offerings were made was Mount Sinai, which is so often associated with the severity of the law. But here is an act that is full of grace, the response of grateful hearts to God for His giving of the law and for His establishing of the Tabernacle. Indeed, rightly understood, grace is just as evident as law in this context. It is a false antithesis to suppose that the Old Testament equals law, while the New Testament equals grace. In fact, law and grace go hand in hand, and are side by side, in both the Old Testament and the New; and the real picture that comes through from a true reading of the Old Testament is that of a God full of grace and compassion, rich in mercy and tender in His love towards His people. The facile assumption made by many (who do not appear to have read the Old Testament at all) that it is a sub-Christian God that we meet there is wide of the mark!

49)7:1088

The offering of the priests, then, was the spontaneous response of grateful hearts to the goodness and grace of God. This sets the question of Christian liberality in its true perspective, and the scriptural principle is not difficult to see. Where the people are conscious of the blessing of God in their lives, they will give spontaneously and keep on giving. Finance in the Church is directly related to faith and consecration. An attitude of glad-hearted consecration on the part of the people of God will always provide a sufficiency, and indeed an abundance. One thinks of the similar spirit of generosity shown in the giving for the construction of the Tabernacle in Exodus 35ff, when the people's response was so great that Moses was obliged to appeal to them to stay their hands (Exodus 36:6). It could hardly be said to be usual in our day for people to have to be restrained from giving! It is what the Apostle Paul would call 'abounding more and more' (1 Thessalonians 4:1,10; cf 2 Corinthians 8:15).

Another point of importance to note is that although the offerings from each of the princes, and therefore from each of the tribes, were identical yet each one is recorded separately and in detail. This is done not merely to draw attention to the identity of the offerings but, far more important, to show that each one was noted individually by God. There is surely the love of a Father revealed in this. When an earthly father receives gifts from his children he does not lump them together in a heap and say 'Thank you all very much.' Rather, he acknowledges them individually, and one by one, expressing his personal pleasure and gratitude in individual and personal terms. This is what God is doing here with the gifts of the princes. This should be an enormous encouragement in spiritual life, for it means that in God's book on high what we do for Him in love for Him is recorded precisely and individually. This is another - and a very necessary other - side of the idea of the recording angel. All the expressions in Scripture about 'writing down' and 'entering in a book' tend us to think in terms of sin and guilt; and this is solemnly true; all that ever we have done is written down (cf Colossians 2:14). But there is a blessed counterpart to this, as is evidenced here (cf Malachi 3,16,17). God is not unrighteous to forget our work and labour of love which we show towards His name (Hebrews 6:10).

50)7:1088

The possibility of giving pleasure to God by our glad thank offerings and worship may be a somewhat remote thought in the minds of Christians but if so it is a measure of how much the Church has lost sight of the real heart of the Christian experience, which is fellowship with the Father and the Son through the Spirit (1 John 1:3). How should we suppose, if that fellowship is real, that God is indifferent to it, from His side? If our chief end is 'to enjoy Him' should it be thought strange or improbable that He takes pleasure in His people (Psalm 149:4)?

We should note that no mention is made of any trespass offering being made by the princes. The distinction between confessing sin and confessing themselves sinners is a real one, for on this occasion the princes were not coming to God in contrition, but in worship. This serves to remind us that there may be occasions in our relationship with God when contrition is out of place. One of the impressive things in the New Testament, and particularly in Paul's epistles, is to see how very little place there is, comparatively speaking, for contrition. Paul does not grieve about his sins to the Lord; he is 'up higher'. Perhaps we should recognise that there is a grieving about sin, and a preoccupation about it that is, frankly dishonouring to Christ, and calls in question the perfection of His sacrifice for us. It is not that we forget that we are sinners, still less that we underestimate the heinousness and the ugliness and affront of sin in the sight of a holy God, but rather that preoccupation with it is displaced by the outgoing of the heart in glad adoration and worship. If God is able to say 'Your sins and your iniquities will I remember no more', ought not we also to be able to be delivered from undue preoccupation with them?

51)7:89

The supreme point in this unusual chapter comes in its final verse, following the catalogue of the totals of the offerings, massive and munificent as they were. When Moses went into the Tabernacle to speak with God the divine voice spoke to him from above the mercy seat on the Ark of testimony. Scholars are not certain whether what follows in chapter 8 gives the substance of what the Lord spoke to him, or whether 89 is intended 'as an independent statement and not simply as an introduction to a divine address' (North). What is important, however, from a spiritual point of view, is the fact that God spoke with Moses when the Tabernacle was completed and the altar consecrated and dedicated. In other words, when the ground of fellowship was properly established, according to the pattern shown in the mount, then God met with Moses, and through Moses with the people. This speaks to us of the only way in which fellowship with God is really possible on the ground of a Godappointed system of atonement and approach to Him. It is only through Christ the Mediator that we can have fellowship with God and that God can speak with us.

Furthermore, and from a spiritual point of view even more important, the possibility of God speaking with His people is linked here directly with the dedication of the princes and their gifts to the Lord. This is a consideration that merits further thought.

52) 7:89

Further to the thought about the possibility of God speaking with His people, we may recall what we are told in 1 Samuel 3, about the days following the period of the Judges when the word of the Lord was precious that is, a scarce commodity and there was no open vision. The reason for this is not hard to seek: it was because God had been grieved away by the sin of His people that He did not speak. When this is the situation, the need is twofold. *Firstly*, God's people must recover a biblical pattern for life and a biblical doctrine of 'approach' in Christian terms, the recovery of the theology of the cross. One compelling reason why the church of God has made so little headway in modern society is that it has so substantially departed from biblical foundations and biblical thinking. *Secondly*, there must be a recovery of the spirit of glad abandonment to God in His gospel, the spirit of dedicated stewardship followed by the coming of the word of the Lord to Moses and to the people. The prophet Malachi sums it up: 'Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it' (Malachi 3:10). This is the glad reward of true and faithful stewardship; and this is the message of the chapter.

53)8:14

The end of the last chapter spoke of the voice of the Lord being heard among the people in the Tabernacle. We instanced the story of 1 Samuel 3 as an example of how the word of the Lord came among God's people after a long dearth. This same chapter illustrates this passage which speaks of the lighting of the candlestick in the Tabernacle. In chapter 7 it was the coming of the word of the Lord; here it is the coming of the light. And both are integrally connected in the spiritual message that this affords us. For a forward movement and the children of Israel were about to move forward from Sinai towards the Promised Land you need the word of the Lord, and you need the light of the Lord, shining in the midst. The tragedy in Samuel's day was that the word of the Lord was precious (scarce), and that the light was flickering and faltering. Such is the association of ideas here, and it reminds us of another scripture Genesis 1: 'And God said ...' that is the coming of the word; 'Let there be light' that is the coming of the light.

This, then, shows us the desire and concern of God for His House it is to be a place where His voice is heard speaking and where His light is seen to shine out into the darkness of men's hearts, bringing illumination upon the dark places of their experience. Nor can the two ever be separated: word without light cannot be of divine origin, and is inconceivable; light without word can be a fruitful cause of error and heresy.

54)8:522

These verses deal with the consecration of the Levites, and it is in the context of 14 that we can best understand what is said here, because their consecration was in the spiritual sense the lighting of innumerable lamps among the people of God, giving them light from Him. The twofold emphasis in Jesus' words, 'I am the light of the world' and 'Ye are the light of the world' is illustrated clearly in this. In the absolute sense, it is He alone who gives light, and when He comes, by His word, light comes to men. But when consecration takes place, light is shed abroad in the Church and this is as true for preacher as for people.

The substance of this section is parallel to what we have already seen in chapters 3 and 4, which deal with the choice of the Levites for service in the sanctuary, in place of the first-born, and the duties binding upon them. It is not a matter of repetition, however, for as one commentator remarks, 'the Levites are conceived of as an offering brought by the Israelites at God's command. This is a novel idea, going beyond anything in chapters 34'. Furthermore, in the earlier chapters, what was given was a description of the consecration to which the Levites were destined by God, whereas what we have here is their actual committal to this consecration. The particular value of the passage is that it shows the Levites entering into their true destiny in the service of God. And that must always be a moving experience, in much the same way as an admission of members into full communion ought to be for us, and usually is.

55)8:522

The regulations for the Levites are less stringent than for those of the priests: this is not to 'play down' their office, but rather to distinguish them from the priesthood. The sprinkling is with 'water of purifying' (7) or 'water of expiation' (RSV), which Delitzsch takes as referring to 'the water in the laver of the sanctuary, which was provided for the purpose of cleansing of the priests for the performance of their duties (Exodus 30:18ff)'. Thus cleansed, they were designated as the offering of the whole people (9,10) by the symbolic ritual of the laying on of hands upon them. This offering was to be made by Aaron (1.1 although in 13 it seems to be Moses who offers them; but all this may mean is that Moses received the command to do so, while Aaron acted as his executive). Calvin suggests that Aaron's involvement in the dedication rather than Moses was designed to prevent the 'danger of their being puffed up with pride against all others', and to remind them (the Levites) that their degree of honour was not similar to or the same as that of the priests. By whomsoever the offering was made, however, it completed the symbolic act of the laying on of hands (10) and signified 'the transfer to the Levites of the obligation resting upon the whole nation to serve the Lord in the persons of its firstborn sons, and present them to the Lord as representatives of the firstborn of Israel, to serve Him as living sacrifices' (Delitzsch). The Levites in turn were to complete the transfer of themselves to the Lord with a sin offering and a burnt offering, laying their hands on the animals in the same way as hands were laid on them by the Israelites.

56)8:522

This 'double' identification, the people with the Levites and the Levites in turn with the sacrificial animals, is explained in 1319. The Levites belonged to the Lord and were given by the people to Him for His own, and they were taken thus to be His Own in place of all the firstborn of the people. The execution of the command is recorded in 2022. The principle implicit in the idea of laying on of hands is, of course, that of identification. The Levites were representing the people of Israel, who were thereby identifying themselves, and being identified with the Levites in their consecration (just as the Levites in turn identified themselves with the sacrificial animals). They recognised the Lord's claim on the firstborn as being a claim on all His redeemed people. It is this that constitutes the challenge of the passage for us who read it today. God shows in it a pattern, as He showed Moses and Israel a pattern in the mount, to which he calls His people to conform. He has chosen us in Christ for a destiny not only of salvation but also of service, and His ringing summons to us is to throw in our lot with His work, identifying ourselves with it and committing ourselves irrevocably to it. The symbol 'of belonging' to the Lord comes into its own in the New Testament, and is fulfilled for the whole Christian community. The Church is called 'the general assembly and church of the first born' (Hebrews 12:23), that is, every believer incorporated into the body of Christ is set apart to be the Lord's. Even in the Old Testament, however, the idea of separation for the whole congregation of the Lord's people is decisive.

57)8:522

A good example of the concept of separation unto God may be seen in the incident recorded in 1 Samuel 8, which tells of Israel's insistence on having a king 'that we also may be like all the nations', an insistence that was to cost them dearly precisely because the whole point of their calling to be God's people was that they should not be like the other nations, but rather be God's peculiar people, separated unto Himself. It is significant that it was in those times when Israel most approximated to this separated character that they most fully realised their true destiny. The tragedy was that so often, particularly in the period of the kings, that separation was so substantially at a discount. If there is one general message for the Christian Church writ large on the pages of the Old Testament, it is that the people of God must take their call to spiritual nonconformity with the utmost seriousness. Only thus can they fulfil their destiny as lights in the world.

Nor is this separated existence to be regarded as cramping or restricting. Indeed it was the opposite for the Levites, for God said to them and of them, 'I am their inheritance', just as He has said earlier to Abraham, 'I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward' (Genesis 15:1). God is no man's debtor, and it is those who, called to a one-track life, respond with wholehearted devotion, that live life most fully, and most interestingly too. One of the lessons that may be learned significantly from the lack of detail in the record of the lives of so many of the kings of Israel is that there is in fact nothing to record of lives that are outside the covenant purposes of God. They are dull and lifeless, even boring figures, lacking in substance and vitality. It is the life thirled to the divine purposes that is really full and meaningful. Not only so: the separated life is also a life-giving, and fruit-bearing life. This is implicit in the idea of the Lord being their inheritance, and it finds its best and fullest expression in the Pauline statement in 2 Corinthians 6:10, 'As poor, yet making many rich'.

58)8:2326

The concluding paragraph of the chapter deals with the question of the age at which the Levites were to commence and conclude their service of the sanctuary. The variation in the lower age limit as compared with 4:2ff (cf also I Chronicles 23:3) has already been referred to (see Notes for March 7th and 8th). Both this passage and the earlier one are indicative of the divine concern for His servants' welfare. There is always a special love and care that God expends on the faithful to Him in His service. It would seem that He was intent upon seeing that they were not overburdened, and that He set limits to their service, as if to say, 'I do not expect you to go on beyond your strength'. Them that honour Me, He says, I will honour and care for too. This may be taken as part of the 'hundredfold in this life' that our Lord promises to those who are faithful to Him in discipleship. We need have no fear or misgiving in serving Him. He is a generous and faithful Master. Is this a word of encouragement and assurance to some over-burdened and hard-pressed and discouraged servant of God today that the future is in His hands, and that He will provide?

59)9:15

The illustrative value of this chapter for the spiritual life is very great, for both the Passover and the pillar of cloud and fire proclaim a clear message to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. The situation is that the children of Israel are at Sinai, and about to move forward on their journey to the Promised Land. It is this that gives the setting for interpretation, and the twofold lesson is that of provision for the journey (the Passover) and light along the way (the pillar).

From a spiritual point of view, the command to keep the Passover was a significant reminder that everything in Israel's experience, as a people of God called to pilgrimage, depended and rested upon the mighty act of God on their behalf when He made bare His holy arm and plucked them out of the land of Egypt and the house of bondage. Indeed, their very existence as the people of God depended on what He had done in delivering them. The Passover pointed them to the blood of the slain lamb, and to the divine substitution that had rescued them from death. 'When I see the blood, I will pass over you' - their entrance on pilgrimage was made on this ground alone. The New Testament parallel is complete the mighty intervention of God in Christ for the salvation of men, the great reconciliation and propitiation wrought in His blood whereby the barriers are broken down and the way opened up for men to return, in penitence and faith, to God. This is the gospel, and it is on this basis that the invitation to pilgrimage is made. Christ is the Way, as He is also the Door, and here is the blood-sprinkled door of the new covenant by which if any man enter in he shall be saved.

60)9:15

Furthermore, the Passover was something that Israel was commanded to eat as well as to observe, and this bears witness to the fact that the mighty act of God was for them not only the basis and foundation of their pilgrimage, but also a source of sustenance and nourishment for them on their journey. It was, so to speak, a sacrament for the Old Testament people of God, and was repeated again and again as a source of spiritual nourishment to them. Not only so: it pointed to the spiritual reality behind it, namely that meditation on the mighty act of God, and dependence upon it day by day, is what affords spiritual sustenance and help in the pilgrim's life. So it is also in the Christian way: the cross is our source of supply as well as being the place where we begin the Christian life. This is what Christ meant when He spoke of eating His flesh and drinking His blood. A life rightly related to the message of the cross is one that will always be well-nourished and sustained. There is always a sufficiency of supply, and no one who embarks on the Christian life will ever fail of food and provision on the way. Furthermore, keeping the Passover was a reminder to Israel of the standard under which they were to advance, and the principle by which they were to walk. Their lives were to be rightly related to the redemption that God had wrought. In the New Testament sense this speaks to us in the language of Christ: 'If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me'. For the Christian this is the order of the march, and there is no other way.

61)9:6/4

These verses describe some supplementary regulations made to cater for cases where the celebration of the Passover at the normal time is prevented for one reason or another. Their formulation arose through an incident occurring at the observation of this first Passover. There were certain men who were ceremonially defiled (6) and could not therefore keep the feast on the day appointed. On enquiring for a ruling on this (8), Moses is given it (9ff) and pronounces accordingly, enunciating a general principle covering all like situations. The feast was to be kept exactly a month later, and with all due observance of the regulations. Whether the later celebration of the Passover was obligatory or voluntary for those who had been unable to observe the main feast is uncertain. What is clear, however, is that there was to be no misuse of this supplementary legislation. Failure to observe the Passover at the appointed time either through indifference or carelessness, when neither uncleanness nor being on a journey was involved, was to be regarded as a punishable offence. The sentence referred to in 13 could mean either death or excommunication. If, however, we bear in mind the rigour of the New Testament interpretation of excommunication (cf 1 Corinthians 11:30; 5:5; 1 Timothy 1:20), the distinction between death and excommunication in this context may for, practical purposes, be an artificial one.

62)9:1523

This passage marks the beginning of Israel's departure from Sinai on the way to the Promised Land, and it is fitting that the divine leading and direction of the people should first be described. The date mentioned in 15 links the passage with Exodus 40 (2ff; 34-38). The pillar of cloud and fire has already been mentioned in the story of Israel (Exodus 13:21ff; 14:19-24; 24:1ff; 33:9,10 and 40:34ff). Sometimes the emphasis is upon the pillar going before the people, sometimes the cloud stands over or upon the Tabernacle, sometimes its night-time appearance as a pillar of fire is stressed. The Exodus references show that Israel was already used to being led of God by the pillar, in their journey from Egypt to Sinai. And this pattern is described again here, in detail. Calvin observes that the additional fact recorded here is that the cloud now rested on the Tabernacle. That is, as its characteristic and specific locus: 'The people were indeed previously directed by the sight of the cloud, as we have seen; but here a new fact is related, namely that since the Tabernacle was set up, the cloud, which hitherto was suspended in the air and went before the camp, now settled on the sanctuary. For a fresh acquisition of grace is here proclaimed by the more certain and conspicuous sign, as if God showed Himself more closely and familiarly as the leader of the people. Although, therefore, the cloud had been a director of their march from its very commencement, yet it more fully illustrated the glory of the Tabernacle when it proceeded from thence'.

63)9:1523

It remains an open question whether the Israelites experienced two kinds of guidance on their journeys, one by the direct voice of the Lord, speaking to or through Moses, the other by the manifestation of the pillar of cloud and fire. This uncertainty is seen in 18, where the 'commandment' of the Lord might seem to indicate an oral command, yet the end of the verse and 19 would imply that the divine 'word' came through the cloud. Either way, however, the picture of Israel's dependence on the divine guidance is a very beautiful one; but it has been well said, that 'the children of Israel in the wilderness, surrounded by miracle, had nothing, which we do not possess. Their guidance came by the supernatural pillar; ours comes by the reality of which that pillar was nothing but a picture' (Alexander Maclaren). This statement is a pointer to the kind of spiritual lessons that flow from the symbol of the pillar. They are many and rich. For one thing, it was the token of God's abiding presence with the people. He went before them (Exodus 13:21; 40:38) until the day they entered the land. This is an eloquent reminder, in New Testament terms, that the Christian life is not the acceptance of a system, but the entrance into a fellowship, into a relationship of companionship with Christ.

Not only so: when one thinks of the fractious nature of the Israelites, their murmurings and backslidings, their declensions and falling away from God, it becomes an even greater marvel to realise that throughout all, His presence was unchangeably with them. What could speak more forcefully than this of a God Whose grace is greater than our sin? This is the assurance that the invitation to pilgrimage brings with it. And it comprehends every other consideration, every other possible blessing. If God be for us, says the Apostle and, we may add, with us who can be against us?

64)9:1523

The pillar was also the guarantee to Israel of God's shelter and protection, As the Psalmist puts it, 'He spread a cloud for a covering' (Psalm 105:39). One recalls the marvelous story of the deliverance from Egypt, when the pillar moved round and stood between Israel and the oncoming Egyptians: 'The Lord looked unto the host of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and of the cloud, and troubled the host of the Egyptians' (Exodus 14:24). This is what God does for His people. David expresses it very beautifully, and accurately, in Psalm 121. The protecting love of God is fierce and tender, rugged and gentle. Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him. All this, in addition to the assurance of the divine guidance. The Lord led them unerringly *where* they were to go, and *when* and in spiritual life the 'when' is quite as important as the 'where'. To move before God's time always leads to trouble. Commenting on Israel's wilderness journeyings, the Psalmist says, 'He led them forth by the right way' (Psalm 107:7) not always the expected way or even the shortest (cf Exodus 13:17:9), but with God in the lead, the longest way round is the shortest way home. There is plan and purpose in all He does, and all He does is for the best. He guides! This is the overruling consideration. We are not left to walk alone. He knows the way through the wilderness. 'How can we know the way?' asked doubting Thomas, perplexed and troubled as he was at that point about many things, as the best of Christians are, from time to time; but our Lord's assurance: 'I am the way' reminded him, and us, that in fellowship with Him there is a sure way through even impossible situations.

65)9:1523

There are two further thoughts implicit in the idea of the pillar. One is that of revelation. God revealed Himself to Moses and to Israel in the cloud: 'The Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord' (Exodus 34:5). And in the New Testament, God has revealed Himself finally to men in Christ, as the God of love and grace, and in such a complete way that Jesus could say, 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father' (John 14:9). The other is that of *communion* (Exodus 33:9-11): when the cloudy pillar descended and stood at the door of the Tabernacle, the Lord talked with Moses 'and the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend'. This is the ultimate possibility of the cloud: it points to this personal communion that all who trust in Christ may have with the Father and the Son. It is not simply forgiveness that the gospel proclaims, though that were a gospel all in itself; nor is it merely a gospel of new life, or of the restoration of the divine image in man; best of all, it is fellowship with Him. Jesus said, 'Ye are My friends' (John 15:14). We know the power of friendship even on the human level, to exercise a decisive and definitive influence in our lives; how much more must this be true of the friendship of Christ. His is the transforming friendship; it is the fellowship of the burning heart (Luke 24:32). We become our true selves when we walk with Him.

66) 10:110

The connection between this passage and what immediately precedes it is clear: the forward march of Israel was to be determined by the movement of the cloud (9:1523), and announced by the sounding of the trumpets (10:1 ff). The institution of the trumpets is the final instruction given to Israel prior to their setting out on their journey. Five different uses of the trumpets are mentioned: a) the calling together of the whole congregation (3) when both the trumpets were blown; b) the calling together of the princes alone (4) when only one was blown; c) the blowing of an alarm as a signal for marching (5ff); d) when they reached Canaan the trumpets were to be blown for a memorial before God to bring them to His remembrance, and enlist His help (9); e) they were to be sounded also in days of festival and to secure God's attention (10). From this we see that the sounding of the trumpets for the summoning of the people and the princes was different from that which indicated the forward march, although it is not certain in what this consisted; 'blowing', in 7 is distinguished from 'sounding an alarm'. Delitzsch distinguishes the two by saying that the one signifies blowing in short, sharp, tones, the other, blowing in a continued peal; but Calvin seems to take the opposite view, suggesting that the alarm was a 'louder and more protracted sound, but blown with intervals'. Either way however, it is clear that the sound of the trumpets had a twofold reference: it spoke to the people, gathering them together in assembly and directing them on their way; it spoke also to God, and brought His people in remembrance before Him in time of need, and recorded their glad thankfulness to Him for His goodness to them.

67) 10:110

Calvin's comment on the symbolism of the trumpets is a pertinent one: 'We must, however, observe the promise, which is inserted, that the Israelites 'should be remembered before the Lord', that He should put their enemies to flight; not as if the safety or deliverance of the people was attached to the trumpets, but because they did not go to the battle except on reliance on God's aid. For the reality itself is conjoined with the external symbol, namely that they should fight under God, should follow Him as their leader, and should account all their strength to be in His grace (cf Psalm 20:7; 33:1618).' A good deal can be made of this for spiritual life, in relation to prayer, for more important than the fact that the trumpets spoke to the people, they also spoke, as we saw in the previous Note, to God. When they sounded, God held His people in remembrance in their time of need. They were so to speak, a signal to God for help and God heard and remembered, and delivered them from their foes. There is never any battle in which we fight in which we need be without divine remembrance. This is the provision of God, that in every situation of, pressure, hazard or danger, prayer can be made to, and heard by, God; nor should there be any victory won by the believer or by the church which does not issue in glad praise to God, in worshipful prayer and thanksgiving.

68) 10:1-128

At this point the account of the journeyings of Israel from Sinai to the borders of the Promised Land begins. The whole journey from Sinai to Kadesh, in the desert of Paran is given summarily in 11 and 12 and what follows in 10:13-12:16 is an expansion and elaboration of that summary. From Sinai to Kadesh was in point of fact a journey of only eleven days (cf Deuteronomy 1:2). Thus speedily did the people of God reach the borders of their inheritance. Clearly, therefore, the long and protracted period of some thirty-eight years' wandering in the wilderness (which a considerable part of the remaining chapters of Numbers is devoted to describing) calls for some explanation. This is given in the chapters which follow this and particularly in the story of the spies' expedition and its tragic sequel (chs 13/14). In 13ff the order of Israel's march is more fully described in terms of the detailed layout of the camp given in 2:13-1, the only difference being the additional note in 17, 21 about the order in which the different houses of the Levites bore the Ark and its furniture. The Gershonites and Merarites followed the tribes of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun: and were followed by Reuben, Simeon and Gad. They would thus be in a position to set up the framework of the Tabernacle at the chosen place for the next encampment and have it ready for the Kohathites who would follow, with Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin, Dan, Asher and Naphtali bringing up the rear.

69) 10:29-32

The incident recorded in these verses is full of interest. Moses' invitation to Hobab to accompany Israel on their journeyings was extended on the ground of his familiarity with the terrain through which they were to pass. His initial unwillingness to go with them called forth a repeated and more urgent invitation from Moses which, although it is not explicitly stated, seems to have prevailed upon him. That this was the likely outcome is supported by the fact that there would otherwise be little point in the incident having been recorded; and this seems to be confirmed by the reference in Judges 4:11 which indicates a presence of the descendants of Hobab in the Promised Land among the tribes of Israel.

Some think that Moses was in error in thus inviting Hobab to act as a guide, and that he showed lack of faith in doing so when he had the pillar of cloud and fire to lead, and that 33b contains an implied rebuke; but this may be reading more into the text than is really there. God does not disdain using human instruments in helping His people, and there is nothing necessarily contradictory in the thought of Hobab being used as a guide any more than it was wrong or lacking in faith to send spies in to spy out the land from Kadesh, when they had God to guide and assure them. It is hardly likely that Moses would so insensitively default in this way; besides, if he had made a mistake, the Lord must surely have corrected him.

70) 10:29-32

The incident affords us a useful and important illustration, on the spiritual level, of the invitation to pilgrimage. It is hardly possible that Hobab, as the son of the priest of Midian, should have been unaware of the history of Israel from the time of their departure from Egypt up to this point. It is very likely that right from the outset he had been aware of the mighty acts of God in bringing Israel out of bondage and constituting them His people. For all practical purposes, what is said of Jethro in Exodus 18:1ff could be said with equal force of Hobab when he heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, he praised the God of Israel. It is the general impression that must have been created in Hobab's mind that is important for it was the impression of a living God in the midst, Who worked wonders, and was allsufficient, allpowerful and allloving.

It is against this background that we must seek to interpret the significance of Moses' invitation to him to cast in his lot with the people of God. This is always the proper setting of the gospel invitation: it is in view of the mercies of God manifested in the redemption that is in Christ Jesus that the appeal is made to men to receive the reconciliation, become children of God and enter into pilgrimage.

This is ever the pattern unfolded in New Testament preaching: the apostles proclaimed the birth, anointing, life and ministry, sufferings and death of Christ and His rising again, and on the basis of this, preached forgiveness through His name, inviting men: 'Come thou with us, and we will do thee good: for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel'. And where men know Him, and are persuaded of the good that He has promised in the gospel, they will be so gripped and mastered by it that their lips will be touched with holy fire to speak persuasively to others concerning Christ and, like Moses, refuse to take No for an answer.

71) 10:33-36

There has been much discussion, and confusion, about the precise interpretation of these verses. Critics have interpreted 33b as meaning that the Ark of the covenant went ahead of the people by three days, in order to search out a resting place – a position, as someone has pointed out, 'useless to those who came after, and dangerous to the advance party'. One commentator thinks the Ark 'is conceived of as moving by itself' – surely an absurd literalism. It is idle to compare this with the moving of the cloud, since the cloud was a supernatural manifestation, while the Ark was manmade; albeit at the behest of God. MacRae (New Bible Commentary) maintains that there is no grammatical necessity of interpreting the phrase 'three days' journey' in this way, and stands by the AV rendering 'in the three days' journey' which, while involving a measure of interpretation, is consistent with the context and entirely possible grammatically. The difficulties, however, remain: there is an apparent contradiction between the position of the Ark before the people in 33, and what is said in 17, 21, where it is clearly in the midst of the host, not in front. Two possible interpretations may be made: one, that on this particular occasion its position was different than at any other time, a) because the first three days' march 'were through rough wilderness country, devoid of human enemies but presenting unusual difficulties in finding suitable camping sites' (MacRae); and b) to typify the divine leadership of the people, in symbolic form (the Rabbinic interpretation suggests this view). The other interpretation is that the phrase 'before them' (33) may have the force of 'in their presence' as in Deuteronomy 3:28; 10:11; 31:3, where 'Joshua or Moses is said to go before the people under circumstances which clearly indicate that they were not physically in front of them, but before them in the sense of being visible to them and in authority over them' (MacRae).

72) 10:35,36

In these verses the going forth of the Ark seems to be represented as the Lord going forth to battle rather in guiding His people. As one commentator puts it, 'it is a question not of leadership along unknown ways, but of enemies and war.' But this is not necessarily inconsistent with the emphasis in the preceding verses. It is a statement, in form, of Moses' usual practice throughout journeyings, and since in these journeyings he would be quite likely to meet with unknown enemies on the way, it would be a natural attitude to adopt day by day. To be forewarned is to be forearmed! Delitzsch's comment is worth studying, 'Moses said this, however, not merely with reference to enemies who might encounter Israel in the desert, but with a confident anticipation of the calling of Israel, to strive for the cause of the Lord in this hostile world, and His kingdom upon earth. Human power was not sufficient for this; but to accomplish this end, it was necessary that the Almighty God should go before His people, and scatter His foes. The prayer addressed to God to do this, is an expression of bold, believing confidence a prayer sure of its answer; and to Israel it was the word with which the congregation of God was to carry on the conflict at all times against the powers and authorities of a whole hostile world.'

73) 11:13

The section of the book beginning with this chapter and stretching to chapter 14 has a broad, comprehensive lesson to teach us. Here, in these verses, the people began to murmur against Moses and against the Lord, and were dealt with by Him. That is a lesson in itself, to which we shall turn presently. But in the broader context of these chapters and this is what we are meant to see - their murmuring continued and had a cumulative effect. It was not merely that they murmured once or twice; they developed a murmuring, complaining spirit, and it was this that came to a climax at Kadesh Barnea, when they failed at a critical time of opportunity, and were turned back by God into the wilderness and kept there for forty years. Israel finally entered into the Promised Land, but that *generation* of Israel did not, and were not allowed to, by God. The lesson is, not that they were finally lost, but that they were disqualified in the purposes of God a grim and solemn reality. This murmuring, complaining critical spirit, it is clear, got into them, and did something to them, rendering them progressively incapable of rising to their divine calling until, at a moment of crisis, they crashed. Such is the context in which the series of incidents recorded in this chapter must be studied. Severally, they stand as a distinct part of the divine dealings with the people, and bear a lesson quite clear and pointed for us.

74) 11:13

First of all, we should see that the divine reaction here is that of the overshadowing purpose of God that is determined to have His way with His people. God is, we must remember, working to a plan: He is involved in nothing less than the redemption of the world, and all He does must be interpreted in that light. He must correct and chastise from that overruling standpoint. He sees best what is good, and must discipline His people towards this, however grimly. We could take 13 as a brief summary of the whole issue, with 4ff describing and elaborating the details; or we could take the events of 13 as preceding those in 4ff. Either way, it is clear that 4ff give the substance of the problem that faced Moses (for a commentary on this, see Psalm 78:11ff). What it amounts to is this: God had bestowed on Israel the dignity and privilege of a spiritual calling and destiny. He had made bare His holy arm on their behalf, shown them the bright and glorious prospect that faced them if they were prepared to walk in His ways and they jibed at it, reacted against it, lightly esteemed it, and turned their backs on their destiny, in sheer, carnal and fleshly worldliness. Discontent with a spiritual calling this is the theme, and its relevance and importance are surely obvious for us, in relation to how He dealt with them for their sins.

75) 11:410

The spirit of murmuring becomes specific in these verses, and its cause attributed to the rabble among the people (this seems to be the force of the phrase 'mixed multitude', which one commentator renders as 'riffraff'). This rabbleroxing element among the people certainly spread a major disaffection throughout the camp. The weariness they expressed with what they felt to be a monotonous diet of manna, and their disparagement of it, kindled the divine anger. One would have thought that Israel would never have forgotten the terrible conditions of their slavery in Egypt and the horrors, privations and tortures that had made life such a misery for them, and would have been content with any change from that, let alone the dignity of a high calling and destiny and the provision of a faithful and bounteous God. But no; they were actually looking back to these Egyptian experiences as if they had been a paradise for them (5)! From which we may learn that looking back on 'the good old days' is always a matter of wearing rosecoloured spectacles, and the one word to describe the attitude of those who do so is humbug! It was, of course, the existence of the false among the true in Israel that caused the trouble, for this is always a fruitful source of infection. Now, a spiritual destiny is intolerable for a worldly people to contemplate hence the telltale phrase in 6, 'nothing at all, beside this manna'. There are those for whom this state of affairs is heaven itself, and every kind of joy, and those for whom 'nothing but manna' is sheer hell and unbearable; for manna is a heavenly food, and to appreciate *heavenly* food one needs a heavenly taste. Which serves to explain why in the same congregation one man will fret and fidget when the sermon goes beyond ten or fifteen minutes, and another will go out with the comment, 'We didn't know how hungry we were'.

76) 11:11-15

Moses' plaint goes beyond the initial, precipitating cause of it (the complaint about the manna), and it seems that the people's continual murmuring brought to a head in him an increasing disenchantment with them making him expostulate with God regarding the fractious people. One of the commentators (North) draws our attention to the kind of language Moses uses here. 'By placing this burden upon him, God has dealt ill with him' (11). Bold as this statement certainly is, it is surpassed in 12 by the assertion, cast in the form of a rhetorical question, that he, Moses, is, after all, not the people's mother and is, therefore, not obliged to fulfil maternal duties towards them'. The reference is, of course, to the word 'conceived' essentially a feminine concept, and it recalls references such as Isaiah 49:15 and 66:13. It is a graphic thought, but it is perhaps particularly in the context of the congregational 'family' of God's people that it becomes really meaningful. And when Paul's moving words to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 2:7-12) on the same theme are taken into consideration, we realise just how profound is Moses' understanding of the heart of the Lord towards His people. At all events, Moses is not so much abdicating or throwing off his own responsibility for the people as pleading with God that the duty of providing for Israel's needs lies with God their Redeemer, rather than with him.

77) 11:1624

These verses give the divine response to the latter part of Moses' cry in 14 that he was unable to 'carry all this people alone' and to the murmuring of the people about the manna. The difference in treatment meted out to Moses on the one hand and the people on the other is some indication of the qualitative difference in the two attitudes: that of Moses was a complaint about the people. The provision of help for Moses is gracious and generous and seventy elders are set apart and anointed with the Divine Spirit to enable them to share in the burden of governing the people.

Commentators maintain that we are not to understand the anointing of the elders as implying that the fulness of the Spirit possessed by Moses was diminished in consequence, although Calvin disputes this, maintaining that 'this division comprehends punishment in it'. This, however, seems an arbitrary assumption to make, and one for which there is no real evidence in the text indeed, the contrary, if we understand Moses' reaction in 29 aright. And it is surely best to take the provision of the seventy as one of grace at a time of difficulty and pressure in Moses' experience. Delitzsch remarks, 'The Spirit of God is not something material, which is diminished by being divided, but resembles a flame of fire, which does not decrease in intensity, but increases rather by extension'. This certainly seems to be what happened on this occasion, God's answer to the need was a fresh outpouring of His Spirit into the midst of His people.

78) 11:1624, 3135

But the divine response to the people's complaint was very different. The language used in 19, 20 makes it clear that the provision of God was to be very 'doubleedged': their craving for flesh would be satisfied, to be sure, but that very satisfaction would itself be an expression of divine wrath. Moses' mystification as to how this provision could possibly be made (21, 22) is simply swept aside in the onward momentum of God's displeasure against the people. The command to them to sanctify themselves has a grim note in it: their chastisement was to be a religious act, and they were to have 'the full treatment'. God's stern dealing with the murmuring people makes grim reading. As the Psalmist puts it, 'He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul' (Psalm 106:15). He was as true as His word. The flesh they had cried for and coveted came (31ff), and it was the means of their destruction. While they were gorging themselves upon it, the plague came upon them and devastated them. Was God, then, to blame, for letting them have what they were so set upon? How careful we should be! What He forbids, He forbids in His mercy, for our good. He knows how bad it would be for us to have it. But when men insist, He sometimes says, 'Very well, have your fill of it, if you are so set on it; have your own way'. This was an attitude that developed into a fixed and unalterable reality later, when at Kadesh Barnea the people hung back from entering the land and God finally said, 'You have made your choice, and I will accept it. Back you go into the wilderness'. They disqualified themselves, because they rendered themselves increasingly incapable of fulfilling their destiny.

79) 11:2430

The twofold word from God, in mercy and judgment, is now fulfilled. The elders are appointed and receive the anointing of the Spirit. Their prophesying (25) is an evidence of the charisma they have received, in much the same way as 'speaking in tongues' and 'prophesying', were in the New Testament Church. This seems, however, to have been a one-off manifestation the final words of the verse, rendered in the AV as 'and did not cease' should read with the RSV and most modern versions, 'but they did so no more'. But, as Delitzsch remarks, 'we are not to infer from the fact that the prophesying was not repeated that the Spirit therefore departed from them after this one extraordinary manifestation. This miraculous manifestation of the Spirit was intended simply to give to the whole nation the visible proof that God had endowed them with His Spirit, as helpers of Moses, and had given them the authority required for the exercise of their calling'.

An interesting incident occurred in relation to this divine anointing (26ff). Two of the seventy elders had remained in the camp, instead of repairing to the Tabernacle with the others. (No reason is stated as to why they should not have been with the others, and speculation that they were unclean, or occupied with special labours is fruitless). They also received the anointing and prophesied in the camp. This clearly caused excitement, and the matter was reported to Moses. Joshua, Moses' righthand man, urged Moses to put a stop to this seemingly irregular and unauthorised exercise of the prophetic spirit. His motive in so doing was clearly worthy and, creditable, for he felt that the honour and the authority of Moses was being challenged (cf Mark 9:38, 39 for a New Testament parallel). But Moses refused to do so, and dissociated himself from any spirit of jealousy shown on his account, uttering the memorable words, 'Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them.' (29)

80) 12:13

This chapter records a further example of murmuring and disaffection in Israel, but with significant differences from that in the previous chapter. There, the trouble arose through the refusal of the worldlings among them to rise to a true spiritual calling; here, however, the opposition came from much nearer the centre, from those nearest to Moses in natural and spiritual kinship, Miriam and Aaron, his sister and brother. It is clear that the heart of this issue lies in the challenge that they made against Moses' position of supremacy as leader of the people, and his right to speak for God. Moses' marriage to the Cushite woman is therefore simply the pretext for the attack, and an excuse to arouse opposition against him. The pretext in itself may have been a real enough issue so far as Miriam was concerned, but it was nevertheless still a pretext, and we have to look beyond it for the real reason for this altercation, namely, resentment at Moses' undoubted authority. Commentators differ as to the identity of this Cushite woman whom Moses is said to have married, and although none of the interpretations is either conclusive or satisfactory, we will have to look at them, to try to assess them in relation to the 'pretext' that Miriam made of the situation, and this we will do now.

81) 12:13

Different interpretations of the identity of the Cushite woman whom Moses is said to have married, have been given. None of the conclusions is satisfactory. The question is solved simply for Calvin, who maintains she is none other than Zipporah (following Augustine and others), since there is no mention of the death of Zipporah up to this point, and he regards it as 'too absurd to charge the holy prophet with the reproach of polygamy'. It is true that 'Cush' is used of two, possibly three, distinct districts or peoples Ethiopia (the regular use of the word), a district east of Babylon, and also a north Arabian people, appearing in certain inscriptions as the Kusi. If this latter holds good, it could be reconciled with the word 'Midianite' (cf Exodus 2:1521; Numbers 10:29).

On the other hand, Zipporah may well have died, and the reference would then be to a genuine second marriage. Certainly the text seems to suggest that Miriam's complaint was against a recent marriage. Delitzsch bases his view that this wife cannot have been Zipporah on the fact that it is highly improbable that Miriam had made Moses' marriage to Zipporah (which had taken place so many years before) the occasion of reproach at this particular point, and that it would have been much more likely for her to have done so if a short time before, probably after the death of Zipporah, he had contracted a second marriage with a Cushite woman. But, from a psychological point of view, it is not necessary to suppose that it must have been a recent marriage that had caused Miriam's petulant jealousy. It is by no means unknown in human relations for resentment to rankle for years, and it would only need a certain combination of circumstances finally to bring what had been a secret attitude out into the open at last. The most one can say is that if we accept that Zipporah had died (for which there is no biblical evidence) it would be simplest to follow Delitzsch's viewpoint. If, however, the identity of 'Cushite' with 'Midianite' is valid, Calvin's is the more likely interpretation.

82) 12:13

It has been pointed out that 'Miriam and Aaron do not call in question Moses' prophetic position his right to lead, but only the uniqueness of his prophetic position and his right to sole leadership', and that there is no suggestion in their question in 2 that he had done anything to forfeit the position originally held. This also serves to confirm that the issue of the Cushite marriage was simply a pretext, not a reason, for their challenge. Calvin's comment here provides a good analysis of the situation: 'They are proud of their prophetic gift, which ought rather to have fostered modesty in them. But such is the depravity of human nature, that they not only abuse the gifts of God towards the brother whom they despise, but by an ungodly and sacrilegious glorification, extol the gifts themselves in such a manner as to hide the Author of the gifts.' The point of the reference in 3 to Moses' meekness is that it must surely be taken with the final sentence in 2, 'And the Lord heard it'. The implication is that, although Moses through very meekness was prepared to submit without protest to this unprovoked and hurtful attack without defending himself, God was not prepared to let it pass (so Calvin, who adds, 'this passage teaches us that although the good and gentle refrain from reproaches and accusations, God nevertheless keeps watch for them, and, whilst they are silent, the wickedness of the ungodly cries out to, and is heard by, God').

83) 12:410

The Lord's intervention in the situation is swift and decisive. All three are summoned to the Tabernacle, Miriam and Aaron are commanded to stand forward to receive the divine pronouncement on their challenge and complaint against Moses, a pronouncement Moses would hear, although he stands in the background. Two things are made clear: the first, that there are various ways in which God speaks to man and makes himself known to them; and the second, that there is a qualitative difference between the way in which He makes Himself known to people like Aaron and Miriam and the way in which He makes Himself known to Moses. What marks a man or woman as a prophet, or prophetess, is that he should be the recipient of dreams and visions and this means that the Lord 'speaks' with him. It seems clear, that both Aaron and Miriam fall into this category (cf Exodus 4:16; 15:20), and that this is the basis of their claim in 2b. By contrast, however, Moses' position is entirely different. The 'not so' in 7 is emphatic: he is 'entrusted with all My house', i.e. his position is 'compared with that of the chief slave who is at once the confidant of his master and the man to whom his master's whole house is entrusted' (this is the basis of the reference in Hebrews 3:26:5 where Moses' position as servant is in turn contrasted with Christ's as Son). This is clearly a relationship of a different order, involving personal and intimate converse between them, described in the words 'mouth to mouth' (cf 'face to face' in Exodus 33:11; Deuteronomy 34:10). The further phrase in 8, 'the similitude of the Lord shall he behold' serves to underline this unique intimacy the more graphically (cf Exodus 33:18-23). This exposition of the relationship between Moses and the Lord is made the basis of the divine condemnation. They should have been afraid to challenge this unparalleled relation, recognising its superiority and the qualitatively different authority he had bestowed on Moses. Because they failed to do so, Miriam, as the instigator of the rebellion, was immediately stricken with leprosy.

84) 12:11-16

Aaron, on seeing the judgment of leprosy coming upon his sister, beseeches Moses for mercy. There is surely in his prayer an implicit recognition of the different kind of authority that Moses had. Indeed he is acknowledging that Moses possessed a power in intercession with God that he himself could not exercise, hence his appeal to his brother. The intercession is readily and willingly made by Moses, and secures the healing and restoration of Miriam, after a seven-day exclusion from the camp (cf Leviticus 14:2ff). Delitzsch regards the passage as meaning the 'restoration and purification from her leprosy were promised to her after the endurance of seven days' punishment', and adds, 'Leprosy was the just punishment for her sin. In her haughty exaggeration of the worth of her own prophetic gifts, she had placed herself on a par with Moses, the divinely appointed head of the whole nation, and exalted herself above the congregation of the Lord. For this she was afflicted with a disease which shut her out of the numbers of the members of the people of God, and thus actually excluded from the camp; so that she could only be received back again after she had been healed and by a formal purification. The latter followed as a matter of course, from Leviticus 13 and 14, and did not need to be specially referred to here.' The forward march of the people was held up until Miriam was fully restored. This was but one of many hindrances on the way to the Promised Land.

85) 12:116

It is necessary, if we would gather the deepest lessons from this chapter, to look beyond the pretexts used by Miriam and Aaron to the deep, underlying reasons why they were so critical. It is surely clear in such circumstances that if this pretext of the Cushite woman had not been present they would as likely have found another, or even invented one. Why did they speak against Moses and thus challenge his leadership? Because something else was true, deep down within them: they were reacting against the word that Moses spoke from the Lord, and against the 'word' that his dedicated and consecrated life spoke to them. Moses was faithful in all God's house, that is to say, he was utterly true and dedicated to the divine purpose and had adhered unswervingly in obedience to it. But this is a costly way to live, and not every one is prepared to pay such a price for an onward, forward movement of God. For Miriam and Aaron at this point, the price was, apparently, too great to pay. Ultimately it was not even a question of ousting Moses from the leadership of the people, but one of ousting the word that Moses spoke from God, in favour of another, easier one - less trenchant, less demanding, less devastating. There was a death that they were not prepared to die, as Moses was. When Jesus taught His disciples the way of the cross, many said 'This is a hard saying, who can hear it', and many walked no more with Him (John 6:60, 66). This, basically, is why God vindicated His servant, and visited Miriam so signally with His divine displeasure. From which we may gather that the really dangerous problem facing the work of God arises not so much from the worldliness of a mixed multitude as from the refusal of God's own people of the Word and the cross that alone can discipline, fashion and transform their lives. The real enemies of the work of God are not the unconverted and the graceless but those who have a name that they live and are dead, who pay lip service to the life-changing character-forming word of the cross, and have desired an easier way.

86) 13:120

The narrative of the spies' expedition into Canaan is the prologue that leads to the story of the divine judgment upon Israel at Kadesh Barnea. Twelve men chosen from each of the twelve tribes are sent in to spy out the land. They are sent, according to 1, at the command of the Lord, but according to Deuteronomy 1:22 it was the people who asked Moses to send the spies. This is taken by some to be a sign of their want of faith in Jehovah's leadership. Others, however, and much more probably, maintain that this proposal pleased Moses, so that he laid the matter before the Lord, Who then commanded him to send out for this purpose the spies! The spies were all men of rank in their tribes, 'heads of the people of Israel' (13), but different from the tribal princes mentioned in 1:3ff; 7:12ff. The order of the listing of the tribes in 415 follows, in the main that given in 1:515, with the minor alterations of Zebulun and Ephraim being reversed, also Gad and Naphtali. At the end of the list (16b) there is added the statement that Moses called Hoshea, son of Nun by the new name Joshua. The instructions given by Moses to the spies are recorded in 1720. The commission was definite and specific: they were to penetrate the Negev (the south), and the hill country, and seek to make some assessment of the possible military strength of the people, and their aptitude for war, and estimate the economic resources of their land. This was an astute and business-like proposal, with both the more immediate objective of conquest, and the longer-term prospect of settlement in the land in view.

87) 13:2-25

The twelve spies went in, as they were bidden, and for forty days they searched out the land, obtaining in the course of that time a fairly clear and coherent picture of conditions there and of what would have to be faced by the people. In 21 we are given a summary of the expedition, with what follows in 22-24 giving a particular detail which was of great importance to the congregation of Israel, as will be seen in what follows these verses, when the spies returned and made their report (5). During the forty days a length of time which really requires them to have ranged the length and breadth of the land the spies made a full investigation of the terrain, from the wilderness of Zin in the south where Kadesh was situated, to Rehob in the north, near Hamath, a place generally identified with Beth-rehob at the Jordan valley near to Dan and Mount Hermon. Visitors to Israel can well imagine such an itinerary and follow with engrossing interest the spies' progress northwards through the wilderness of Judea upwards through Samaria, into Galilee and along the shores of the lake (what would have been their reaction on seeing it for the first time!) and up the Jordan valley to the slopes of Mount Hermon. It is little wonder that in their report they should have spoken as they did in 27!

88) 13:2633

On their return the spies reported back to Moses. Their testimony was unanimous (27ff): it was a good and fruitful land, flowing with milk and honey, and the grapes of Eshcol, a fertile valley north of Hebron, were produced as token evidence of this. A note of great reserve, however, was sounded by the majority of the spies in 28: the land, they said, was inhabited by a very strong people, and their cities were large and well fortified (as the excavations at places like Jericho and Megiddo show today). In addition, the descendants of Anak were there (the sons of Anak represent probably not individuals but tribes of Amorite or north Arabian people settled around Hebron many traditions survived in Canaan of gigantic peoples, most of whom were the original dwellers of the land). The people seem to have got word of this gloomy report, and became agitated and discouraged by it this is implied in 30, in the statement that 'Caleb stilled the people before Moses'. His attitude was positive and optimistic: all that the other spies had said was accepted, giants and all, 'nevertheless, let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it! The defeatist attitude of the other spies is underlined again in 32, 33. It was as if, having once uttered their reserve, they were carried on by its momentum into an almost hysterical state of panic, which communicated itself inevitably to the congregation of the people, as we shall see in the chapter that follows.

It will be best to complete the survey of both this and the next chapter first of all, before making general comment on the implications of this grave and critical crisis point for Israel.

89) 14:110

The effect of the ten spies' report as it circulated among the people was to spread their defeatist attitude throughout the whole congregation of Israel. A movement of mass hysteria seems to have swept through them, but it was also more than this: it was to change the metaphor like putting a spark to dry tinder. Their history, recorded in the past few chapters, prepared for this, and the resultant conflagration was inevitable. The 'murmuring' reached an ominous level (2, 3) and broke out into open rebellion against Moses and Aaron (4), as they opted for new leadership to take them back to Egypt (reference is made to this incident in Nehemiah 9:17, where it is explicitly stated that they 'appointed a captain to return to their bondage' in Egypt. We may perhaps see a precedent for their action, not insignificantly, in the revolt by Aaron and Miriam against Moses' leadership in 12:1ff).

Moses' and Aaron's reaction to this was one of great distress and grief, and they fell on their faces before the assembled congregation (5), to call upon the Lord. Deuteronomy 1:29-31, however, indicates that Moses first made an attempt to reassure the people and exhort them to go forward without fear.

Joshua and Caleb, the other two spies, added their protest to Moses' and Aaron's, making an eloquent but vain appeal to the people, urging them to trust in the goodness and providence of God to fulfil His promise to them, and warning them of the danger of rebelling against Him (8, 9). The congregation, however, were too far gone in their revolt to be influenced by this most eloquent of appeals, and were all for stoning Caleb and Joshua, and would have done so but for the intervention of God (10b), through the appearance of His glory in the Tabernacle, to deal with the situation Himself. All in all, this is one of the saddest and most tragic experiences of Israel's long history, and one fraught with the most serious and far-reaching consequences, as we shall see in what follows.

90) 14:1-25

The warnings given by Moses and Aaron, Caleb and Joshua, were all too grimly realised. The Lord's anger was kindled against His people. They had despised Him, and He would suffer this outrage no longer. The divine sentence was announced: the people were to be destroyed (12), and in their place a new people were to be created, from the descendants of Moses. God would 'go back to the beginning again', and start afresh with His purpose. There now follows a remarkable debate between Moses and the Lord, as he intercedes for the people, and with princely mediation wins for them a reprieve. But, even with this, judgment cannot be avoided (22, 23): the land is closed to them, and the people are turned back into the wilderness, there to wander for forty years, one year for every day the spies were in the land, until that whole generation of adults should die off, Caleb and Joshua, and the children excepted. The distinction made here is that Israel as a nation was pardoned, and still remained the people of God; but that generation of Israelites as individuals failed forever in the hope of their calling. For them this was the end not in the sense that they were no longer His people (for He still dealt with them in mercy in their wilderness wanderings), but in the sense that they missed their high destiny, and entered a dreary 'secondbest'.

91) 14:1125

Moses' intercession, as he 'stood in the breach' before God (Psalm 106:23) is similar to that in Exodus 32:10ff, with the addition here that he pleads the honour of God's name among the heathen, which would be impugned in their sight if He destroyed them all. In addition to this consideration, Moses also pleads the revelation that God had given of Himself as being 'longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression' (18). This is powerful and effective pleading indeed! Calvin says, 'Moses was able to derive from thence a sure directive for prayer; for nothing can be more sure than his own word, on which, if our prayers are based, there is no reason to fear that they will be ineffectual, or that the result should disappoint us, since He who has spoken, will prove himself to be true'. Finally, he bases his appeal on experience (19): 'Pardon, (he says) as Thou has so often done before.' For since the goodness of God is unwearied and inexhaustible, the oftener we have experienced it, the more ought we to be encouraged to implore it; not that we may sink into the licentious indulgence of sin, but lest despair should overwhelm us, when we are lying under the condemnation of God, and our own conscience might torment us. In a word, 'Let us regard this as a most effective mode of importunity, when we beseech God by the benefits which we have already experienced, that He will never cease to be gracious' (Calvin).

92) 14:11-25

The divine response to Moses' intercession is immediate and God pardons according to Moses' word (20). This 'change of mind' on God's part is remarkable, but it poses problems. It could be argued that the contradiction is only apparent, and that the sentence of disinheritance did not in itself exclude the possibility of forgiveness, and that this is in fact what took place: that generation did lose its inheritance, although it received the forgiveness of God (cf Psalm 99:8). The truest thing, however, that can be said is that we have here one further evidence of the essential mystery inherent in the relationship of the divine sovereignty and human responsibility. As the Westminster Confession puts it: 'God from all eternity, did by the most wise and holy counsel of His will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established'. The two sides must clearly be held in a polarity of truth, rather than modifying the emphasis on the divine sovereignty on the one hand or qualifying the reality of human responsibility on the other. Whatever the mystery involved, Moses' prayer clearly moved God on this occasion to change His dealings with His people.

The reference in 22 to their having 'tempted me now these ten times' must surely be understood in general terms, ten being used as a number of completeness (although the Jewish Talmud takes it as a literal figure and instances specific references in support of its contention). The Lord's testimony in 24 concerning Caleb is very moving: 'he had another spirit with him, and hath followed me fully' complete obedience and complete confidence are indicated. In such a context, this must surely have gladdened the heart of God!

93) 14:26-38

Moses and Aaron are now instructed to inform the people as to the details of the sentence passed upon them. The entire faithless generation of them, Caleb and Joshua excepted, are condemned to wander in the wilderness for forty years, one year for every day that the spies were in the land. There is a grim irony in the pronouncement that the Lord will take the people at their word: 'Would that we had died in this wilderness!' (2), they had said, and so it was decided. The expression of their murmuring spirit became their sentence, and they had decided their own destiny by their faithlessness. It is clear that the message of this section of the book is that they had brought their exclusion from the Promised Land upon themselves. And, as one commentator puts it, 'the punishment which befell the people was no merely arbitrary act: the unbelief and disobedience which they had repeatedly exhibited showed their unsuitability for the conquest of Canaan.' Even their children were not exempt from this visitation, for although they were eventually to enter the land (31) as a prey, this would only be after their prolonged period in the wilderness, a discipline which they must endure to atone, as it were, for the faithlessness of their fathers. A grim footnote is added in 36:38 to the Lord's pronouncement of the sentence upon the people. The ten spies who had been instrumental in spreading the disaffection among the people and bringing them to the point of rebellion and revolt were stricken by plague and died before the Lord. This is the beginning of the Lord's 'displeasure' (thus does the RSV render 'my breach of promise' in 34), and, as Calvin points out, 'a kind of presage to all the others of the punishment which awaited them' As the New Testament would put it, 'God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap' (Galatians 6:7).

94) 14:39-45

What follows in the concluding verses of the chapter reminds us of the distinction that the apostle Paul draws (2 Corinthians 7:9ff) between godly sorrow that worketh repentance and leads to salvation, and the sorrow of the world that worketh death. Instead of allowing the terrible sentence passed on them to work repentance in them, all that their 'confession of sin' (40) led to was a carnal resolve to enter the land in spite of a warning from Moses that God's judgment in the matter was unalterable, and that they would certainly come to grief. That they were devoid of the presence of God in this ill-advised and ill-fated escapade is made plain in 44 by the statement that 'neither the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, nor Moses, departed out of the camp' with them as they went up. The message of the verses is clear: their action simply confirmed the rebelliousness and obstinacy of their hearts against the will of God, and underlined the inevitability of the divine judgment that came upon them. As one commentator has said, 'It is human nature, to neglect to serve God when he wills it, and then to attempt to serve Him when He forbids it.' The truth is, God wanted more, far more, from His people than this abortive display could possibly indicate. All that they did was to demonstrate their natural perversity of heart, and their failure to understand the nature of repentance. In 44 it says, 'They presumed ...'. This is an eloquent and perhaps sufficient commentary on their state of heart, and it prompts us to remark that in such circumstances God is not really taken in by our protestations, though we ourselves may often be, and others also. The truth of the matter is that the wilfulness, the disobedience, the hard-hearted disregard of the divine will, were all unchanged.

95) 13/14

We must now pause to consider some of the lessons that this tragic crisis at Kadesh Barnea provides. It is clear that the solemn message it bears impressed itself very deeply on the minds of New Testament writers. Two passages in particular, 1 Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 4, call for some comment. The point of Paul's introduction of the subject in his epistle to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 10) is a general one. It is a warning to the Corinthian believers that if they persist in tempting God by their carnal worldliness and spiritual carelessness, they would run the risk of being disqualified, as Israel was, in this story. It is significant that Paul had just spoken (9:24-27) of the possibility of a believer, and a servant of the Lord, becoming through carelessness 'disqualified', castaway not in the sense of being cut off from the mercy of God, or of losing salvation, but in the sense of losing one's reward, of losing indeed, one's truest and highest destiny in the service and purposes of God. Paul could see in the Corinthian Church the same sinister pattern at work as had brought spiritual disaster upon the people of Israel, persistent and continuous dissension and disputing, and above all murmuring, against the authority of the apostle. He is bidding them beware, saying, 'See where all this is leading: your feet are on the slippery slope, and by and by you will not be able to stop. There is a predictable end to this attitude of yours. Remember the children of Israel at Kadesh Barnea'. To those who are called of God and part of the divine purposes for their day and generation, this is an immense challenge: if through unwillingness, or fear, or timidity, or carelessness, they fail to recognise this to be their calling, and hang back, for whatever reason, they will need to beware lest they fall as Israel fell, and God turned elsewhere to those who are prepared to dare to believe and venture out on Him.

96) 13/14

We next look at Hebrews 4. In this passage the Apostle gives an impassioned appeal to his readers to enter into all that God has for them in Christ, and guard against the danger and tragedy of not entering in because of an evil heart of unbelief. The statement he makes in 4:2: 'For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it' refers not to the gospel of grace being preached to them of old time, but to the good news that Caleb and Joshua brought back from the Promised Land, when they said 'We are well able to go in and possess the land'. This is the message which they heard and which did not benefit them. The point of the parallel becomes very clear when we remember to whom this epistle was written: believers who were wavering in faith and likely to turn back because of their unwillingness to let go of the old tradition and Jewish beliefs and ways. In this way they were just like the children of Israel on the borders of the Promised Land, and history was repeating itself in the spiritual sense, hence the apostolic exhortation, 'Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief' (4:11). This is a word of continuing relevance for the believer, especially when he is tempted to vacillate, selfishly holding back his allegiance from the full commitment to the work of God to which he is summoned: and its exhortation to him is to cast hesitation to the winds, and go forward in the divinely appointed pattern, and 'go on unto perfection (maturity)', to go in and possess the land (6:1).

97) 13/14

There are two directions along which the spiritual application of these chapters can be followed: invitation and challenge. We look first at the invitation afforded by them. On any estimate, the spies' expedition into the land, and their subsequent report, opened up an immense opportunity for Israel, and provided an invitation to enter into the blessing and enrichment that God had in mind for His people. In view of this, the fateful 'nevertheless' in 13:28 stands in eloquent contrast, for it underlines the enormity of their failure in turning back, in spite of the undoubted and confessed attractiveness of the Promised Land. The refusals men make of the grace of God are always made in face of such attraction. There are those who remain outside the covenant blessings of God in this way and never really enter the kingdom. They listen to the gospel, and they see the attractiveness of the new life how could any man not see this they taste, so to speak of the grapes of Eshcol, in the sense that they almost savour, by implication, the blessings of God's salvation, in the hearing of the Word; they stand, as it were, on the threshold of the kingdom and yet they turn away, refusing it. One thinks of the sometimes irrational considerations that make men turn back. These Israelites swept aside the great prospect that stretched before them, that for which they had been called out of Egypt, were prepared and trained for, that for which their whole history had destined and predisposed them. In one disastrous moment, in which they weighed the blessings of life against the doubtful attractions of the Egypt that their hearts hankered after the 'good old days' in which in fact they had suffered and languished in bondage they hankered and pined, and the blessing of God was outweighed. This is how men are lost; this is how men miss the gates of eternal life.

98) 13/14

There is no doubt that a formidable challenge faced Israel on entering the land, that would take all that there was of them to fulfil, as they confronted the sons of Anak, and the walled cities that abounded there. And all the attractiveness of the gospel invitation does not conceal the resounding challenge and summons that it also presents to men. But a gospel that promises an easy time is not a gospel worthy of respect. It can be a temptation, in our preoccupation with commending our message to a generation that has become indifferent to it, to present the gospel in a false attractiveness that simply emasculates it and makes it a caricature of its real nature. This, however, is far from the biblical standpoint. There is a certain attitude of mind that has gained currency in modern days, that is well expressed in the words, 'the world owed me a living', and which is deadly for the moral and spiritual welfare of church and nation. We have pampered and spoiled ourselves as a generation until all that we can speak of is rights and privileges, never responsibilities and duties. It is possible to capitulate to this spirit in such a way as to lose sight of the great horizons, and shrink the glory of the gospel to such an extent that it is made to play the role of a 'tranquilliser' for sick and pining hypochondriacs instead of a mighty, authentic word from on high about sin and forgiveness, new life and everlasting hope. What Church and nation need today is a challenge worth facing, a cause to live for and die for. It is just such a cause that is represented in this story: 'Go in and possess the land'. The Church is not a wet-nurse, appointed to soothe and pet the chronic immaturities of those who are not prepared to come to terms with themselves; it is rather the trumpet that summons men to battle. Churchill's famous wartime summons, to 'blood and toil, tears and sweat' need to have their spiritual counterpart. In Christian warfare the price does not come down: it asks everything of us! There is no cut-price Christianity in the New Testament, no cheap grace. This is the standard, and the faithful few go forward in this spirit, even if, to continue the Churchillian metaphor, they have to 'go it alone'. There were only twelve disciples: but they turned the world upside down!

99) 15:116

Taken by itself, the message of this chapter is plain and straightforward. It is the record of various offerings that belong to the Levitical pattern and system of sacrifices and offerings constituted by God for His people. It is, however the position of this chapter in the historical sequence that should cause us some thought. Why should such a record occur at this particular point? It will be noticed that in chapter 16 the narrative is once again resumed, and the story of God's dealings with His people in the wilderness is continued. What is the significance of chapter 15 *here*, and in *this* place?

In 2 we read. 'When ye be come in to the land...'. But in chapter 14 it has just been said that none of that generation would enter the land. This institution, then, must be for the new, younger generation (14:31) who were under twenty years of age. And it is significant that the burden of the chapter may be said to be with two matters: sins of ignorance and sins of presumption. Here, it would seem, is the connection with the previous chapter. Sins of ignorance are pardoned; sins of presumption are punished. Israel's sin at Kadesh was one of presumption 'with a high hand', as it is literally translated, and they were punished in this final way, and excluded for ever, from entering the land. The chapter therefore stands as a meditative commentary on the serious and often fatal consequences of a life of sin, and should be understood as such.

100) 15:1732

The question that now arises is: does this have a message for us today? Is it valid for the New Testament era? What the chapter appears to say is that there is provision with God for sins of ignorance, but not for sins of presumption. Does this hold good then, for the New Testament also? And, therefore for us? This is surely a matter of great concern, especially when we think of sins we have committed that have not been, and could not honestly be said to be, sins of ignorance, but wilful, deliberate sin, in rebellion against God's good and perfect will. In answer to this problem it is sometimes averred that whereas the Old Testament makes provision only for sins of ignorance, the New Testament provides for all sin, of ignorance and of presumption alike. But this is not perhaps the right or best way to put it. It is true that the new covenant is wider, broader and greater than the old; but we do see surprising evidence in the New Testament itself of this distinction between sins of ignorance and sins of presumption (as cf Luke 23:34; Acts 3:17; 17:30; 1 Timothy 1:13). But, in fact, these references simply serve to raise *other* problems in our minds. Take the references to the Crucifixion (Luke 23:34; Acts 3:17). Was this a sin of ignorance? Did they not *mean* to crucify Christ? What of the deliberate, calculated, malevolent plotting against Him? And what of Saul of Tarsus' mad frenzy against the Church? Was there not calculated and deliberate malignity there? Clearly, sins of ignorance embrace a fairly wide range of sinful attitudes!

101)15:1732

The truth of this difficult matter seems to be this: there are always two elements at least in sin, ignorance and wilfulness, and it is the presence of the element of ignorance (however partial) in human sin that makes it forgivable at all; whereas demonic sin, being pure wilfulness and revolt against God, is neither forgivable nor can be. And the terrible thing is that human sin can on occasion approximate more and more to the demonic in such a way that it passes the point of no return, to become fixedly wilful and presumptuous. This, we may say, is the sin against the Holy Ghost, for which there is no forgiveness, in this life or the next.

Now, in human experience, the two elements are mixed in varying proportions, now the one, now the other being more predominant; and none of us can ever really say just how near the point of no return we may be approaching (for has not sin a blinding power?). The only safe way is to strive with all our might to see that we do not sin at all. In this connection, we should remember that Scripture speaks, explicitly as well as implicitly of *culpable* ignorance (cf 2 Peter 3:5). This is seen supremely and most frighteningly in Judas Iscariot, of whom it is finally said that the devil entered into him 'and he went out; and it was night'. He made himself unforgivable, passing the point of no return, refusing even the Lord's final appeal to him at the Supper. This is what Israel did at Kadesh. And the point of these regulations given to the new generation here is that God was telling them, in effect: 'Watch your step: be thou very wary lest continuing in sin like your fathers will push you also past the point of no return'. A solemn thought indeed!

102) 15:32-41

This incident is inserted here as a practical illustration of sinning 'with a high hand'. It had already been laid down clearly in Exodus 31:14,15 and 35:2 that any breach of the law of the Sabbath should be punished by death; there could therefore be no extenuating plea of ignorance by this man about what he had done. In 34, what should be done to him refers only to the manner in which he was to be put to death, not to the sentence itself which, as the above references indicate was unmistakable. The instructions in 37ff appear to have been given in relation to the incident in the previous verses, as 39 makes explicit: they were to wear the 'fringes' as a reminder of the commandments of God, and to prevent such presumptuous sin.

The severity of the penalty imposed upon Sabbath violation is 'an indication of how the nation, as a whole, was impressed with the inviolable sanctity of the Lord's Day' (Delitzsch). All the Old Testament evidence serves to indicate that this was something crucial in Israel's relationship with God and for this reason: reverence for the Day symbolised reverence for God Himself, and violation of its sanctity was therefore a sin against Him, an insult to His majesty. It is in this regard that we can best understand the widespread contemporary neglect and desecration of the Lord's Day: it symbolises our modern generation's neglect and contempt of the things of God; it is man's refusal of God, in the same way and for the same reasons as anti-Semitism, the hatred of God's people, is man's rejection of God. As to the severity of the sentence - death by stoning - we should remember that it is not so very long since in our own society, a man could be hanged for sheep stealing. We do not do that nowadays; but we should realise that we must distinguish between the *form of punishment* (which varies from age to age, society to society) and the *sanction* of the law which does not change. It is *always* wrong to steal sheep even though the punishment for the offence may change. Similarly, it is always wrong to violate the Lord's Day, even though nowadays there is no penal consequence involved in the eyes of the law.

103)16:122

The historical narrative is now resumed, and what is recorded in this chapter seems to continue the topic of presumptuous sin, for here was a revolt, which brought summary judgment from God upon it. We need not suppose it took place immediately following the events of Kadesh. The commentators suggest that it may well have taken place at a time not near either the beginning or the end of the forty years of wilderness wandering. It is placed here in the meantime, however, by the Holy Spirit for our learning and admonition, as a further illustration of 'presumptuous sin'. The words in 7, 'Ye take too much upon you, ye sons of Levi' are rendered significantly by the RSV, 'You have gone too far...'. This is what presumptuous sin means - going too far, passing the point of no return.

A careful reading of the chapter shows that it records what we might call a composite rebellion, i.e. it was made up of more than one strand and one issue. On the one hand it is clear that one party was led by Korah, and was composed principally of Levites, and that their quarrel was the fact that the family of Aaron had been specially set apart for the duties and privileges of the priesthood (cf 8:10 especially). On the other hand, Dathan's and Abiram's complaint (cf Psalm 106:16,17) was against the authority that they considered Moses and Aaron to have arrogated to themselves (3,13). It is interesting to see that while a united complaint was made against Moses, he in reply divided it up into its component parts. As one of the commentators puts it, 'a rebellion against ecclesiastical authority and another against political authority are associated together, and the strength of each is greatly enhanced by co-operation with the other'.

104) 16:122.

Here, then, are two groups of people, widely different it would seem, in their background having little in common with one another but uniting and making common cause against Moses, and against God! There is surely something basically contemptible and lacking in integrity, lacking even in character, in such an attitude people with nothing in common, and perhaps having otherwise little time for one another, save a common antagonism to the truth of God. Strange bedfellows indeed! Nor is this something confined to those far-off days, for we see the same pattern repeating itself in the New Testament, in the strange and unnatural alliance of the Pharisees and the Sadducees against our Lord, two groups of people who had almost nothing in common save their hatred for Jesus. Nor must we forget Pilate and Herod who, formerly enemies, were made friends (Luke 23:12) over their condemnation of Jesus. How very sinister that the grim reality of opposition against Christ and the gospel should cement a 'friendship' between two so very different people, who could not naturally stand each other! Is there not something very strange and frightening in such a situation?

105) 16:122

As to the rebellion itself, the words in 3 are significant: 'Ye take too much upon you...', which may be interpreted as meaning: 'You are claiming too much for yourselves' that is, in terms of what obviously seemed to them spiritual pride and self-righteousness. This is always a charge, which those intent on really following the Lord lay themselves open to. It is unavoidable, for the very good reason that men are always pricked in their conscience by the testimony of total obedience in another's life. It is the resentment caused by the awareness of a standard they cannot reach without being prepared to be changed and made different by the grace of God. And this they are not prepared to allow. In these terms, any believer, let alone a God-appointed leader, is likely to be accused of 'going too far', and of being narrow, extreme dogmatic and fanatical. For those who oppose it, 'religion' and particularly that form of it which presents itself as a thoroughgoing consecration to God is something that must be kept strictly in its place, it must never on any account be allowed to interfere with life. How difficult for such an attitude to realise that the Christian gospel has only one way 'going the whole hog': it is all or nothing. There can be no halfway house. We should learn from all this that the real nature of complaint against the servants of God is often very different from what appears on the surface. Besides, they could hardly blame Moses (14) for not bringing them into the Promised Land, when in fact God had simply taken them at their word when they had shown so clearly their unwillingness to enter. But then, opposition to God is never a very rational or consistent matter is it?

106) 16:23-50

The punishment that fell on the rebels was very terrible. The drama of the challenge with which he confronted them must have been terrific, and it shows just how sure Moses was of his God, to commit himself in this way. We might be tempted to shrink from such a story, and say, 'What a harsh and terrible thing to have happened'. This is a favourite pastime for those who seek to belittle the Old Testament and say that the Old Testament God is not the Christian God, but rather the bloodthirsty Jewish deity, and that Jesus came to correct these false ideas about Him. But we have only to look at the story recorded in Acts 5, when Ananias and Sapphira were summarily judged by the holy God. The parallel is a true one: danger was threatening God's sovereign purposes in the Church, and He could not allow it to go unchecked, for a poison could have spread that would have destroyed the life of the young Church. And so it was here: for this spirit to have continued among the people would have meant that the whole onward march of Israel would have been overturned. Such a challenge had to be dealt with summarily. The message here is this: 'Hands off My work', says God. As the Epistle to the Hebrews says, 'It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God'. This is the real issue: God is something more than a status symbol, more than a comfortable and comforting idea 'up there'. He is the living God, He is good, but He is a God Who stands no nonsense, and He is not prepared to let anything, or anybody stand in the way of His sovereign purposes.

107) 17:113

This chapter belongs to the story of the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram recorded in the previous chapter. It is the second instalment, so to speak, of the divine vindication of Moses and Aaron, and completes the picture of God's dealings with His people in the matter. Chapter 16 is, in a sense, negative in its emphasis, in that it speaks of judgment which, be it remembered, is God's 'strange' work. But chapter 17 is positive: it is a vindication in an unmistakable manner, of God's choice of Aaron and his posterity for the priesthood. One commentator, referring to the judgment of the rebel leaders, says, 'Great issues are rarely decided by force alone. Reasonable proof is also requisite, if a decision is to be lasting'. This is a legitimate way of looking at it. At all events, the double indication of the divine will the judgment of Dathan, Abiram and Korah on the one hand, and the unmistakable seal on Aaron's priesthood on the other, was meant to convince the people finally, and finish their murmuring, against God and His servants. The fact that it seems to have failed to do so for in later chapters we see more of this unhallowed spirit is some indication of the irrational and demonic nature of the opposition that men show against God and His will and purposes. Some people are just not prepared to be convinced of the truth, however unmistakable and convincing, persuasive and unanswerable God's indications may be. But the proof does not fall to the ground on that account. For it shows to any reasonable consideration that God is saying: 'This is the way, this is right'. It is a testimony to everything rational in the universe, to the moral foundation of the world, if not to irrational stubbornness, that right is right, as God is God.

108) 17:1-13

The 'sign' itself was simple enough: the leader of each tribe was to bring a rod to be placed in the Tabernacle, with each man's name upon his rod. Aaron's name was to be on the rod of Levi. God undertook to show, by unmistakable sign, whose rod was His sovereign choice. And in the morning, when the rods were examined, Aaron's rod was found to be bearing buds, blossoms and fruit of almond, while those of the other tribes were barren and bare. There are several lessons here. It can be taken, first of all, as a simple sign, in the sense that 'something happened' to Aaron's rod that did not happen to the others, and that God thus indicated His choice of Aaron rather than any of the others. And this is a good understanding of the story as such: Aaron was singled out and shown as different from the others, and this was the indication of God's will for the people. But there is also something more. There is a symbolic significance in the nature of the sign itself, and that in two ways: firstly, in that it was a rod that was chosen by God, and secondly in that the rod was made to show life at the behest of God. The 'rod' was a symbol of power and of authority in the Old Testament economy, and certainly in the early history of God's people. Remember the rod of Moses, which became the symbol of divine authority in his hand how he smote the waters of the Red Sea and parted them with it and how he drew water from the rock by means of it. This, then, was God's way of saying that His authority, so far as the priesthood was concerned, was vested in Aaron and that Aaron's authority was a living reality.

109) 17:1-13

The rod was made to show life by the hand of God. It budded, blossomed, and bore fruit. This was God's way of saying that the priesthood under Aaron would be a living thing, and a source of life and blessing and benediction to the people whom it served. What is more, God is saying that this family, that does in fact bud and blossom in blessing among the people, is the one He has chosen. This, in fact, is the test: life, and fruitfulness, and blessing where these are, let none presume to oppose or challenge! This is very impressive; Aaron was by no means perfect, he had his faults, indeed, but their lives had the seal of God upon them, and they were fruitful in His sovereign purposes. It was this consideration that overrode all others. This is what the people needed and were meant to see, in this 'sign' from God. It was this that was designed to make the murmuring cease once for all. This is surely a word for today also. The test is still the same. God makes the rod of His chosen and ordained servants bud and blossom and bear fruit. This is always the overriding consideration. What matter if it does not follow the expected patterns, or leads in strange directions? Is the Lord's seal upon it? Then let us be content, and follow. This was Moses' message to Israel then, as it is to us also today.

110)17:113

Matthew Henry has, as usual, a very penetrating and shrewd comment to make on this story: 'Here were not only almonds for the present, but buds and blossoms promising more hereafter. Thus has Christ provided in His church that a seed should serve Him from generation to generation.' The *fruit* represented Aaron's priesthood then; the *blossoms* his sons who even then were 'in training', so to speak, for future responsibilities; the *buds* represented the generation to come, the children who would yet take their place in the succession. Here is a word of enormous hopefulness and encouragement, for a work on which God lays His hand. Fruit now, blossoms promising much as it becomes fruit later; and buds breaking out, in the young lives committed to our care. In this light, it becomes clear just how serious a thing it was for anyone to challenge and dispute a work on which God had so manifestly laid His hand. One wonders whether the significance of this 'sign' to the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:11) was simply this message given here as if God were saying to him, 'Remember Aaron's rod that budded, and take heart in the difficult task I have appointed for you. Fear not: be not discouraged: for in due time you will reap if you faint not. I will make your ministry to bud and blossom and bring forth fruit. Beyond death there is resurrection; and although there may be dark night to pass through, with much weeping, *joy cometh in the morning*.'

III) 17:113

Two further thoughts remain before we pass to the next chapter. Aaron is a type of Christ, our great High Priest. His eternal priesthood is also challenged today, by men who do not care to bow to His authority. And God has vindicated His priesthood by raising Him from the dead. The Resurrection is the budding and blossoming of the almond rod all over again. The New Testament writers make much of this in their preaching. Peter, in Acts 2, preached the resurrection, and it was this that made the rebels tremble. Paul, preaching to the Athenians, holds up the authority of Christ, and calls for repentance, asserting that God has vindicated that authority in that He raised Him from the dead. In Romans 1:4, Paul says that He was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.

The final point is this: God's purpose in leading the people back to the wilderness was to purge their hearts of sin. In 5 it is said that the miracle of the budding rod was meant to make the people's murmurings cease. And it did. But, this was only a token all it did was to point forward to the one great miracle which does give the final answer to the problem of sin and man's rebellion against God the death and resurrection of Christ. He, Christ, is the almond rod that is laid, barren and alone, in death, and buds and blossoms in newness of life, and it is this victory, this vindication by God of the sacrifice which He made on the Cross, that alone constitutes the final answer to the murmurings and rebellions of man, for in the death and resurrection there is wrought a full and final reconciliation between God and man.

112) 18:17

The lessons and indeed the point of this chapter are not immediately apparent, and we might be tempted to pass it with some impatience as a passage in which the complicated rituals of early Israel did not have much to say to us. But this would be misleading and inadvisable: we must remember that the Scriptures disclose their best and most fruitful lessons to patient and painstaking enquiry, not to superficial examination. When we go step by step, seeking to find out what the Lord would have us learn here, we note in the first place the connection between the contents of this chapter and what has immediately preceded it. The rebels had just challenged Aaron in the priesthood: they had coveted his place and position and privileges. And here, God paints a clear picture of the priesthood for them, to show them it is not something to covet. He unfolds the responsibilities of priesthood, as a warning, so to speak, against carnal coveting of the office. The truth is, it is possible to covet place in the work of the Lord, and to do it as a means of self-expression, for the gratification of personal ambition, and as the expression of a lust for power, or even merely for the prestige it seems to bestow. It is odd, is it not, that what attracts from the outside, is in fact the kudos, the glory and the dignity? The other side never seems to be seen, with its solemn responsibilities matching every privilege in it! This is one of the important lessons the chapter proclaims, and it is so important that we shall do well to dwell on it a little further.

113)18:17

The Scriptures warn very clearly against the natural tendency to hanker after the kudos attached to position or authority in spiritual life. 'Seekest thou great things for thyself?' said Jeremiah to his servant, 'Seek them not' (Jeremiah 45:5). In Hebrews 5:4 were a 'No man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God'. And in 1 Corinthians Paul stresses the complementary nature of the various callings within the Church, the body of Christ, and warns against trespassing upon another's calling, urging us to be content with what God has called us to do, and to do it with all our might. That will be big enough responsibility to be accountable for in His sight, without coveting others' place. We cannot be more use to God than He chooses to make us, in any case (1 Corinthians 12, also 7:20ff).

And so, here, God gently reminds His people that there are solemn responsibilities attached to the priestly and Levitical offices. Aaron and the Levites, it is pointed out, were to bear the iniquity of the sanctuary, and the iniquity of the priesthood. This means: if the sanctuary were profaned by the intrusion of strangers, or by persons in their uncleanness, the blame should lie on the priests and the Levites, whose responsibility was to have prevented it. Or, if any of the offices of the sanctuary were neglected, or any service not done in accordance with the divine will, they were held accountable for it. Here is a word for the servant of God, with a vengeance! The defilement of the sanctuary, the intrusion of alien things, the neglect of the true work of the ministry these are the things a minister is held accountable to God for! This is why a man cannot afford to fear the face of men, why he must be prepared ultimately to be at odds with whole sections of his people. He fears the face of God more than that of any man, for it is to Him that he must in the end give account. As ministers we are held responsible for the purity of the Church's life and activity. That is burden enough for any man, and will make him more concerned to please God than please any man, whatever the cost.

114) 18:824

The second lesson of the chapter is that when responsibility is fulfilled and honoured worthily and with a full and pure heart, the privileges are incontrovertible and blessed beyond all telling. God is no man's debtor. He abundantly provides for those who serve Him faithfully and in love: 'Them that honour Me I will honour', saith the Lord. The point that is being made in this central bulk of the chapter is that not only do the priests and Levites have high responsibilities in their office, but also their calling involves sacrifices. They are not as other men. They are to have no inheritance, as the other tribes this we have already seen in earlier chapters. The Lord is their inheritance. They are separated unto Him, and what are rightful and natural privileges for others are denied to them by virtue of their office and calling. These enactments, then, were made so that they should be disentangled from the affairs of this life (cf 2 Timothy 2:4). 'They had no grounds to occupy, no land to till, no vineyards to dress, no cattle to tend, no visible estate to take care of' (Matthew Henry). But from the natural point of view, this is sacrificial living. And no man who is not prepared thus to count all things loss 'for the excellency of Christ Jesus the Lord' is likely to be either faithful to His calling or fruitful in it. But those who do, find the reward of God rich and satisfying. The Levites had no inheritance, but God's provision for them, even in material things, was bountiful and generous. They received the tithes of all the other tribes, and were thus cared for by a faithful God (this Paul also takes up in 1 Corinthians 9:13,14).

115) 18:824

An important point here, is to realise that the material provision God gave to the Levites, and gives also to those who serve Him, is simply the material symbol of the spiritual enrichment He gives them also, when they are dedicated to His service (cf particularly 12, which may be taken both literally and metaphorically). A faithful priest or minister of God is a much blessed man, God keeps him as the apple of His eye. He blesses him with His best blessings (as we may gather from Paul's well known words in 2 Corinthians 6:9ff as poor. yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing all things'). God is truly no man's debtor. And what applies to priests and Levites surely also applies to the priesthood of all believers, as we may gather from Jesus' words in Mark 10:28ff: 'There is no man that hath left home, or brethren ... for My sake and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time...'. 'Seek ye first the kingdom', says our Lord in another place, 'and all these things shall be added unto you' (Matthew 6:33). Such is the message the priests and Levites of old proclaim to us.

116) 18:824

The third lesson of the chapter must necessarily be the word it speaks about the basic presupposition underlying this whole arrangement of divine provision *tithing*. It is plain to see that everything here really depends upon the principle being adopted. It would never work, but for this. What was the force of the tithe? It was similar in principle to the institution of the Sabbath day of rest, which was a symbol that all days belonged to God. And the tithe is the symbol that all we have is the Lord's. To practise tithing is therefore a standing witness that we recognise this to be so in our lives. This, as we believe, is one reason for the spiritual impoverishment of the Church in our time it is because it does not as a matter of fact practise this kind of discipline and stewardship.

Tithing is something that should begin when Christians are young. Here is a challenge to lads and lassies and an invitation to adopt God's appointed way right from the beginning, as soon as they are earning money at all. When they do, they will soon get into the way of it, and it will become to them ('second nature', indeed). Soon they will not even regard it as their own, but God's, as of right, and will even feel it is like stealing if they withhold it. When one thinks of the vast sums of money that would become immediately available for the Lord's work in the world if even 10% of His people in the land were to tithe their incomes when one thinks that more money was spent in one year in Britain on bird seed than was contributed to all missionary work operating from the UK then one begins to see the measure of the real spiritual impoverishment we suffer from today in the 'Christian' West! 'Will a man rob God?' cried Malachi long ago. The question still stands today.

117) 19:122

This is a chapter the entire significance of which lies for us in the type which it gives of the New Testament and of Christ. In Hebrews 9:13,14, the Old Testament pattern and the New Testament reality are set together: 'If the blood of bulls and goats, and the ashes of an heifer . . . how much more, shall the blood of Christ...'. The message, therefore, for us is in the provision of cleansing of the conscience from dead works to serve the living God. The ceremonial usage was as follows: A red heifer, or young cow, was to be taken without the camp, and slain in the presence of the priest, who was to sprinkle of its blood with his finger seven times before the tabernacle of the congregation; the entire carcass was then to be burned, and into the midst of the fire which consumed it the priest was to throw cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool. When the carcass was completely consumed, the ashes were to be collected and preserved. On a person's contracting that ceremonial defilement which arose from touching a dead body, a portion of these ashes was to be mixed in running water, and a clean person, dipping a bunch of hyssop in the mixture, was to sprinkle it on him that was unclean. There are several important lessons for us to learn from all this, and we shall take some time to look at them in the Notes that follow.

118) 19:122

Let us look first of all at the relation of type to reality. There is a plain statement in Hebrews to the effect that 'it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins'. Only the blood of Christ can do this. In this respect the sacrifices of the Old Testament had no intrinsic worth, but were shadows cast on the course of history by the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. But this does not mean that they had no efficacy. If we believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, then we must believe that Christ the Saviour was at work in the Old Testament as in the New, blessing and sanctifying His people. Thus, very properly, the Westminster Confession says: 'This covenant (of grace) was differently administered in the time of the law and in the time of the gospel; under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come, which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins and eternal salvation.' But they were efficacious in an indirect way, in what they signified, rather than in themselves, and by virtue of what they signified, i.e. the death of Christ, whereas the New Testament ordinances are directly efficacious.

119)19:122

In both the Old Testament and in the New, distinctions are made between different aspects of cleansing. On the one hand, there is the oncesforall cleansing of the guilt of sin (typified by the brazen altar). It is the putting away of sin once for all by the sacrifice of Christ. When once we come to the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness, we receive a full, free and final cleansing from the guilt of our sin. This corresponds to justification, which covers the whole of life, past, present and future. The believer is a justified man, and remains so, unalterably. When he sins, as he will, the question of his standing is never again raised; judicial guilt is oncesforall dealt with and put away. His subsequent sins as a believer are dealt with as a family matter, within the family of God, and there is provision for this. But his standing is not affected, nor can it ever be. As to the judicial guilt of sin, we are forgiven persons, and remain so. But as to the other aspects of sinning, much still is to be said. On the one hand, there is the fact that it is not possible, in our daily walk through the world, but that we shall contract defilement from contact with the dust and grime of the world. This seems to be suggested in John 13, in the feet-washing scene. The imagery there is that of a man, returning from the public baths to his house, when his feet would contract defilement, but not his body, and would thus need cleansing. So the believer, oncesforall washed, needs no further cleansing; but needs to bring his daily sins to the Father for cleansing and forgiveness, so that he may remain in unbroken fellowship with Him. This is typified in the contrast between the brazen altar (in the Tabernacle) and the laver.

120) 19:122

On the other hand, as perhaps a special case of oft-needed and oft-repeated cleansing, there is the case of the believer whose conscience has again become defiled through contact with something unclean. It is here that the idea of the 'ashes of the heifer' comes in. In this regard, we see particularly how everything points to Christ. The heifer was taken without the camp, as Christ was. The cleansing is based on, and depends on, the sacrifice of the animal, that is, on atonement. Every kind of cleansing goes back to the Cross, and there is no cleansing apart from that blessed place. But the ashes were mingled with water. The ashes obviously speak of the once-for-all sacrifice that has continuing efficacy; but what of the water? Water symbolises in Scripture both the Word and Spirit of God, and we may say that the symbolism means something like this: The believer who contracts defilement is convicted of his sin by the Holy Spirit (cf John 16:8) speaking in and through the Word, and he is thus brought afresh to the Cross for cleansing and renewal. Furthermore it is in the Word and by the Spirit that the efficacy of the Cross comes home afresh to us. Significantly, the blood of Christ, the Word, and the Spirit of God, are all associated with cleansing in the New Testament (cf 1 John 1:7; John 15:3; 1 John 5:6,8). We should not and need not differentiate these in the different aspects of cleansing, for *all* are active in each, whether in the initial, once-for-all cleansing by which we enter into the kingdom of God, or the constant daily cleansing we all need to keep us in fellowship with the Father and the Son, and in the specific instances in which we become defiled by contact with some uncleanness.

121) 19:122

We should not be concerned to press this threefold distinction in cleansing too far, but they do correspond to basic realities in our experience: the oneforall cleansing by which we become children the continual cleansing by which we are maintained in fellowship with Him (in this regard we may recall Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 4:4 'I know nothing against myself, but I am not thereby justified', for this indicates that even when we may not be conscious of things that are wrong, we still stand in need of constant daily cleansing) and: thirdly, the specific cleansing in any particular matter. There is a distinction, after all, between a believer who is conscious that he is not perfect and therefore needs continual, daily cleansing by the blood of Christ (cf 1 John 1:7) and one who has got out of touch with the Lord because of some specific transgression. David was 'out of touch' for a whole year, before and until he sought the 'purging with hyssop', mentioned in Psalm 51 a clear reference to this ordinance in Numbers 19. The specific matter mentioned here is defilement by contact with a dead body ceremonial defilement, to be sure, but what does it represent, typify, in spiritual life? Any dead thing the dead hand of the world on a believer's life, the deadness of some unhal- lowed thing, that leaves its mark upon the life that blights and mars it, robs it of its fine edge of consecration. And solemn thought can such defilement ever remain secret, as to its ef- fects? Is it not sadly true that others can often discern that something is amiss, and could say to us, 'Brother, sister, what is it that has taken the fire from your testimony the light from your eye, the joy from your heart?' Well?

122)20:16

This chapter continues the story of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness. The opening verses record the death of Miriam, Moses' sister. It is therefore against a background of a personal sorrow that we should look at this murmuring of the people. Was it not rather heartless that the people should have started their bitter complaining again when Moses' sorrow was so fresh? Was it not inopportune? There is a lesson in this, for us. When people are out of sorts with God, they become clumsy and insensitive, and intrude unceremoniously at all manner of unsuitable times, causing needless hurt and distress, that could and should have been avoided. This lends particular seriousness to this evidence of murmurings and shows how far wrong and far out they were. The picture is one that, alas, has grown very familiar to us in our studies of the journeyings and wanderings. Every time anything seems to go wrong, this was how they reacted, in a grumbling querulous and faithless spirit that took it out on Moses and Aaron, who were the constant scapegoats for their vindictive and ugly attitude against God. We find ourselves almost gasping, 'Do these people *never* learn? Have they not learned any wisdom from their past experience of God's dealings with them?' Well might we ask this, for His dealings with them up to this point were all such as to inspire them with a faith and trust in His goodness and love (cf Deuteronomy 8:26 for a description of God's grace to them). It was in face of *this* that they sinned yet again. Astonishing, and perverse we think? Yes; but how has it been with us? Have we learned, any better than they? Good question!

123)20:713

The divine reaction to the querulous and faithless spirit of the people is not wrath, but grace. The provision of water for their needs is yet another signal evidence of the meaning of the grace of God—undeserved, unmerited kindness and goodness. 'Grace for the rebellious' would be an apt title for the passage, and the words of the hymn come readily into mind, 'And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind'. Water for the thirsty, bread for the hungry, home for the homeless, rest for the weary, pardon for the sinful—this is grace, and in this story before us we have an illustration of something that is fulfilled and magnified in the gospel of Christ. It is this that makes the gospel good news—good news for those who have failed, and been a disappointment to themselves and to God, for those who despair of themselves in His sight. Everything in the New Testament confirms this. One thinks of Peter, and his black denial of Jesus—this was no unexpected happening, but something that was entirely predictable, for all along his heart had refused the discipline of discipleship. What must he have felt after that denial? Surely dark despair and desolation. Yet, one of the first statements of the Resurrection narrative was, 'Go tell the disciples and Peter...'—a special reassurance from the risen Lord that there was grace for failures, grace for poor, broken, dejected Peter; to reach deeper than the depths of self-despair, to lift him up and back into fellowship with the Lord. Is this a word for some Peter today, who is so far down that he almost thinks it would be wrong of God to forgive and pardon and give him a fresh start, so rebellious he has been, so often he has fallen? Ah, this is the wonder and marvel of His grace, which goes far beyond our understanding of it! Take this word, Peter, today. It is for you!

124)20:713

But there is another emphasis in these verses, and it is necessary to complete the picture. There is absolutely no room for complacency in the knowledge of such a love and grace as God displays here. For He means us to take His grace seriously, on pain of punishment. We may not presume upon it. When we do, we shall suffer for it. This is the lesson which Moses' experience in 12, 13 has to teach us. A judgment was passed upon him because of his sin, and the privilege of leading the people into the Promised Land was withdrawn from this great leader and given to another (cf Psalm 106:32, 33; Deuteronomy 32:48ff; Deuteronomy 3:24ff). What was his sin? He was rash and presumptuous; he smote the rock, when God said to speak to it, transgressing by his unbelief of God's word. Whatever the nature of the transgression and we may suppose it was serious indeed it brought dire consequences upon him. Moses was disobedient in the matter, through irritation, anger and resentment, not to say bitterness, with the people; and disobedience is no less serious in the man of God than in the people of God. And he paid dearly for it. The lesson is clear: grace is never a ground for complacency or presumption. By our carelessness, by our sinful neglect, we can sin away forever some of the privileges of our calling not salvation itself, but our opportunities for service, our possibility for usefulness, our contribution to the ongoing purposes of God. Can a man take fire into his bosom and not be burned? The answer, ringing from a hundred pages in Scripture is, Never. The fact that this happened to Moses teaches us that there is no height to which we may rise in spiritual life where this will not be a possibility or danger. Be not high-minded, but fear!

125)20:1422

The next lesson of the chapter emphasises the grace of God from a different point of view. It is an interesting and instructive episode that is unfolded in these verses. Israel is refused a passage through the land of Edom, and not all the assurances Moses can give to the king of Edom will suffice to make a right of way for them. This enmity had old roots: Edom is Esau, and Esau and Israel had had differences in the past, as we know from Genesis. But what Edom did to Israel here was something God never forgot. It is an incident referred to not a few times in the subsequent history of the Old Testament and in the prophetic writings (cf, for example Judges 11:1618). The message here is: he who touches God's people touches the apple of His eye. He could chastise His people, judge them, discipline them, but woe betide anyone else who does them harm and ill. They were precious to Him, and for anyone to do despite to them was to ask for trouble. This also is the grace of God: He would buffet them, bruise them, chastise and punish them, but He had a care for them, He would never let them go, and He would allow no others to touch them with impunity. It is an interesting commentary on the nature of the life of pilgrimage that Edom should not allow Israel to travel through her land. The world is never slow to spurn and despise the people of God. This bears witness to the 'separate' character of true Christian life. We are in the world but not of it. In all conscience Israel had in so many ways all but obscured her pilgrim character. It would be well if as Christians we were to take seriously as our aim and intention the sentiments of Moses expressed in 17, 'We will go by the king's highway, we will not turn to the right hand nor to the left.' Is this descriptive of our walk through alien territory?

126)20:2329

The last verses of the chapter record the death of Aaron. We should not miss the significant fact that the chapter which ends with the record of the death of Aaron began with that of the death of Miriam. What must this have meant to Moses, in terms of bleak desolation and loneliness, Miriam's death took? It seems likely, therefore, that that year saw the double bereavement of God's appointed leader, and it says something to us about Moses' stature that he should have continued without interruption in his divinely ordained work even in such a context of sorrow and grief. The reason for Aaron's death at this point is emphasised again in 24 (cf 12,13), but there is almost a gentleness and certainly a solemn dignity in the Lord's words about his being gathered unto his people. And, withal, there is a beautiful sense of continuity in Aaron's son Eleazer being invested with the priestly garments and authority. As we say, 'God buries His workers, and carries on His work'. There was to be no interruption of the divine provision for His people. They were not to be without a high priest. And surely this serves to remind us of the wonderful words in Hebrews 8:23, 24 about the imperfection of the Levitical priesthood: 'They truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death; but this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood.'

127)21:13

The opening verses of this chapter record the encounter Israel had with king Arad, of Canaan. The context seems to be the onward movement of the people following the episode with Edom, recorded in the last chapter. Undeterred by Edom's refusal to let them pass, they resolve to find another way. Perhaps the most significant thing about what is told us here is the new spirit shown by the people. In the initial encounter with Arad, they experienced a setback, in which some were taken prisoner. They are undismayed, however, and betake themselves to the Lord in prayer with determination and firm resolve, and God wonderfully heard their prayer and gave them the victory. It is true that in the verses immediately following this, we again see the people discouraged and grumbling; but at least there is the beginning of a new attitude that 'paid dividends' in no uncertain way. By which we may learn that so often the Lord is just waiting for some sign of firmness and fortitude in His people, in order to bless them by His grace and enabling. Low-spiritedness is so seldom ever justified in face of such a willing God. If only we would realise that even a spark of spirit in us will be met with all the resources of the Godhead to help and prosper us! In this sense it is certainly true that God helps those who help themselves. Perhaps it is simply that we sometimes need time to become disenchanted with our own spinelessness in the spiritual life, and take a tumble to ourselves, and see just how 'fragile' and 'precious' we have all unconsciously become. Then, a new determination to be 'up and doing' will grip us and that is the context in which God delights to answer our prayers. Is this a lesson for us today: Are our prayers really so doleful that they are incapable of being answered?

128)21:49

The circumstances surrounding this well-known story are such as have become familiar to us as a pattern in the account of Israel's wanderings and the lessons to be gathered from it repeat those we have already gathered from the stubborn spirit of murmuring and backsliding so often evidenced by the people. The particular and special value it has for us, however, lies in the fact that our Lord Himself chose it to illustrate His greatest utterance about the gospel, in John 3:14-16, where the correspondence is made in unmistakable terms: 'As Moses...even so... the Son of Man...'. Here, then, is the best possible of illustrations to bring out the meaning of salvation. When we remember that the Old Testament is 'God's picture book', compiled to teach us the truths of grace, we realise that in His providence and mercy some of these old records throw wonderful illumination upon the doctrinal truths of God's salvation, helping us who are so slow to understand the Scriptures, to grasp them more fully and truly. One recalls our Lord's postresurrection words to the disciples: 'O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken...and beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself.' Was this story included? One can hardly think it would have been missed out, when He had already used it, to such effect, with Nicodemus. We shall spend some time with it, then, to see the lessons it is designed to teach us.

129)21:49

First of all, we are taught something about the nature of sin. Salvation is from sin, and men do not look to a Saviour until they feel their need of one. Paul once said, 'by the law is the knowledge of sin', and this part of the law is surely designed to give a knowledge of sin that will lead to a desire for salvation. In the fact that the Israelites were bitten by fiery serpents, Jesus means to tell us that sin is like the mortal bite of a poisonous serpent. One thinks readily of Genesis 3 and the story of the Fall this was a fatal bite indeed! Behind all sin is the poisonous influence of the evil one (remember, Satan's temptations are called his 'fiery darts' by Paul in Ephesians 6). Sin bites like a serpent and stings like an adder, inflicting a terrible wound on men's souls. To be a sinner means therefore to stand in need urgent need of healing. With snake-bite, time is of the essence, if life is to be saved. A sinner is a man with a sickness unto death and there is no time to lose if life is to be saved. This is one of the aspects of sin that calls forth the compassion and pity of God, and the tender care of the Great Physician Himself. One thinks of how Jesus moved among the poor and needy of His day, filled with compassion for them in their plight. Remember Nicodemus devout, respectable ruler of the Jews that he was yet in the eyes of Christ he was a sick man, more sick than he knew. What must this illustration have meant to him, when he began to realise its significance on the lips of the Saviour, as He used it in His ministry to him? Is *that* how He sees me, he would think? Is that really the truth about me?

130)21:4-9

This remarkable illustration teaches us something more about the nature of sin, however. The serpents were sent to Israel as a punishment for their murmurings against God. They were men in revolt. Sin, Jesus means to tell us, is revolt against God, against His good and perfect will. This can be seen clearly in the story of Nicodemus, who was blind to the truth about the new birth, as may be gathered from his comments. But it was a willing blindness: he did not want to see the truth, because seeing it would have been at that point much too costly a thing for him. He was resisting it because his heart was in rebellion against God, as the Israelites were. And it is important that we should see that this kind of fatal revolt can occur in people like Nicodemus as well as in the wayward, murmuring Israelites. As Paul puts it in Romans 8:5ff, they that are in the flesh cannot please God, being at enmity with Him and this is true whether the 'flesh' be respectable or religious, as well as gross or depraved. This truth is a bitter pill for the natural man to swallow, but swallow it he must, if he is to know anything of the blessing and the peace of God's salvation.

131)21:49

The provision God made for Israel illustrates the great gospel provision for sin. What is the significance of the uplifted serpent of brass? Matthew Henry says, 'That which cured was shaped in the likeness of that which wounded'. This is the key. Brass speaks of *sin judged* (cf the brazen altar in the Tabernacle, where the burnt offering for sin was sacrificed). Thus, here for Israel was the symbol, of substitutionary atonement their sin, represented by the serpent, was cursed and cancelled, and it was this they were bidden to look upon. Judgment cannot come where judgment has already been. So Christ, for our sakes, and for our healing, was made in the likeness of sinful flesh: He was made sin for us, on the bitter cross, and was lifted up from the earth, when He bore in His own body the judgment of a holy God upon sin. What is important for us to see is the identification of the Saviour with the sin, in both cases. From our point of view, what this says to us is that our sin must go to the cross to be judged and cancelled out, and that it did go to the cross, on the spotless shoulders of the Lamb of God. And it is because it was, once for all, dealt with and done away, that there is hope, and healing, and forgiveness for the children of men. As the old hymn puts it, 'There is life for a look at the Crucified One'.

132)21:49

Jesus said that as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up. How are these words 'lifted up' to be construed, in reference to our Lord? The first and fundamental reality is His being lifted up on the cross. The Son of man had to die, had to be made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. It is in this sense that Jesus said, in another place, 'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me' (John 12:32). But there is a sense in which we can 'extend' the meaning of the words. If the cross were the end of the story, there would be neither healing nor salvation. He arose! He triumphed over Satan, and spoiled principalities and powers, making a show of them openly. In this sense, Jesus was 'lifted up', in His resurrection and exaltation to the Father's right hand, to the place of power. By the same token, we may further extend the thought of His being 'uplifted' in the preaching of the gospel. The preaching of Christ crucified, which to the Jews is a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, is the power and wisdom of God to those that are being saved. The story of the Acts of the Apostles is the story of the Son of man being lifted up in this sense, and what glorious healing is recorded! And finally, we may speak of that 'uplifting' in relation to the lives of His people. We as believers are meant to show forth an uplifted Christ. The test of a true Christian is that he makes it easier for people to believe in God. 'Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me' we sometimes sing. When He is thus uplifted in us, the healing goes forth to bless men's lives. It is ever so.

133)21:1020

The account, almost in summary form, of the continuing journeyings of the people of God is punctuated here by a beautiful incident (16ff). It is the record of the Lord's further provision for their needs, and well illustrates Isaiah's famous words, 'Before they call, I will answer' (65:24), for on this occasion they do not even voice the need of water to the Lord. It is He (16) who takes the initiative and tells Moses to gather them together so that He may provide them with water. More importantly, perhaps, the divine initiative forestalled any possible complaint from the people, so that, instead of murmuring, songs of praise rang out from them (17ff). In our comment on 13 we spoke of a new spirit among the people, and certainly these verses exemplify this to a marked degree. The overriding impression is that of movement, from one place to another, and this is surely a parable of deeper spiritual realities, for they give the impression that Israel was now 'getting somewhere'. And it is always this that makes our hearts sing for joy. And it is not without significance, that Israel got to Pisgah (20) from where they could see the Promised Land!

134)21:2/35

The incidents recorded in these verses are similar in content and significance to Israel's earlier experience in 20:14-22 with Edom. Once again, as previously, Moses declares his intention of going 'by the King's highway' (22); but to no avail, and the Amorites confront Israel just as Edom earlier did. This, as we said, symbolises the conflict between the people of God and the world: it is, ultimately, an irreconcilable conflict, and one that is fought to the death. What is said in 34 is ever the heritage of God's people in the ongoing battle. It is God's battle, and the victory is His. All that is needed is for His people to be at one with Him in His purposes in the world: given that, no power on earth can finally resist or oppose them. But the work of God ever advances by the way of conflict, whether in Old Testament times or in New, or today, and it is simply unrealistic for us to think otherwise, or to imagine that we will ever 'get by' in our Christian experience without encountering opposition of one kind or another. As Paul says, 'We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22).

The number of place names mentioned in this passage reminds us of the value of consulting a good map, to trace the movements of Israel during this time and to gather something of the strategy of their advance towards the Promised Land.

135)22:17

We come, with this chapter, to the story of Balaam, a story remarkable and impressive in the range of its teaching, yet not without its problems in interpretation. What is recorded here emerges directly from the account given in the previous chapter of the triumphs of Israel over Edom, the Amorites and Bashan. It is in the context of the forward march of the people of God that Balak of Moab's attempt to get Balaam to curse Israel must be seen. This, in fact, gives us one very valuable key to a proper interpretation, for it indicates that here was an attempt by the evil one to hinder, frustrate and destroy the work and the people of God. This is certainly the significance the New Testament gives to the story (cf 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14) Hitherto, the attack on Israel had been direct, and these had been repulsed; but now, this was more subtle, because indirect, attack, and all the more dangerous because of this. The story is therefore important for us in the light it throws upon the unseen warfare against principalities and powers, and the way in which the evil one uses his wiles to hinder and frustrate the work and purpose of God. And one of the most important things for us to see is that Satan found his tool in a 'servant of God' who was out of joint spiritually, and who wanted the best of both worlds. This was the doorway through which Satan was able to 'get at' the people of Israel. This contains its own warning for us: we may never know just how much harm and injury we may do the work of God and the people of God if we are out of joint spiritually, and therefore become the unwitting tool of the devil. He is never slow to grasp an opportunity, or to jump at any chance we give him. Renegades, of whatever sort, usually succeed in doing much more harm than ordinary enemies of the faith.

136)22:8/4

One of the impressive lessons of the story is the way in which God overruled this attempt to bring evil on Israel, and turned the curse into blessing (12, and cf Deuteronomy 23:4, 5). This serves to emphasise just how sovereignly God was determined to protect and preserve this people, in spite of all their waywardness and rebellion. It reveals the strength of the bond that existed between God and Israel. His mercy was ever toward them, and it went ill with any who tried to harm those whom He was determined to bless. Perhaps the chief lesson, however, that the incident has to teach us, and that which the New Testament writers take up in their application, is the character study it gives of Balaam himself, and of the battle that went on in his own heart—a battle for integrity of character, a battle which he eventually lost, if we interpret the last stage of the story aright. Thus, within the battle to harm and hurt Israel, there was also this hidden battle for the soul of a man. Balaam was not a Hebrew; yet he was a worshipper of the living God. He was one of those outside the covenant who 'found' the Lord and served him, like Jethro, the priest of Midian, and others. He was clearly known to Balak of Moab as a man with a reputation for spiritual power. It is an interesting commentary on the misunderstanding of spiritual power that can grow in a man's mind to think that it could be exercised thus unscrupulously and wantonly, without reference to the moral nature of the God Who was supposed to be the source of it! How little some men discern about the nature of God!

137)22:1518

The first part of the story is plain and straightforward; and if it could have stopped at 18, all would have been well, for in response to Balak's request Balaam took the only possible ground that could be taken: he waited upon the Lord, to seek His will in the matter. This, we may say, was entirely right and proper; and that will was made quite clear and unmistakable to Balaam in 12. And yet if Balaam had been, as Delitzsch observes, a true prophet and a faithful servant of Jehovah, he would have at once sent the messengers away and refused their request, as he must then have known that God would not curse His chosen people. This is a very valid point: sometimes men make a show of 'seeking the mind of the Lord' on an issue that is really quite plain and obvious, and in which the mind of the Lord has already been declared. And it may well be that even at this point, the essential 'doublethink' in Balaam was striving with what he must have known in his heart of hearts was right. Nevertheless, as we see in 18, Balaam took the right stance, uttering words that are worthy of the highest spiritual standard: 'I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God, to do less or more'. If only he had stayed there, if only that moment of high dedication which we need not doubt was absolutely sincere, so far as it went had been maintained, how different it would have been in the end for him. What a tragedy it is that a man should fall and draw back from the highest he knows!

138)22:1922

There is a difficulty in understanding the anger kindled in God against Balaam (22) in view of the permission given him in 20; but the sense would seem to be as follows: When Balaam went the second time to the Lord and to have gone back a second time to ask about God's will could only mean that he wanted a different answer we must assume that the Lord, reading his heart said to him, in effect, 'I see that you are determined to go. Then have your own way'. Thus, the words in 20 represent God's permissive, rather than His directive will. Hence God's anger when Balaam went with the messengers of Balak (22). God sometimes does allow us our own way, without preventing it, allows us to play with fire, and allows us to be burned, to our cost. It is written of Israel in one of the Psalms, 'He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul '(Psalm 106:15). But how did such a thing come about? The critical point is between 18 and 19. It is clear that Balaam's firm attitude in 18 began to waver, and that it was the hope of gain that made it do so. And we may suppose a debate in his mind, in which he first wanted the Lord to change His mind on the matter, and then convinced himself that He had in fact done so. It is here that we see that this is not only ancient history, but also the unveiling of the deceitfulness of our own hearts. How easy it is to allow our estimation of what is God's will to be coloured and decided by our own secret hankering and determinations.

139)22:2335

The circumstances of Balaam's double-mindedness being as they were, it was inevitable that a divine confrontation should take place, and it is this that forms the substance of these verses. There were, it seems, two elements in that confrontation: on the one hand, it was the expression of the divine anger (this is the force of 'adversary' in 22) against Balaam for what he was intent on doing. On the other hand, it was designed to restrain him from advancing further on a road that was inevitably to lead him headlong into disaster. The impressive and frightening thing, however, is that although Balaam's ass could 'see' the angel (the animal's reaction to the sense of the supernatural is entirely convincing, in this regard). Balaam himself remained entirely unaware of the angel's presence until he was abruptly brought to his senses by the speaking of the animal (another supernatural and miraculous manifestation). One feels for the ass in this story clearly terrified as it was by the presence of the angel, on the one hand, and harassed and illtreated by Balaam on the other. It was, as we say, caught between two fires. As such, it represents the suffering brought upon the entirely innocent by those who are out of joint and at odds with God. The blight that unconsecrated lives inevitably spread all around them is one of the uglier and more shameful aspects of sin.

140)22:2335

We do not know whether the word 'ass' had the same kind of connotation in those days as it sometimes has with us today but it does seem that there is a certain fitness (for our thinking) that it took an ass to demonstrate to Balaam the real nature of what he was doing. One thinks in this connection of the Psalmist's words, 'O Lord, Thou knowest my foolishness' (Psalm 69:5). It would almost seem that the Lord was grimly determined to show this man just how foolish and ill-guided he was. We should not under-estimate the nature and extent of his blindness, however it is a very solemn and frightening reminder of what sin, when deliberately indulged, can do to our powers of perception, and how it can 'put out our eyes' and render us insensitive to spiritual realities. The later dialogue between Balaam and the angel (32ff) shows that grace was still nevertheless at work in this strange and unusual incident: for the angel points out (33) that but for the ass's reaction Balaam would have been destroyed. His eyes, it seems, had been opened just in time. How humiliating it must have been for the seer, who prided himself on having eyes for divine revelation, to realise that he had not been able to see what his dumb ass had seen. Truly, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:27, 'God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise'.

141)22:3641

The last verses of the chapter recount the eventual meeting between Balaam and Balak the king, who is, understandably, somewhat cool and reproachful of the seer for his delay in coming and his to Balak - unaccountable reluctance to 'perform' in answer to the generous overtures made to him. The answer Balaam gives simply repeats what he had already said to the king's messengers (18), and again he seeks to indicate to Balak that he is 'under orders' to speak only what Jehovah allows him to speak. We think it would have been better and safer for the seer to have indicated to the king something of the dramatic and dreadful encounter he had had with the angel of the Lord, for that would surely have impressed upon Balak the futility of his desire to bring a curse on the people whom God was determined to bless. That Balaam did not do so may well be an indication that, even then, he was still not utterly reconciled to the divine will, and still, it may be, hankering after some gain from the transaction. At all events, the hint of asperity in his voice in 38 is disquieting, and may not be unconnected with the fact that later his 'counsel' (see 31:16, and compare 25:1ff and Revelation 2:14) led Israel into grave and terrible sin. What he could not do by cursing the people of God he succeeded in doing by deceit. Solemn, solemn lesson!

142)23:112

In this and in the next chapter we have recorded for us four prophecies uttered by Balaam under the constraint of the Spirit of God. They are remarkable for their insight, and are indicative of the sovereign control God had over this recalcitrant and double-dealing seer. The implications of these utterances are considerable, and not without problem in the matter of interpretation. The preparations recorded in 13 show that Balaam was 'going through the motions' of seeking the face of the Lord - was this to convince Balak of the genuineness of the approach, and therefore to absolve Balaam, so to speak, of any responsibility for what the Lord would say? Was the wily seer 'hedging his bets' as we say, so as to safeguard his own position against any possible repercussions that might follow an adverse answer from the Lord? The Lord, however, is impatient of this 'performance' (4) and ignores Balaam's reference to the sacrifices, thrusting His word into the seer's mouth and commanding him to go and speak it to the king. We shall look at what that word was later. Meantime, we observe that Balaam's position was not quite perilous. He had put himself in considerable danger in being obliged to prophesy the blessing instead of the cursing of Israel, when the king and all his nobles were all around him. It would have been so much easier for him to have said 'no' at the beginning, and refused to go with or to the king in the first place. Ah yes! But when we wilfully take a wrong turning, God is intent on teaching us the hard way that 'to gang our own gait' is fraught with complication, embarrassment and even danger to life. Jesus said 'my yoke is easy...'. But we often make spiritual life far more complicated for ourselves than it need have been, and than it was meant to have been!

143)23:112

It is very interesting and striking to think that all during this incident Israel is unaware that anything is happening behind the scenes. Here was a tussle in the unseen, in which the powers of darkness were vying with the covenant grace of God to overthrow His people, and to do them ill. It is an impressive instance of how God protects His people from hidden, unseen dangers and foes. How wonderful and reassuring to know that the Watcher of Israel slumbers not nor sleeps! Perhaps Israel had some consciousness of an unaccountable pressure upon them that they could not understand, as we sometimes have (cf Daniel 10), and learned only later, perhaps much later, the real reason for it. Let us store up this thought against such a time for our encouragement and reassurance.

The prophecies themselves are no less remarkable than the story itself. It is almost as if God, being challenged concerning His chosen people, went out of His way to make it clear, not only to Balak, but to all posterity, that here was a people for whom He had the most wonderful and farreaching purposes. It is an uncovering of the divine plan of the ages, that which underlies the whole redemptive history of the Bible the plan of redemption, fulfilled in Christ, and prepared for and foreshadowed down the centuries until the fulness of the time when He should come and give Himself a ransom for the sins of men.

144)23:112

In the first prophecy of Balaam, we should note the plain statement in 9 'the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations'. Here is Balaam's discernment of the 'separated' character of this people whom God had called to be His own. And it is a word that has been marvellously fulfilled and literally true of Israel down the long centuries thirty long centuries of turbulent history, in which empires have waxed and waned, and nation after nation has tried to destroy them, but in vain. Is it not wonderful that so long ago such a clear delineation of the future should be given to men? This is what God does when evil men presume to threaten and do despite to His purposes and His people.

That being said, we must now consider the mysterious fact that such an authentic word from God should have been spoken by, and through, a man who was such a questionable character. For we can hardly suppose, in view of that ultimately followed at the end of the story, that Balaam was walking in fellowship with God. All the evidence seems to point to the fact that his doubledealing, wily nature was sovereignly overruled by God. It is clear that Balaam's words were what we would term an ecstatic prophetic utterance, and this, as has been pointed out, does not in itself signify particular spirituality, nor does it follow that those who thus prophesy are necessarily good and faithful servants of God, as this story, and a similarly graphic one in 1 Samuel 19:1824 (which see) make plain. Nor must we forget our Lord's solemn reminder in Matthew 7:2123 that prophesying in His Name does not even guarantee acceptance with Him at the last.

145)23:1326

The second prophecy was prepared for, and given to Balaam in the same way as the first (14,16). There are two things in particular to notice. The first is Balaam's conviction of the unchanging nature of God's covenant promises to Israel, stated as clearly and plainly as it was centuries later by the Apostle Paul, in Romans 11:29: 'The gifts and callings of God are without repentance.' Balaam puts it thus: 'God is not a man that He should lie...hath He said and shall He not do it...?' That is to say, He has said He would bless the people, and He keeps His promise (19). What words for us, and for all time! 'Hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good?' This is a word that we need to take with us day by day, and, in looking at how faithfully it has been fulfilled in Israel, be assured that what He has said to us, He will also do.

The second point to note is what is said of Israel in 21. This does not mean that the people of God were sinless, or that God overlooked their sins we know that is not true but rather that no sin of theirs could weary His exhaustless mercy or cause Him to abrogate His covenant, or His purposes with them. Ah, He sorely punished their sins, but He never left them nor forsook them, for His covenant's sake. He was indeed with them, and the shout of a King was among them (this last has reference to their triumphant progress into the Promised Land, with the Ark in their midst).

146)23:2724:9

Balak is nothing if not persistent and tries yet again to get Balaam to curse Israel by suggesting another place from which to do so. He has not, apparently, 'got the message' that there is no place from which the people of God can be cursed. But Balaam is 'getting the message' all right, and he changes his tack (24:1) going into the wilderness, where he views the encamped Israelites spread out before him. The sight seem to have moved him deeply, and the Spirit of God came upon him, causing him to prophesy once again. On the two earlier occasions, it was a case of the word of the Lord being given him, whereas here the seer was brought into an ecstatic state in which he received the word of the Lord. Perhaps we are meant to regard this as an accumulative effect, as if to underline that God was really intent on blessing, not cursing, His people. At all events, the blessing he pronounced on Israel was very definite, and of a twofold nature: on the one hand he spoke of the glorious prosperity of Israel, and the exaltation of their kingdom (57); on the other, he spoke of the terrible power, so fatal to all its foes, of the people which was sent to be a curse or a blessing to all the nations (8, 9). This twofold blessing we will next look at in more detail.

147)23:2724:9

The first part of the vision (57) presents an impressive picture of, so to speak, an 'ideal' Israel Israel as seen in the mind and purpose of God. It is a picture of beauty and prosperity, of a land that God was bountifully to bless, and it reminds us of another moving description, given in Deuteronomy 11:11,12 of 'a land which the Lord thy God careth for'. The words in 7 are particularly graphic: the nation is personified as a man carrying two buckets of water 'that leading source of all blessing and prosperity in the burning East' (Delitzsch) a beautiful picture of the true Israel 'pouring out the living waters of salvation, the pure streams of the Spirit, and making the wilderness of the world rejoice and be glad' (Wordsworth). This is fulfilled in Christ the true Israel of God, in and through whom rivers of living water flow out to mankind. In the second part of the blessing (8, 9), it is the power of Israel that is described. As Delitzsch says, 'the fulness of power that dwells in the people of Israel was apparent in the force and prowess with which their God brought them out of Egypt' (cf 23:22), not only the unicorn, however, but also the lion figures in the metaphor describing the strength of Israel. It is almost as if Balaam were rebuking the temerity of Balak for presuming to want to curse such a people. 'You are treading on perilous ground, Balak', he seems to say, 'and you had better watch out. If you rouse the lion, it will be to your cost.'

148)24:1025

But Balak's eyes are blinded to the warning implicit in the seer's words, and his anger flares out against him (10,11). This Balaam counters with a further, final prophecy, which in content surpasses all the others for its profound depths. It is an extraordinary word. Not only does Balaam become the mouthpiece of God to declare the divine purpose for the chosen people, but also the vehicle of revelation of God's ultimate purpose in choosing them as His people, namely the sending forth of a Redeemer. One has only to read these verses, especially 17 and 19, to sense the high dignity and mystery of their message. The Star from Jacob and the Sceptre from Israel point forward to Christ Himself, Who is the fulfilment of these wonderful words. And, thus early in history, the gospel is proclaimed in prophecy not to Israel, but to the Gentile nations. We can only marvel that such clear vision should have come so anciently, and through such a man!

The prophecy itself is a fourfold one, divided by the repetition of the words 'he took up his parable' (15, 20, 21, 23). The first part refers to Edom and Moab (17,19); the second to Amalek (20); the third to the Kenites (21, 22); the fourth the great powers of the world (23, 24). It is, of course, true that Balaam's prophecy received at least partial fulfilment in the raising up of David as King of Israel; but it is just as clear, that that divine kingdom that Balaam foresaw was realised in David only in its first and imperfect beginnings, and that its completion was not attained until the coming of 'great David's greater Son', the Messiah Himself. He who breaks in pieces all the enemies of Israel, and founds an everlasting kingdom, to which all the kingdoms and powers of this world are to be brought into subjection.' (Delitzsch).

149)25:15

The last episode in the story of Balaam makes sad and sorry reading. These verses record the whoredom of Moab, of which Moses indicates in 31:16 that 'the counsel' of Balaam had been followed in this matter. It would seem that Balaam, before quitting the country had suggested to Balak that if the Israelites could be seduced into the idolatry and impurity of the worship practised at Baal-peor by the Moabites, they might even yet come under the curse of the Lord. This evil course was followed: Israel was duly tempted, was corrupted, and in the war that followed, that was waged to execute vengeance on them for this, Balaam was slain by the sword.

There is a timely warning for us here. There is a superficial attitude to the story of Balaam in God's 'second best' that might make us complacent, so long as He will still bless us (within the limits we ourselves impose on Him by our sin). Some men do not care very much about God's second best, and would be content with much less. Ah, but it is much easier to fall and to make mistakes, when in God's 'second best'. That is how it was with Balaam. He had not crucified his double motives, and had not learned to hate his sin; and in the end events went out of his control: the evil thing rose up again within him, and he fell tragically, bringing woe upon Israel. And so he goes off the stage of history, having at the last done devil's work, a total dupe of Satan, when he might have been an example and an inspiration to succeeding ages (cf 1 Corinthians 10:12).

150)25:6/8

The extent of the corruption that afflicted Israel is well demonstrated in these verses. From 8 we may gather that a plague had been sent on them as a judgment on their evil ways, and this had produced at least some semblance of contrition (6b). But not enough, as the ugly incident recorded in 6a makes clear. It is the brazenness of Zimri's action that is so sinister and an indication of just how far the poison had spread in the nation. It is generally in the later and more advanced stages of the corruption of society that sin becomes blatant and open. For long enough, it is concealed and covered in the murky and hidden corners of society; but when it parades itself arrogantly and shamelessly in its contempt for accepted convention and for the standards of God, then it is revealed for what it really is, the rejection of God and rebellion against Him. That Zimri was the son of a noble house (14) serves to compound the sin, for he was one who by his status must surely have been in a position to exercise an influence on many in Israel. Those in prominent positions in society need to recognise that privilege involves responsibility. They are not in any sense free to live 'as they like'. They are accountable to the God who gave them their privileges. They would do well to remember this.

151)25:6/8

The action and reaction of Phinehas was very radical and extreme; and doubtless he would have his critics who would seriously question whether the sin merited such harsh and thorough treatment. But we should take note of the fact that God vindicated him in no uncertain fashion (1113). He, at least, was in no doubt as to the seriousness and heinousness of what Zimri had done; and this prompts the reflection that when men differ in their views from, and take issue with, God's estimate of a situation, it is *they* who are making the error of judgment, not God. It is very refreshing to have this divine testimony concerning what we might call a 'hard-line' attitude to sin. God is, apparently, not in the least afraid of being thought censorious, or of His servants and champions being thought censorious either. Rather, it is a question of calling some very ugly things by their proper names, and dealing with them accordingly. In this permissive and morally decadent age of ours we could certainly do with some of this spirit.

152)26:151

After the fascinating and dramatic chapters which unfold the story of Balaam, we come once again to a chapter of names and tribes, concerning which it might seem at first glance that there is little to be learned, and still less gathered and extracted of a spiritual nature. All the same, when we remember that the Scriptures yield their best treasures to reverent and painstaking enquiry we begin to realise that the Holy Spirit has His own purposes in recording this statistical analysis here. At the beginning of our studies in Numbers we stressed that in the historical context of the divine drama of redemption, some of the most important lessons to be learned were those of the sovereignty of God and His faithfulness. This is what is stressed and underlined afresh for us in this chapter, particularly the *faithfulness* of God to His Word and to His promise. The meaning and significance of Balaam's words in 23:19 are brought out very clearly in these verses. We note in 1 that this numbering of the people took place 'after the plague'. One commentator suggests that the plague probably destroyed the remnant of the generation that had come out of Egypt. If this is so, one can see in a very graphic way the sovereignty of God at work, fulfilling His will through the very actions and attitudes of His people that flouted and transgressed it. Evil was made the unwilling and unwitting tool of the divine sovereignty.

153)26:151

A comparison of the figures given in these verses with those in chapter 1 shows some very interesting and intriguing facts. While some of the tribes show a marked increase in numbers, others show just as decisive a decrease. One wonders whether the decrease in the tribe of Reuben, for example, has to do with the incident recorded of Dathan and Abiram in 16:1ff (compare what is said in 9,10 here with the account there)? And has the big decrease in the tribe of Simeon something to do with the fact that Zimri (25:14), a Simeonite, was involved in the Baal-peor disaster? And is Gad's decrease due to the fact that they were associated with Reuben and Simeon in the order of the tribes? The over-all decrease from 603,550 to 601,730 reads like a statistical return in an Assembly or Presbytery report, recording a decrease in church membership! Perhaps there is a lesson for us here in the recurrent decreases recorded year by year in church membership. 'When the Israelites were suffering persecution in Egypt, they 'multiplied exceedingly' (Exodus 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' (Psalm 78:33). Here there is comfort and warning for the Church and every soul in it - comfort in time of affliction, and warning in days of prosperity' (Wordsworth). It is a fact that oppression and persecution do bring life and vitality to the Church. Scottish history shows that our Church was far more vital in days when she was 'up against it', than in times of prosperity. Think of the Church behind the Iron Curtain today - a living, increasing body!

154)26:5265

The main, central lesson of the chapter has to do with the faithfulness of God. He is faithful to His word and His promise. He said that none of that generation of Israel would enter into the Promised Land, because of their sin and unbelief; and none of them did (64, 65). For 38 years, God kept the nation wandering in the wilderness until the generation died off. *Then*, He proceeded to lead them on and in. This is a solemn consideration, and it serves to complete the biblical picture. The truth is, the biblical idea of divine faithfulness is two-sided, two-edged, and is so in the very nature of the case. It is impossible to have the one without the other. We have already referred to Balaam's words in 23:19, 'Hath He said, and shall He not do it?' There are many occasions on which we could take these words as a source of the most wonderful assurance and comfort. But this story reminds us that there is also a grimness about them that is very terrible. And it is not that *God* changes, He changes not. The change is in us. It is our attitude to Him, not His to us, that determines whether His faithfulness is a comfort or a terror to us. And nothing can alter this inescapable fact of human existence and experience, because God cannot change His nature. Israel's own history provides a graphic illustration of this truth. The pillar of cloud and fire was one of the great realities of their ongoing experience. To them it was a source of comfort and strength and assurance; but that same pillar was, at the same time, a source of terror to their enemies. This does not mean God was a different God to Israel than to them. He was one and the same God to both: it was they who were different. His love and grace were anathema to them. It was this that was their condemnation.

155)26:5265

It is a question, then, of one's attitude to God and His ways that determines whether we find Him a God of love, a source of comfort, hope and joy, or unbearable. This is the point Peter takes up in his epistle (1 Peter 2:6ff), when he speaks of those who find the God Who was a sanctuary to many, a rock of offence and a stone of stumbling. C.S. Lewis has a tremendous passage in one of his books, which makes this point very graphically: 'My fear was now of another kind. I felt sure that the creature was what we call 'good', but I wasn't sure whether I liked 'goodness' so much as I had supposed. This is a very terrible experience. As long as what you are afraid of is something evil, you may still hope that the good may come to your rescue. But suppose you struggle through to the good and find that it also is dreadful? How if food turns out to be the very thing you can't eat, and home the very place you can't live, and your very comforter the person who makes you uncomfortable. Then indeed there is no rescue possible: the last card has been played.' Another scholar describes this in terms of the distinction between reckoning on God and having to reckon with Him. It is really up to us.

156)26:5265

The reference to Caleb and Joshua in 65 is an additional indication to us of the faithfulness of God, for He was faithful to those who had been faithful to Him. - '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 has 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 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 filled with unworthy fears regarding God's capacity and willingness to bring them to victory in the land (Numbers 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' (G. Philip) 'Them that honour Me', says the Lord, 'I will honour'.

157)27:111

There is a sense in which the lesson about the faithfulness of God in the last chapter is continued in this one, for the same kind of contrast is present here as there, the daughters of Zelophehad are assured of their inheritance, while the divine verdict on Moses, 'who spake unadvisedly with his lips' and was excluded from the Promised Land for his sin, was ratified.

First, then, the story of Zelophehad's daughters. Reference is made to them in 26:33, here, and in Joshua 17:3ff. In an account of this nature, what we need to do is to get behind the outward features of the story and discover the principles that underlie it. It is thus that we can gather the spiritual message for ourselves. Here is a situation in which an unprotected, defenceless family of daughters, who seem to have no provision made for them within the known and declared legislation concerning inheritance in the Promised Land, appeal to the justice and faithfulness of God for recognition and redress, and their appeal is heard and honoured. It is very remarkable to find this piece of humanitarian legislation at such an early date, when the rights of minorities, let alone minorities of women, were so little recognised or noticed, and it emphasises once again how 'advanced' the Mosaic code really was. But it does something far more also, it underlines the reality of the fatherly care of God for all those who have been hardly used by life, those whom misfortune has buffeted, those who are 'the poor of the land', those who tend to be forgotten in the mad whirl of life, and have few to care for them, and fewer still to plead their cause. Is this a word for someone in need today?

158)27:111

Here, then, is a word of encouragement for all who have found themselves in such a position of helplessness and need, lonely, unprotected, unprovided for, under-privileged, deprived of the protection and sustaining force that menfolk can give. *There is a God in heaven who cares, who sees, who understands, and will move in answer to our cries, and will provide for our needs.* There is no one too insignificant for Him. His tender mercies are over all His works. This is embodied supremely in the gospel narratives themselves, where we see the Son of God, Friend of sinners, making good this word to the insignificant, the poor, the oppressed the widow of Nain, blind Bartimaeus, the woman of Samaria, the lepers. He was their Champion as well as their Saviour! Let us take this word, then, today, without reserve. It is an assurance about what God is like. Let us bring our plea to Him, and spell it out before Him. Nothing that is a concern to us will fail to be a concern to Him. We should particularly note what is said in 7 'The daughters of Zelophehad are right...'. They had only to speak, to tell out their case, for it to be given immediate and full redress. On this level, the story has so much to teach us, wonderfully reassuring as it is; but there are other, even more important lessons also, as we shall see in the next Note.

159)27:111

We should bear in mind that Israel was still very much in the wilderness; the Promised Land was as yet a dream for them. It was not theirs at that point to apportion to the tribes. Yet, here is a group of people, Zelophehad's daughters, laying claim to an allotted part as if it had been all conquered and made over to the chosen people. Here is faith indeed! Faith in the word of promise. They did not doubt that what God had promised He would assuredly perform. And they were determined to be in on it. It is very wonderful to think that in the midst of so much faithlessness and backsliding and worldliness in Israel there should be this kind of unquestioning faith in the promises of God. This is a good example of the idea of the faithful remnant, and it reminds us that even in the darkest moments God has his seven thousand that have not bowed the knee to Baal. Nor is it difficult to see a spiritual parallel here. The Promised Land in the Old Testament is a type and illustration of salvation and eternal life, and if this is so, then the five daughters of Zelophehad were staking their claim to eternal life and laying hold upon it. This is a very graphic and telling illustration of how to enter the kingdom of God. They considered the promises of God: and they interpreted them in relation to their own case; and applied them personally to their own needs and desires. To take God at His word and deed this is the way to make the promises one's own by claiming them, laying hold on them by simple faith. Matthew Henry, in his own penetrating way, suggests that in this respect these five daughters of Zelophehad were indeed five wise virgins, and one wonders whether in fact our Lord may conceivably have had them in mind when He told the parable in Matthew 25.

160)27:1214

This word about Moses stands in marked contrast to that about Zelophehad's daughters. They are promised an inheritance in the land, but Moses is excluded. The reference in 14 is to what happened in chapter 20, when Moses 'spake unadvisedly with his lips' (Psalm 106: 32, 33). For further elaboration of the incident, see Deuteronomy 3:23-28, also Deuteronomy 32: 48-52. There is, of course, no question of Moses being excluded from the blessings of eternal life but his illconsidered irritation and anger at the waters of Meribah was a costly mistake for him, in that it excluded him from the privileges of leading Israel into the Promised Land. Let us learn from this that the sins of the saints, though they will never make them forfeit eternal life, will affect their reward, affect, too, their continuing usefulness and serviceableness for God. God is faithful to Himself, and takes His own grace seriously. This stands in the Scriptures as a timely warning to all who believe on Him that we may never presume upon the grace of God. Carelessness and neglectfulness in spiritual things, although forgiven, may cost the children of God very dear. It is very solemn to realise that in the Scriptural record there are several cases of servants of God, honoured and owned of Him in the most signal kind of way, falling sadly and tragically in the later days of their lives Noah, Moses, David, Solomon. If this has a lesson for us, it is that there are dangers concealed in the spiritual life for those who have advanced beyond the elementary stages and have been going on faithfully and steadily for long enough. Well might the prophet pray, 'Revive Thy work *in the midst of the years*' the middle years, when we are at the height of our powers; *there is the danger point.*

161)27:1214

We may perhaps think that this judgment on Moses was rather harsh and disproportionate to the offence. But we may be sure that God did not deal arbitrarily with His honoured servant. Who shall know whether Moses' sin created something in him that made him incapable of furthering the divine purpose with this people? This is the point - incapacitation for future work. If in fact the ongoing work of the Lord requires continual enlargement of capacity for its fulfilment, then we cannot afford to impair that enlargement through sin. A simple illustration of the kind Paul was in the habit of using may help us: the field of athletics. If a worldclass runner damages a muscle, and it heals leaving a weakness, he may still be a very fine athlete, but he may no longer be able to give the superb, classical performance as before. Something will have come in to disqualify him finally from that place where only two or three names are mentioned. So it was with Moses. Sin in the believer is forgiven but it may do permanent damage to his usefulness and disqualify him forever from the kind of purpose God has for him. This is very frightening; and God means it to be frightening, so that we may beware, and at all costs battle against sin.

162)27:1523

We have been speaking about disqualification, but now we can think of qualification. Grace is of course the principle on which the work of God operates, and we cannot speak ever of qualifying for grace. But, at the same time, just as sin reduces our capacity for the kind of enlargement that God's work needs, so in the same way obedience and responsiveness to the grace of God and His good and perfect will creates the possibility of enlargement of capacity, and sets us in the way of further, positive service. Jesus said, 'To him that hath it shall be given', and these words are particularly true in this connection. God had His hand on young Joshua from the beginning, and had destined Him for a work of strategic significance. And early on in the story, Joshua 'passed a test' that did something to him (cf the story of the spies, and Joshua's spirited testimony at Kadesh Barnea (chs 13/14); it enlarged his capacity, and led him on. And in the fulness of the time, God called him forward (cf Isaiah 49:2 hidden in the hollow of His hand, and in His quiver, till the appointed time).

We should notice particularly Moses' pastoral care for Israel. He accepts his own situation humbly and with all submission, and his concern is only that Israel be not left as sheep without a shepherd. And Joshua is chosen as the next undershepherd of Israel. Here is the Old Testament apostolic succession; and we should note particularly the spiritual qualifications ('in whom is the Spirit', 18). There was nothing arbitrary or hereditary here. On such an one the mantle of Moses (20) was to rest. It is not for us to assert that Moses was set aside by God, in the sense that Paul uses the word 'disqualified' in 1 Corinthians 9:27, nor can we say how long he might have gone on as leader of Israel if he had not spoken unadvisedly with his lips. But what we do see is that God's work goes on none hindering. Soon Moses was to climb up the mount, his work over, and lie down to rest, being gathered to his fathers. The saying has it, 'God buries His workmen and carries on His work.' And we see in the appointment and anointing of Joshua the steady, onward movement of the divine purposes. His work goes on. He invites our cooperation and participation; when we are obedient, the work goes on and we are blessed and enriched in sharing in it. When we disobey, it still goes on but we are hurt and damaged by our folly. God help us to learn and to obey at all costs in humble submission and surrender to His holy and perfect will.

163)28:1, 2

The lessons that emerge from this chapter and the next, which deal with various sacrifices and ritual and ceremonial observances, come from a consideration of the broad principles underlying them, rather than from a study of each enactment in close detail. To do the latter would be the proper course if we were studying Leviticus: we will therefore content ourselves with taking a sweep through these chapters in order to gather their overall message. First of all, we must remember the context, and bear in mind just where in the story of God's dealings with His people we now stand. The old generation of Israel, that generation which sinned away its opportunity to enter into the land by its failure and unbelief at Kadesh Barnea, had now, all died off, and God was dealing with the new generation that was about to go in to possess the land, under the leadership of Joshua. It is significant that, just as He had given the original generation these detailed instructions as to the observing of feasts and ordinances at Sinai, so now with the new generation He does the same. In other words, God underlines once again the fundamentals for Israel's life. 'If you are to be My people,' He seems to say, 'then this is how it must be with you, this is the priority, and this must be the basis and foundation of all your experience.' Here, then, is a lesson for us at the outset: one generation had failed; and, in taking up another, God was saying in effect that the only hope of averting failure was the establishing of a right pattern of worship. And the significance of this? Just that at the heart of these instructions for worship lies the matter of a right relationship with God. It is here that everything hopeful begins; as it is the lack of such a relationship that spells foreboding and disaster for the people of God.

164)28:1, 2

One can easily see, looking back, how this was in fact what brought failure and loss to the first generation of Israel. Their long history of murmuring, their hankering after the old ways, their secret desires for the fleshpots of Egypt, all this spelt a wrong relationship with God. They were not right with Him; and Kadesh was simply the summing up of their continual spiritual sickness, the inevitable culmination and fruit of past disobedience and rebellion. They had failed to discern the heart and essence of all God had said to them in the earlier enactments, namely, that He wanted a people for Himself, to walk in fellowship with Him. This is the purpose of creation. God has not willed to be alone in His universe: He seeks the fellowship of the creatures He has made. Indeed, He has made us in such a way that *only* in fellowship with Him do we find ourselves and attain our true destiny, as human beings. And, having failed with one generation, He begins again. Oh, the patience of God! What lessons there are here, if we were to choose to linger at this point! And the lesson for us is the same as it was for Israel; everything true, hopeful and fruitful in Christian life begins with a true spirit of worship indicating a right relationship with God.

165)28:315

Still on the theme of worship and right relationship, we should notice the implication in 18 and the emphasis on the offerings in the morning and in the evening, it is that Israel's day was to be bounded and compassed on all sides by worship. Life was to begin and end with God. This does not merely mean starting and ending the day with prayer, for it is of course possible to do this and still live a practically godless life. What it means is that the whole of life is to be set in the context of God, lived *for* God, and *unto* God steeped in God, so to speak. This is life as it was meant to be, as it was designed to be interpenetrated by the dimension of the eternal, touched and suffused with the supernatural, the life, indeed of heaven upon earth. Certainly, this is the only life that ultimately tells for God. Only thus can we truly serve Him and bring forth fruit unto Him, for His glory. But we must beware of the danger of regarding this merely as a means to an end. Fellowship with God, regarded as a means to an end, the end being fruitfulness of service, can be a great snare, and will ultimately lead to the kind of failure to which the first generation of Israel came. Fellowship with God is the end in itself, and service for Him is the incidental, though inevitable fruit of it. This is emphasised in the New Testament also in the calling of the disciples by our Lord (cf Mark 3:14): 'He ordained twelve, *that they should be with Him*, and that He might send them forth to preach'. In this respect, the familiar catch-phrase, 'saved to serve' may be called in question. This is not the biblical emphasis. It is, rather, 'saved for Himself'. We are redeemed *unto* God, first of all, by the blood of Christ, and only afterwards unto service.

166)28:1631

There are two phrases and ideas in common usage in our thinking, and especially in our hymnology, the Fatherhood of God, and the Lover of our souls. Both ideas underline and emphasise the reality of fellowship and relationship. The important thing in a family is not work or service, but relationship. A father takes pleasure in his family. In a true family the important thing is not the getting or the giving by the one or the other, but the relationship of love and care and concern between its members. And in particular, a bond of love, such as that implied in the phrase, 'the lover of our souls'. It is a relationship that is paramount and supreme, and alongside it service simply pales into insignificance. In the book of Revelation we have the real picture, as it ought to be 'For Thy pleasure they are and were created'. For His pleasure! This is the end of worship. When this is paramount, and central, everything else is right, for everything is then rightly related to Him. In this connection we should note how frequently throughout these chapters the sacrifices are said to be 'a sweet savour to God'. This is the point at issue. This should be the aim of our worship, not getting things from God, but giving pleasure to Him. This is seen supremely in the pleasure given by the Son to the Father in the worship He gave Him, as the story of the Transfiguration well illustrates, when the love and desire of the Son for the Father broke through the bonds and barriers of human nature in a grand oblation to the Father of lights. This is the real test: do we think of giving God the pleasure in us that He desires? Do we come to His house Sunday by Sunday with this thought in view?

167)28:1631

What we have said in the last Note or two about worship and relationship is surely a much-needed emphasis today, and it is the necessary corrective to another which has been distorted almost beyond all biblical recognition. We refer to our Lord's own words, 'Inasmuch as ye do it unto the least of these my brethren, ye do it unto Me'. Of course Jesus said these words to underline an important truth. But we are very sure He did not mean that to be set in opposition to what we have said about the centrality of fellowship with God. And we must at all costs beware of making this a substitute for that personal relationship with Him. For this would mean, in effect, that good works, works of compassion and mercy could take the place of fellowship with God and become 'Christianity' for us. This danger is present in a twofold way. On the one hand, it is possible for service to displace fellowship. It can become, for believers, perilously easy to become involved in Christian service that fellowship with God is neglected. We must beware of the spiritual barrenness of a busy life. 'My son', says God, 'give me thine heart' not the work of your hands your time, talents and money, but your heart. On the other hand, service can become a substitute for fellowship altogether. So many seek to serve a God they do not really know. The story of Mary and Martha is meant to show us what ought to come first. Mary, not Martha, was commended by Jesus. And we must beware of 'clever' interpretations that try to vindicate Martha's 'practical Christianity' as against Mary's 'sitting at Jesus' feet'. Jesus, in effect rebuked Martha's 'practical Christianity' because, however sincerely it was meant to please Him, it did not, but missed what He really wanted to impart to her. She was too busy to sit still, and give Him pleasure. The service that counts issues from fellowship with Him, and where fellowship with Him lessens and is displaced, service becomes less and less fruitful and useful, becoming subject to the law of diminishing returns.

168)29:16

This chapter speaks of three celebrations that took place on the seventh month: the feast of trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the feast of tabernacles (for a parallel passage and comment, see Leviticus 23:23ff). The seventh month was a particularly important one in the Jewish year, since it included both the day of atonement and the feast of tabernacles, and it may be for this reason that it was ushered in with a special ritual of trumpet sounding. It is not certain why it is called a 'memorial' some think that, as the seventh month was the beginning of the civil year, it was a particularly suitable time for recollection (in much the same way as we today tend to 'look back' at New Year time). Others think it kept the creation in mind, echoing the 'sons of God shouting for joy' at the foundation of the world; others, that the trumpet sound, 'which is so often connected with the voice of God, was a special memorial of God, having, in former days, spoken with man a sound more joyful far than all the shoutings of the sons of God' (Bonar). However, Bonar inclines to the view that 'memorial' has more the sense of 'a reminding of something present or just at hand.' The meaning would therefore be that it represented God's solemn call to attention in view of the very special causes for joy in this month, viz. the Day of Atonement and the feast of tabernacles. In type, therefore, it represents the proclamation and declaring (i.e. preaching, as by a herald) of the sufferings (the Day of Atonement) and the glory (the feast of tabernacles) of the Saviour.

169)29:711

The feast of the Day of Atonement, described here briefly, was perhaps the most solemn of all the ordinances. It needs to be studied along with the much fuller accounts given elsewhere in Scripture (cf Leviticus 16, and Hebrews 9:6-14, the New Testament antitype; also Leviticus 23:26-32). It was to be a time of afflicting of the soul, that is, of sorrow for sin, when Israel was to recall the shame and the guilt of sin, as a necessary preparation leading to the joy of the feast of tabernacles. Bonar says. 'Sorrow for sin seems to be like the rough sand that a man uses to rub off rust from iron; sorrow searches and rubs sore on the soul, but at the same time effectually removes what cleaved to the soul before. The vessel is thus rinsed of the flavour of former wines, and left quite clean for the new wine of the kingdom. Sorrow does not take away the sin, but it takes away the taste for it, and the pleasant taste of it; it does not empty out the vessel, but it frees the emptied vessel (the pardoned soul) from the former relish it had for earth. It is thus that the Lord's children pass through fire and water to the healthy place. For this reason it is that their souls are tried with spiritual griefs and outward tribulation, it makes the joy of the Lord the fuller and sweeter to them.' George Philip comments, 'There seem 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 classes himself as chief of sinners (Ephesians 3:8; 1 Timothy 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'.

170)29:1240

The feast of tabernacles, further details for the celebration of which are given in Leviticus 23:34-36, 39-43, was the greatest festival of joy of all the feasts. It followed the completion of the ingathering of the fruits of harvest, and marked the sense of gratitude and joy towards the Lord, the Giver of such bountiful provision. In these verses, a rather mysterious point emerges in the diminishing number of bulls to be sacrificed on each of the seven days, from thirteen in 13 to seven in 32. Martin Noth maintains that this can no longer be explained with any certainty. Delitzsch thinks the arrangement was probably made for the purpose of securing the holy number seven for the final day, and indicating at the same time, through the gradual diminution in the number of sacrificial oxen, the gradual decrease in the festal character of the seven festal days. This, to say the least, is nothing more than conjectures. Perhaps we should look for the reason in the 'type' that the ritual offers of things to come, pointing to the passing of the ritual sacrifice when the perfect sacrifice appears in the person of Christ. Bonar hints at such an application by quoting the words in Revelation 10:7, 'In the days of the seventh angel...the mystery of God shall be finished'. The eighth day (35) was reckoned the great day of the feast (cf John 7:37), and it is impossible not to transfer our thoughts to the moving scene in the temple at Jerusalem when our Lord cried out, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink...', for He was the fulfilment of all the sacrifices, and the heart and meaning of the feast. The tragedy was that so often, and particularly in our Lord's own day, Israel rested in the type and shadow, and sought their full joy from the mere feast and its glad ceremonies, instead of pressing through it to what lay behind it, Christ Himself, the water of life and the light of the world.

171)30:1, 2

The contents of this chapter do not at first sight seem to have a great deal to say to us, and might be thought to have merely academic or historical interest. But reflection will lead us to see that there are certain implications that have a practical bearing on Christian life and practice. We look, therefore, first of all at what the chapter is saying in its own context, then think of some of the implications arising out of the subject of vows as a whole. The simple message is, the sanctity of vows. This is seen in the regulation concerning a man's vows. A woman's vows, on the other hand, are subject to certain qualifications, as we shall see in the next Note. The subject is dealt with, significantly, following upon the account of the feasts in the previous chapter, and it may be assumed from this that the vows were related substantially to the presentation of sacrifices (Delitzsch) and made in the context of worship. In this connection one recalls the words of the Psalmist (Psalm 116:1214), 'What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me? ... I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all His people.' The rules by which vows were to be legally regulated, so far as their objects and their discharge were concerned, are to be found in other Scriptures, such as Leviticus 27, which should be read in conjunction with this chapter (see also Deuteronomy 23:21 which emphasises the importance of keeping vows that are made, while making plain that they are purely voluntary and that there is no compulsion involved).

172)30:316

A woman's vows, in contrast to a man's, are subject to certain qualifications, and four distinct cases are envisaged in these verses: an unmarried girl, under the jurisdiction of her father ('not yet of age', 3ff); a woman unmarried at the time of her vow, but having entered marriage before the vow is fulfilled (6ff); the widow or the divorced woman (9); the married woman (1012). The point in these instructions is surely clear. It is the assertion of the headship of the man in the life of the family. The man, father or husband, is regarded as having jurisdiction over the other members of the household, and even over the vows they make. There is more than a suggestion here of the father or husband acting as a restraint against the making of unwise or rash vows, disallowing them for that reason. On the other hand, if he did disallow them, the responsibility would lie on him. That is to say, he could prevent a rash or bad vow; but if he hindered a good one, he became accountable, the implication being that he should not do so. The tacit assumption is that the head of the family has the wisdom to discern the difference between a good and a bad vow. There is a substantial measure of comfort and encouragement in all this for sensitive and vulnerable spirits who may have been led into unwise or rash courses of action, willing and sincere of heart as they may have been in making their vows; and it is an evidence of the pastoral care of God for His children, exercised in this case through those appointed over us in the Lord, in delivering us from the un-wisdom of our own actions. In an age which is impatient of authority, this is something, which shows the positive values of that much-maligned word. We should be grateful and thankful to God that He has a care to rescue us from the consequences of our (youthful and sometimes not so youthful) follies.

173)30:316

The whole question of making vows as such arises in relation to the Christian life. Is there any place for vows in the Christian life? Well, the fact is, Christians do make vows, of a variety of kinds, and in a variety of contexts, and it is as well that we should look into the whole matter from the Christian perspective (the Westminster Confession has a section dealing with lawful oaths and vows chapter 22; and Calvin also has a longish section in his 'Institutes' book IV.13). It is a striking and impressive fact that when we look up the word 'vow' in a concordance, we find that while it is found almost everywhere in the Old Testament, it is scarcely ever used in the New (Acts 18:18, and 21:23). It may not be possible to draw firm conclusions from this, but it might in fact be *prima facie* evidence that what was needed in the Old Testament economy (because of the limitations of the old covenant, which could make nothing perfect) was not in the same way needed in the new, which is the era of the Spirit. In this respect, it compares with the phenomenon of 'lots', which were extremely common in the Old Testament, as a means of discerning the Lord's will, but virtually unknown in the New, when the leading of the indwelling Spirit superseded them. Be that as it may, it will be helpful at this point to look at three vows recorded in Scripture, which serve to illuminate the whole question. These are: Jacob's vow at Bethel (Genesis 28); Paul's vow in Acts 18:18 (also in 21:18-26); and Jephthah's vow (Judges 11).

174)30:316

The well-known story of Jacob at Bethel has been interpreted in two different ways, and both illustrate different facets of the question before us. On the one hand, it is interpreted as if Jacob were bargaining with God. 'if...if...if...then the Lord will be my God'. If this represents conditional consecration on Jacob's part, then Jacob is rightly to be criticised, for it is certainly not the highest ground to take. For, in fact, God demands our unconditional surrender anyway. We owe Him our devotion and loyalty, as His creatures, apart from anything He chooses to bestow on us. In the New Testament sense, this is the challenge and summons of the gospel. It is not an optional extra, but the logical response we make to the mercies of God in Christ (Romans 12:1,2) 'the least we can do'. And rightly understood, this is just what the gospel does lay upon us, and there is in this sense no need for further vows on the matter, as if some specially consecrated people should give God this kind of response while others did not. Vows, as special, advanced expressions of one's consecration, can be highly misleading and erroneous. It is this false idea that lies behind much of the Catholic monastic vow idea. On the other hand, Jacob's vow may be taken as his reaction and response to God's revelation of Himself to the patriarch. 'Since God has done this...and will be my God, therefore I will (in gratitude to Him) raise this stone, and give a tenth of all I possess to Him.' In this sense, it illustrates the vow of lifelong consecration and obedience to God which is the hallmark of a true and living faith. In this respect, we can see the importance of 'paying our vows to the most High', for consecration must be real and utter; far better not to vow at all than to do so and go back on the vow.

175)30:316

Paul's vow in Acts 18:18, it would seem, was a Nazirite vow to reassure himself that underlying the routine of daily life he was devoted to God. Such a vow usually lasted for thirty days, after which, by a series of sacrifices the participant was discharged from it and returned to ordinary life. For the details of this (Nazirite) vow, the notes on Numbers 6 should be consulted. The principle underlying it certainly seems still to have relevance for Christian life today. One thinks, for example, of Paul's teaching about the use of the good things of life 'I will not be brought under the power of any' (1 Corinthians 6:12), and 'using the world as not abusing it' (1 Corinthians 7:31). But the question in all this is: How can we be sure that such an attitude of detachment obtains, at any given time? How other than by applying a temporary discipline to life, to reassure ourselves that underlying the daily routine of life we are after all really devoted to God, and not beguiled and snared by the good things of life? There is both a need for detachment in Christian life, and a need to prove it to be a reality in our experience. Are we able to say, with the Psalmist, 'my soul is even as a weaned child' (Psalm 131:2). And how to be sure of this? Only by putting it to the test by means of a temporary discipline, to prove to ourselves that this is really where we are.

176)30:316

The story of Jephthah's vow in Judges 11 is in many ways a very moving and disturbing one. We do not at this point enter into a discussion of whether what is referred to in the story is a literal bloodsacrifice of Jephthah's daughter (the view held by the early fathers) or that Jephthah simply confined his daughter to a perpetual virginity (a view held by Delitzsch). On any interpretation, the question is whether Jephthah was right in keeping to his vow. And the answer we must certainly give, in the light of the teaching of this chapter, is that he should have broken the vow, because it was a wrong and unwise one to have made. Wrong vows should be abjured and ignored, for it is never right to do wrong. Calvin's words on this subject are worth noting: 'As timid and inexperienced consciences, even after they are dissatisfied with a vow, and convinced of its impropriety, nevertheless feel doubts respecting the obligation, and are grievously distressed, on the one hand, from a dread of violating their promise to God, and on the other, from a fear of incurring greater guilt by observing it, it is necessary here to offer them some assistance to enable them to extricate themselves from this difficulty. Now, to remove every scruple at once, I remark, that all vows, not legitimate or rightly made, as they are of no value with God, so they ought to have no force with us. For if in human contracts no promises are obligatory upon us, but those to which the party with whom we contract wishes to bind us, it is absurd to consider ourselves constrained to the performance of those things which God never requires of us: especially as our works cannot be good unless they please God, and are accompanied with the testimony of our conscience that He accepts them.... Therefore, if it be not lawful for a Christian man to attempt anything without this assurance, and if anyone through ignorance has made a rash vow, and afterwards discovered his error, why should he not desist from the performance of it? Since vows inconsiderately made not only are not binding, but ought of necessity to be cancelled, hence we may conclude, that vows which have originated in error and superstition, are of no value with God, and ought to be relinquished by us.'

177)31:112

The war against the Midianites is clearly meant to be understood as a holy war, that is to say, it was a war ordained by God to be a judgment and punishment because of Midian's sins. This is the only thing that will help us to see meaning and significance in what is undoubtedly a chapter that presents moral difficulties to our minds.

Moses is commanded by God to avenge Israel on Midian (2). We need to recall in this connection the incident mentioned in 25:17, in the story of Balaam (significantly, Balaam was killed in the battle). A small army is selected to go out against Midian, and devastates it, slays its five kings (8) and takes an enormous amount of booty (concerning the apportionment of which a good part of the rest of the chapter is occupied). On their return with the booty, Moses expostulates angrily (14,15) at the sight of the women they had taken captive, and commands that all save those that were innocent girls, be slain, including the male children. And this is done. It is this last particularly that raises questions of concern in our minds, and it would not be honest or honourable to pass these by without trying to say something about them.

178)31:112

First of all, a general word about the grim and sometimes gruesome accounts we find in the earlier books of the Old Testament about the slaughters perpetrated by the Israelites on the nations of Canaan. What we must understand clearly and this includes the incident about Midian is that, as already suggested, these wars were holy wars and they were commanded by God. The only way to make sense of these bloody carnages, and to see any moral ground for Israel displacing the nations of Canaan from Canaan is to realise that God was using Israel as the rod of His anger against them, judging them for their sins and depravities. This is stated explicitly and more than once in the Old Testament itself (cf Genesis 15:16; Leviticus 18:24-30). The iniquity of the Canaanite nations was full, and the time of their destruction was ripe. This is why they were thus dealt with, and it was no arbitrary act of injustice that drove them out of their land. They had forfeited the right to live as nations, by the extremes of their debauchery, just as Sodom and Gomorrah had done, and just as the Canaanite civilisation as a whole had done, bringing upon itself the judgment of the Flood. And it should be remembered that God dealt with His own people in similar fashion, when He brought them into the captivity of Babylon in 586 BC for seventy years. To understand His burning passion for righteousness in His creatures is to understand the basic reason for these judgments upon men and nations that refused to be righteous, and who rendered themselves incapable of being so, by their continued sin. That is the first consideration. There are others, to which we turn now.

179)31:1320

The second point, concerning Midian, is that Midian, an implacable enemy of Israel down her history, at that time constituted a threat to Israel's very existence as a spiritual people. Balaam had shown the way to corrupt this people and the ugly incidents recorded in chapter 25 are enough to show just what a demoralising power this became in the life of Israel. We must always bear in mind the overall divine strategy in choosing Israel and bringing them into the Land redemption was the culminating concern, and the bringing forth of the promised Seed. And the corrupting influences of Midian were threatening the very existence of the line of promise. It had to be exterminated.

But what are we to say about the harsh barbarities committed the slaughter of the women and the children? The usual answer that is given is simply to say that 'of course a good deal of the Old Testament is subChristian, and we could never hold with many of the things such as this that are written in the history books and the Psalms. These were primitive times, and they did not know any better.' But this is not only too simple a conclusion to come to; it is also silly as a moment or two's reflection will show, and it raises far more serious problems than it solves. For what such an approach does is to dismiss certain portions of Scripture, saying they are not inspired by God. But this is to make one's own moral judgment the sole criterion of what is inspired in the Scriptures and what is not. And that is claiming inspiration for oneself. And another man may apply his judgment in other directions, and soon there will be nothing but a Bible of shreds and patches. But there is still another objection to this viewpoint, and we shall look at it now.

180)31:1220

The idea that these 'barbarities' took place in primitive times when 'they did not know any better' is at variance with the facts. For it was not the people who initiated this slaughter of 'the innocents' if it had been, we might see the force of such a charge, for the people were a very dubious lot, with much that was unlovely about their character. But it was Moses who remonstrated with the people for not slaying the women and the children. And Moses walked with God. He was the spiritual giant among them, with whom God spoke face to face. Clearly, if it had simply been the expression of primitive and savage brutality on the part of a backward people, the story would have read the other way round, with the people slaying the women and children and Moses protesting violently against it. Does not this indicate that there must be something far more in this than at first seems to meet the eye? As for saying they did not know any better, this is simply not true. One has only to think of the legislation we read of in Exodus and in Numbers itself to realise the compassion of God towards women and children, and His special care for them, and for the strangers outwith the covenant (cf Leviticus 19:10, 17, 18; Exodus 23:4, 5; Exodus 22:21-23). No, Moses was not acting in a barbarous manner. It is not possible to square his conduct with other Scriptures on this thesis. What he was doing and what he was conscious of doing was that he was acting as a theocratic leader of the people of God, acting as a legal judge in relation to the Midianites, as an executor of divine justice. This is the truth of the position, and some things require to be said about such an idea.

181)31:1220

There are no courts of law as such in Moses' day. But justice was administered for all that, and was through Moses, the Godappointed leader of the people. It was never a case of taking the law into his own hands, for he habitually acted as the Lord's representative and spokesman. Pretty grim justice, we might say? Yes, perhaps. But what has already been said about the heathen nations helps to explain why it was so necessary. Furthermore, we need to bear in mind that Israel was in a particular situation. They were an emergent people, in the sense that they were about to come into their own as the people of God, with a destiny, with a calling, in the world. And always, in emergent nations, one finds a certain stringency in their discipline that is not found in more static or degenerating situations. Thus, in Exodus 22 we see the death penalty exacted for crimes other than murder. This has been mirrored in modern situations also, as for example in Russia and China, where the death penalty has been known to be exacted for things like industrial sabotage. It is, it seems, essential for the very existence of a new emergent community that discipline be harsh and stringent. One thinks in this connection of the extremely severe judgment that fell on Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, when the purity of the Church required the death of these two whose continued existence could have threatened its very life. And so it was here also. Issues were clearly being seen as black and white. The sentence had to be executed on Midian.

182)31:1220

But little children? Did God ordain this? There are two or three things that need to be said in this connection. It was not mere wanton brutality. For it was not indiscriminate not all the children were slain, only the males. And they were the future 'Midian', a potential danger and peril for Israel if allowed to grow up. What we must realise is that there is such a thing as national character and national traits and propensities. We speak of such and such a people as being a military people, and as such liable to be warlike and belligerent. So it was with the Midianites. That is the first thing. The second is this: Let us remember something that is near our own time the extirpation of whole cities during the Second World War, by 1000 bomber raids on Germany. Women and innocent children were slaughtered. And we estimated rightly or wrongly that the only way for the German menace to be destroyed was to have done this, when doing this involved innocent civilians, children included. Thirdly, these words from C.S. Lewis, 'I know things in the inner world which are like babies: the infantile beginnings, of small indulgences, small resentments which may one day become dipsomania or settled hatred, but which woo us and wheedle us with special pleadings, and seem so tiny, so helpless, that in resisting them we feel we are being cruel to animals ... kill them, show them no mercy. For they will grow, and rend you, and perhaps destroy you.'

This is the value of the chapter for the spiritual life. Israel's experiences are a 'picture' of Christian pilgrimage. And from this we must learn to 'resist beginnings', however sweet and alluring and charming they may be. They will finally grow into ugly and dangerous enemies.

183)31:2147

These verses record the distribution of the booty taken from the war with Midian. Half of it was to go to the men of war, and half to the congregation of the Lord, that is, those who had remained in the camp (only a stated number, it will be remembered from 3, went on the expedition). The division was reasonable and just: the 12,000 warriors received, proportionately, more than those who had not been engaged in the battle; moreover, the percentage they handed over to Eleazar for the Lord one-fifth of one per cent was less than the congregation handed over, namely two per cent. It became a general rule that those who remained at home should receive a share of the booty in a successful campaign (cf John 22:8; 1 Samuel 30:24, 25) thus demonstrating the essential unity of the congregation of the Lord. Indeed, as is pointed out in the 1 Samuel reference, those who stayed 'by the stuff' the back-room boys, as we would say would doubtless have duties and responsibilities behind the scenes which necessarily involved them in the action as a whole. They were therefore entitled to their share. God sees to it that the unseen, hidden workers are not overlooked or devalued. Every faithful servant receives his reward. It is interesting, however, to see the concept of differentials being established here. There was a real recognition of different responsibilities and greater and lesser burdens borne. But there were no strikes when the arrangements were made known to the people. Acceptance was the order of the day.

184)31:4854

On a roll call being taken of the army, the officers found that not a single Israelite soldier had been lost. Such a miraculous preservation called forth from them an expression of thanksgiving, in the form of a sacrificial gift to the Lord from their own portion of the booty. In view of the fact that so many of the lessons presented to us from the experience of the Israelites are sad and grim ones, it is good for us to note here that in some respects at least they were 'getting the message' as to what being a true people of God really meant. Here they do the right thing, and express their gratitude to God, acknowledging in a spirit of generous giving His goodness to them. The Lord, as Paul reminds us, loves a cheerful giver, and it must have been a source of joy to the Lord that they should have shown such a spirit of thankfulness. That this is the true basis of liberality is seen in Paul's teaching on the subject in 2 Corinthians 8/9; and we should note that there was nothing niggardly in their giving (50) they gave generously and even lavishly of their hard-won spoils. It is almost a truism to say that a thankful heart is a generous heart; perhaps if the Church of God were more conscious of the mercies of God in Christ, there would be more generous and sacrificial giving on the part of God's people. The financial problems of any Church are always, in the last analysis, spiritual.

185)32:124

These words record an interesting and instructive incident, which has some very challenging lessons to teach us. It concerns the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh, who came to Moses requesting permission to make the land of Gilead on the east side of Jordan their permanent dwelling place, instead of going into Canaan itself with the rest of the people. This they did, according to the record here, because they had large flocks of cattle and they saw that Gilead was ideal cattle country. Moses reacted very markedly to this suggestion (615), immediately identifying it with the spirit of KadeshBarnea, when (chapter 24) Israel were unwilling to go in and possess the land, and hung back from fulfilling their calling and destiny in the name of the Lord, whereupon they replied to Moses that they did not intend to neglect their responsibilities in the wars of the Lord, in Canaan, but they would go over to fight, but leave their wives and children in fenced cities in Gilead. In other words, they now indicated that it was concern for their families that actuated them in their desire and request (1619). This revised version is accepted by Moses, and the request was granted (2024). Such is the incident itself. What of its interpretation, and its spiritual significance and application to the spiritual life? Having read through the story, we are now the better able to go back to the opening verses and consider what it has to say to us.

186)32:115

There can be very little doubt that the proper interpretation of this story is that Reuben, Gad and Manasseh made a grave error in what they proposed to Moses, and that their action was in fact correctly estimated by the man of God in his first reaction to it. Consider first of all some very revealing notes in the text itself. For one thing, we need to compare 1 with 16 and 17. There is a discrepancy here in their report of themselves. In 16 and 17 they say and indicate that the reason for their request is concern for their families and little ones. But the sacred record says very differently in 1: 'They saw that Gilead was a place for cattle.' Moreover, they said this to Moses (4, 5) and made this the ground of their request. What does this mean, but that they saw something materially profitable, and they lost interest in going over Jordan (5) in their desire for it. One is reminded of the story in Genesis 13:10, when Lot lifted up his eyes toward the plain of Jordan and beheld that it was well watered everywhere, and chose it, despite the fact that he was choosing an environment that was spiritually and morally dangerous. The very wording of 1 is reminiscent of that earlier, fateful choice made by Lot, to his ultimate discomfiture and loss. And this choice was likewise fateful for Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, for repeatedly, in later years, that was the portion of Israel that bore the *first* brunt of enemy attack, because they were so vulnerable, and because they did not have the protection of the river they refused to cross (see Judges 10:8, 17, 18; 1 Kings 22:3; 2 Kings 10:32, 33; 2 Kings 15:29; 1 Chronicles 5:26).

187)32:627

One readily thinks of the patriarch's final words about his sons recorded in Genesis 49, in relation to Reuben, of whom he said, 'Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel'. How truly this estimate is substantiated in the story before us! The words in 11,12 are pivotal here: it was a failure wholly to follow the Lord that lay at the root of this attitude, just as Caleb's and Joshua's determination in the other direction was definitive of all their future. Our Lord's words in Mark 8:36, 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul' find graphic illustration in the three tribes' attitude, and should remind us that there is a price to be paid - sometimes a very great one - for allowing oneself to be controlled by worldly considerations.

Moses' second response to Reuben, Gad and Manasseh must therefore be regarded as permissive of what was certainly a compromise. We may wonder at this. But we have seen enough in Numbers already to know this people, and their determination to go their own way. Moses had reminded them of Kadesh Barnea, and the refusal of their fathers to rise to their spiritual destiny. And it is as if God were saying to them once again: 'Very well, if you are set on this, after all I have brought you through, I will accept the situation as you have delineated it. Gilead will be yours - to your cost.' He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul' (Psalm 106:15). How often have these words of the Psalmist applied to Israel's attitudes. (See Judges 5:15-17 for a significant comment on Reuben's attitude here).

188)32:2842

Let us now seek to draw some simple, yet pointed, lessons from all this for the spiritual life. For one thing, here is a group of God's people lacking in real enthusiasm for the goal to which they were called, and opting for something less than God willed for them. Is this not something that often takes place in Christian experience, and in the Church, and in the life of a congregation? We sometimes speak of Christians living in the shallows when they should be launching out into the deep, but this is something even more critical. For a Christian to opt for an easier, less arduous, less demanding way is to be in a backslidden state. It is to have no enthusiasm for the things of God to which He calls us. And it means putting other things in their place, other things that become substitutes for the will of God. Indeed, it is often precisely these 'other things' which lead to the failure. With Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, it was the fertile plains of Gilead that beguiled their hearts from the Promised Land. Let us ask ourselves, in the light of this story: 'Have we opted for an easier, alternative way in spiritual things? And is it because of some beguiling action that means has come to mean -more to us than the kingdom of God, things that would certainly have to go and would go, if we really pressed in and on as God is calling and challenging us to do?'

189)32:2842

Another lesson we may gather from this incident is this: the same factors that hinder people in spiritual life are those that keep others out of the kingdom of God. One thinks readily of the rich young ruler: he stood at the very gates, so to speak, of the Promised Land, viewing it and being inexpressibly drawn to it. But love of the world held him back from entering in, and he went away sorrowful. We do not know whether an absolute distinction can be made between those who are irreconcilably opposed to the message of the gospel and those whose hearts have been divided within themselves, one part of them longing for the blessings of its peace, the other resisting and holding back because of the claims of the world. But both, sadly, may end in the same way, without Christ and without hope for time or eternity. But when we think of how suddenly God can cut men off from the little, paltry things that blind their eyes to the eternal world, we should realise that *none* of these things, whatever they are, are worth the price we often pay for them, in term of spiritual values. Sometimes it is *a way of life* that keeps men from the true riches, and a whole way of life may need to be radically changed, and this is what would have been involved for the rich young ruler, and plainly it was something he was not prepared to face. Ah, a way of life can very soon pass away: how tragic then, to be clinging stubbornly to it until it slips through our nerveless fingers. How much better to cast it aside resolutely, in order to lay hold on eternal life!

190)32:2842

But there is another lesson also, that we may draw from this story, linked to the idea of lack of enthusiasm and wholeheartedness. For such an attitude leads to a double life, in which we deceive ourselves, and in which we lead ourselves into an attitude of compromise, which is a living lie. Reuben said one thing: but he meant another. His concern for his little ones, however genuine in itself it may have been, was only an excuse to hide his carnal desire for the plains of Gilead. And this is what happens in spiritual life. We tell ourselves, and others, one thing: but the real reasons for not going over Jordan are different. The tragedy is that the real reasons become hidden from us, and they no longer remain conscious in our minds. This is how the unhappy, unsatisfactory and spiritually barren state of compromise comes to pass, in which it is quite possible to pay lip service to the call of God, yet live at odds with it, to be 'under arms', it may be, and fighting the battles of the Lord, as Reuben was intending to do, but not with a full, unreserved commitment, and on a different footing from real warriors of God. Do such people really think that no one has discerned that this is how it is with them? Do they really think that such a compromising position, however subtly disguised, can be hidden? Why, it rings in their very voice: it *cannot* be concealed, for there is something in the very nature of the warfare itself that serves to expose anything less than full and wholehearted surrender. Reuben, Gad and Manasseh had not *wholly followed* the Lord: that is what the chapter is about, and it asks us this searching question: Have we been, are we, wholly following the Lord, or have we, secretly, opted for a lesser standard, a less rigorous, less demanding challenge?

Let us not forget Moses' words in 23. 'Be sure your sin will find you out' not, be it noted, 'your sin will be found out,' but something more serious *it* will find *you* out, search you out, hunt you out, be your destroyer. The plains of Gilead cost Reuben dearly in the end. Compromise always does.

191)33:14

The chapter which begins with these verses is largely taken up with a retrospective account of the journeyings of Israel from the time they left Egypt until they stood on the plains of Moab, about to cross into the Promised Land. We are told first of all (2) that Moses made this summary of the journeyings and wanderings at the express command of the Lord. It is clear, therefore, that this record was to stand as an important reminder to Israel and to us of all that had taken place. And the lesson lies in trying to discover why this record was specially made. We think there must be some significance in the fact that the journey is summed up in *forty* stages (548); for it took, all told, forty years to accomplish. We do not mean by that that they completed one stage per year, but rather that there seems to be some symbolism involved in the coincidence of the numbers. And, of course, this is the point; it should not have taken anything like this time to accomplish it. The journey from Egypt to Horeb (Sinai) on a rough estimate could not have been more than, say, 220240 miles, and from there to Kadesh 150110 miles. In Deuteronomy 1:2, 3, we are told that from Horeb to Kadesh was eleven days' journey. The whole thing could have been done in little more than a month! And the lesson of this chapter seems aptly summed up in the contrast given in Deuteronomy 1:2, 3 between the eleven days' journey and the forty years it took them to get to this present point in the plains of Moab. The point to gather here is that a great part of their journey was not really necessary, but was made necessary by their failure and sin. They were on the move, but they did not get anywhere, for so very long. It is possible, too, to journey through spiritual life, being constantly on the move, without getting anywhere, going round in circles and all because of disobedience and sin. If the Old Testament is God's picture book of the spiritual life, the question that this poses for us is whether we see ourselves in this picture. Is this the story of our lives at a standstill spiritually, although showing a great deal of movement and activity? Have we *got anywhere* in the past year?

192)33:14

We should remember *why* Israel remained so long in the wilderness. It was because of their unwillingness for God's will. This is always what brings spiritual advancement to a standstill. When we have a controversy with God's will, no amount of spiritual activity not even prayer - will get us out of the bit. We sometimes sing: 'Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?'

The real answer to that question is that it is to be found at the point where we first diverged from the divine will, the point where we came to a standstill in spiritual life through disobedience. But there is also another consideration of real significance for the spiritual life. In 4, particular emphasis is laid on the mighty acts of God by which Israel was first brought out of Egypt. In this connection one thinks of Exodus 4:31 and Exodus 12:27 *this* spirit, as the proper response of glad and humble acceptance of God's word of promise, and the consequent mighty deliverance, and the great rejoicing in the Song of Moses in Exodus 15. But later what a tragic falling away from that earlier spirit. If only that had been maintained, how different it all would have been! Paul once said to the Galatian Church, 'Ye did run well: who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?' (Galatians 5:7). This is one of the great tragedies of spiritual life, that so many *begin* well, but trail off after a few years into a barren and chilling mediocrity of experience. Israel did so. This is what this chapter is intent upon teaching us, as a warning.

193)33:556

It is against this background of failure that we best understand what follows in the remainder of the chapter, and in the one that follows. For the discipline of the long years in the wilderness has now come to its bitter end, and God is now bringing His people on and in to the land. He has two words in particular for them, which we require to understand in the light of their past failures. On the one hand, they are to drive out all the inhabitants of the land; and on the other, they are to take possession of all God has given them in His promise, and extend the borders of their inheritance to the utmost of the promise. That is to say, there was both a negative and a positive command. It is as if God, in bringing this twofold command into juxtaposition with the retrospect of Israel's past failures, was saying in effect to them: 'Remember your past failures, and see that you do not fail in this that I now set before you. You suffered needlessly during these long years; see that you do not, by another disobedience, bring more needless suffering and deprivation upon your hearts.' One thinks of the words of Psalm 85:8, 'He will speak peace unto His people and to His saints: but let them not turn again to folly'. This is exactly the spirit of these verses, with regard to the people of God. It is remarkable how often, in one brief sentence, the Psalmist sums up the essence of a situation and goes to the heart of it. We should pay more heed than we sometimes do to those Psalms which give such penetrating comment on Old Testament history, for we can be sure that they are inspired utterances, and therefore authoritative for a true understanding of Scripture.

194)33:556

We look, then, at these two commands in turn, first of all, that to drive out all the inhabitants of the land (5056). We have already said something about the possible understanding of Israel's ousting of the heathen tribes from Canaan, and the possible spiritual application of this to our own lives (see Notes on chapter 31:714). The theme is the same in these verses. The Canaanites were to be uprooted utterly and destroyed utterly because they were depraved, and because they were a possible, nay certain, source of contamination for Israel. Subsequent history proves that Israel often found the Canaanite nations rather too 'interesting' and fascinating, to her own loss, for she sometimes spared them, and they became 'pricks in her eyes and thorns in her side', as God had warned them (56), and this led finally, indeed, to their being exiled from their own land.

Here, then, is the challenge once more for the spiritual life: we are to cast out all these warring factions in our lives, for if we do not, they will yet rise up and do us despite. We must deal with them now, when we can, and not wait till they get the advantage over us. If there are enemies of our souls that we have made friends of, with whom we have made a 'nonaggression pact', we had better beware, for they will yet prove perilous, if not fatal, for our spiritual life and service. We should recall our Lord's action in the Temple with the scourge of small cords, and seek to follow His example and cleanse the temple of the Holy Ghost which is our body, and make it a worthy place for His gracious indwelling.

195)33:556

Before we go on to the other command God gave to His people (which is the theme of chapter 34) we should look at one or two features of the long rehearsal of Israel's journey. For one thing, it will be noticed that none of the murmurings of the people come up for mention. It is true that what we have in these verses is simply a catalogue of the various steps of the journey, and it might consequently be thought that this would not be the place to refer to such incidents. All the same, it is not without significance that mention is made of the provision God made for His weary people at Elim, in the fountains of water and the palm trees. Could this be meant to indicate to us, wonderful thought, that more important than all the sorry history of our sin and failure, is the divine provision of grace, that when the story is ultimately told, it will be the latter, not the former, that will adorn the permanent record of our pilgrimage? F.B. Meyer says, 'When we get to heaven and study the waybook, 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'.

Mention is made of the death of Aaron in 38, 39 (cf also 20, 23:29), which had its own lesson to teach. No mention is made here of the reason why Aaron was gathered home to God at this point (20:24); rather, it is related to the completion of the forty-year period of Israel's wanderings, suggesting an integral connection with the divine purposes: his work was done, his course run, and God took him to be with Himself. Always it is the ongoing purposes of God that are central, and this is what must take up our minds and hearts also not vain, regretful tears for the past, though never without a due sense of being unprofitable servants of God, but rather a looking forward to the future with confidence, resolution and courage. After all, as someone has said, 'Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of our lives' (cf 1 Peter 4:2, 3).

196)34:115

We come now to the second command given by God to Israel, to take possession of all He had given them in His promise. The tragedy is that by their failure to cast out and destroy the enemies He commanded them to destroy (33:51ff), Israel failed to make her own all that God had in store for them. It is a simple fact that Israel never entered into their full inheritance, because of their refusal to be thorough enough in dealing with their enemies, and because they were content with small things (like Reuben, Gad and Manasseh. see chapter 32). They could have been a much greater nation than ever they were, with their borders extending far beyond the furthest they ever did extend, if only they had risen to the challenge of God (cf Genesis 15:18, 'from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates'). The spiritual application of this is very plain, in both general and specific ways. In the specific application what must be said is this. When we allow things that are enemies of our souls to remain unmolested in our lives and hearts, make pacts with them, indulge them, they not only become 'pricks in our eyes and thorns in our sides', but much worse - they prevent us from possessing the true riches that God wills us to have. They prevent us from being what we could be, and what we were destined to be, for God. This is as true for unbelievers as for believers. Many a man has been beguiled by some worldly consideration that has become too dear for him to consider parting from without the greatest pain. He clings to it, thinking the loss of it would make life meaningless and dull, whereas by clinging to it he is preventing himself from entering the real riches of life. And he cannot see it. He is content with tawdry tinsel, when God is holding out pure gold to him. And as Jesus Himself said 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?'

197)34:115

What was said in the previous Note about unbelievers, is also true of believers who become beguiled from the simplicity that is in Christ by some forbidden, unhallowed thing, which has become so much part of their lives that the very thought of having to lose it is unbearable. And by clinging desperately to it, they are frustrating the wonderful purpose of God for their lives. He has something *far* grander and more glorious lined up for them and, poor, silly souls, they are blind to the very possibility, and can only think of the pain they would experience if they were really to put their lives right with God. There is also, however, a more general application of this passage, which also has a message for us. There is far, far more for us in the gift of Christ than ever we have yet appropriated or made our own. We are too easily satisfied. The biblical testimony is that God has made us kings and priests unto Him (Revelation 1:5). Do we live like sons and daughters of a King? Do we have a royal mien? Have we made the resources of His royal treasure-house our own? Ah, we have not stretched God by our demands on Him. We are not straitened in Him: He is straitened in us. The challenge in these verses is well expressed in the words of the well-known hymn:

Take, my soul, thy full salvation;
Rise o'er sin and fear and care:
Joy, to find in every station
Something still to do or bear.
Think what Spirit dwells within thee,
What a Father's smile is thine,
What thy Saviour died to win thee:
Child of heaven, shouldst thou repine?

198)34:1629

We can do no better than give the following comment on these verses by George Philip, formerly of SandyfordHenderson Memorial Church, Glasgow, 'Here now is a list of names of the people to whom God entrusted the immediate carrying out of His will and work. He trusted them, frail, 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 freelance independence. In the list beginning in v 18 the first to be mentioned is Caleb who now reaped the longterm 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 selfconfidence. 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; Hanniel, 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 His people, then we are at the beginning of being trusted with the holy things of God on which He sets such high value.'

199)35:18

These verses begin a chapter full of interest in a number of ways, and highly instructive in application to the Christian life. The main part of the chapter concerns the appointment of cities of refuge, but the first eight verses deal with the appointment of cities for the Levites to dwell in, and it was from these cities allocated to the Levites that the cities of refuge were set apart. We have already seen that the Levites were to have no inheritance (see Notes on chapter 4) in the land the Lord was to be their inheritance. They were called to be separate, to be different from, the others. The extent of that 'difference' is seen further, here, they were, to be dispersed throughout the land in forty-eight cities set apart for them by the twelve tribes that is to say, they were to have no corporate existence as a tribe, but were rather fragmented in this way in a Godappointed isolation. Furthermore, the purpose of this dispersion was with a view to the instruction of the people of God in the law of the Lord (cf Deuteronomy 33:10). There is a twofold lesson in this for us. On the one hand it underlines the fact that the separated life, so far as those called to the ministry of the Word is concerned, is likely to be a life of loneliness and isolation, and that it is in the context of such a loneliness that the Lord's work is to be done. There is a sense in which the Lord cannot afford a strong concentration of His servants in one place, when a whole land, and a whole people, have to be served in the gospel. And if there are relatively few who are men after His own heart, it is not surprising that they will not be stationed alongside each other, but often far apart, with only occasional meetings with one another. We should spare a thought, then, for men labouring in lonely places, and pray for them. And in the matter of holidays it might perhaps fulfil a ministry of real encouragement to go and sit under them, to strengthen their hands in God.

200)35:18

On the other hand and this is the other lesson this is a word for all of us who are, as Christian witnesses, called to be separate unto God. We may well be set down in lonely places, as to family, neighbourhood, or work; and it is no warrant to leave our place simply because there is no congenial Christian fellowship there: rather the opposite. The Apostle says, 'Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called' (1 Corinthians 7:20), for this is God's purpose and strategy, to spread the witness as widely and comprehensively as possible. How else is the law of the Lord to be made known, if not by us, just where we are? This enshrines a basic principle of the spiritual life. Redemption for the world meant loneliness and deprivation for Christ, and it will hardly mean less for those who follow in His steps. If this be the price for spreading the message of grace throughout the land, should we not be prepared to pay it? Is this a word for someone who is feeling his isolation and loneliness in the service of the gospel at home or abroad? Take heart and take courage: your labour including the loneliness and isolation is not in vain in the Lord. It will tell for God, in the blessing of others: as poor you will make many rich. (2 Corinthians 6:9, 10).

201)35:934

We come in these verses to the matter of the cities of refuge. The appointment of these cities belonged to the general judicial system that was evolved among the Old Testament people of God. It is important to understand this. It will be noticed that the provision they offered was for the manslayer, not the murderer (16ff), for the man who killed inadvertently or unawares, not the man who deliberately took life. In ancient times, not only in Israel, but among other nations, the duty of avenging a killing lay upon the nearest kinsman; and obviously occasions would arise in which vengeance might well be wreaked on those who had not killed deliberately, and it would seem that this merciful legislation was instituted to prevent excesses that might develop from bloodfeuds. A man could flee to such a city of refuge for sanctuary, pending an enquiry into the matter made by the congregation, who would judge whether it was a deliberate murder or an inadvertent killing. If the latter, the killer could find refuge and sanctuary in the city, and be free from the fear of retribution, so long as he remained within its walls. If he ventured outside its protection, it was his own responsibility. He could be slain with impunity then, with none but himself to blame. One of the spiritual lessons for us here lies in the type of Christ that these cities of refuge always have been taken to afford, down the ages of the Church's history. And the various constituent parts of the type are remarkable in the way they point to, and illustrate the spiritual realities of the gospel in the New Testament. We shall turn to a consideration of some of these, in the Notes that follow.

202)35:934

The distinction between the murderer and the manslayer has its parallel in the gospel, although some little thought has to be given to it to understand it aright and appreciate it fully. There was no mercy, no provision for the murderer, in the Old Testament. He was to be put to death, for his crime was deliberate and premeditated. The question that therefore arises is what parallel there is in the New Testament, with the sinner. For is not our sin also deliberate? Ah, yes; but human sin is rarely pure deliberation, but most often admixed with something else with ignorance, weakness and frailty. One recalls what Jesus said of those who crucified Him: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. They knew very well, in one sense; but in another, their deliberate malice and hatred were mixed with blindness and ignorance. What Paul says of himself to Timothy, 'I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly and in unbelief' is another instance of the same thought. His sin in persecuting the Church was deliberate enough, but it was also mixed with something else: he was duped by the god of this world. And for this reason, mercy was possible for him. It is only when sin is purely deliberate and therefore demonic that there is no possibility of forgiveness. Then, the point of no return has been passed; it is the sin unto death, the 'presumptuous sin' of the Old Testament, the 'great transgression' which banishes a man from the presence of God forever.

203)35:934

Christ, then, is the sinner's refuge, and only in Him is there shelter and protection from the avenger of blood. As sinners we are liable to the condemnation of the law; we are 'wanted' men, guilty before God, and there is no other provision for our safety alone in the sheltering mercy of the Saviour. What rich and wonderful meaning this gives to the Psalmist's words, 'The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it and is safe'. Here, once again, is the Old Testament as God's 'picture book' ; and what an illustration it gives us of the way of salvation, and how clearly it shows that 'coming to Christ' is not merely a mental assent to facts and doctrines, but a betaking of oneself to Him, a movement, a going into action. Have we ever seen a frightened child running to its mother? That is the picture here finding safety and reassurance and protection in her enfolding arm. That is salvation, and there is no condemnation to those that are thus in Christ Jesus, who have fled for refuge to Him. The great evangelical hymns that so enriched the worship and experience of God's people are eloquent of this idea, Toplady and Wesley expressing it perfectly in 'Rock of Ages' and 'Jesus, Lover of my soul', and Bonar in 'I heard the voice of Jesus say'. A quiet reading of these hymns will greatly help us today.

204)35:934

We should note particularly the significance of the fact that the cities of refuge were Levite cities (13). The Levites were set apart specially to be ministers of the Lord, and teachers of His law to the people, and the cities of refuge were appointed from the cities they were given by the other tribes. The association of ideas in this is impressive and remarkable: the function of these cities of refuge matched the function of the Levites themselves. Happy is the man separated unto the ministry of the Word of the Lord who is recognised as constituting and creating a 'place' to which the burdened and the heavyladen can turn in time of need, and find refuge and rest. We should not forget, in this connection, our Lord's words to the disciples: 'Ye are the light of the world: a city that is set on a hill cannot be hid'. Here is the idea of a city of refuge as the calling and function of the Church. And how can we be this? By being like the Levites, separated unto God for the gospel's sake. We may well take Paul as an example in this. He was a man who knew something of the loneliness of the calling to the ministry. What a record of privation and suffering was his! He also had no inheritance, in the sense of earthly possessions,

Lone on the land, and homeless on the water,

Pass I in patience till my work is done.

'As possessing nothing...' - this was the simple truth about him. He counted all things loss for Christ's sake; and it was because of this that he could go on to say... - 'yet possessing all things; as poor, yet making many rich'. The privation, the costly loneliness, the being cut off from so much that makes life humanly speaking attractive all this bore fruit in a life that told, wherever it went, for God. This is how to be a city set on a hill!

205)36:113

We come to the last chapter of this section of Israel's history in her journeyings to the Promised Land, and to a story, which takes us back a few chapters (to ch 27) to an interesting piece of legislation concerning the rights of minorities. We might almost find ourselves wishing that the final chapter of Numbers had been more in the nature of a climax to the book; but this is perhaps less spiritual and realistic than might at first be realised. For life does not really consist of climaxes; a great deal of it is very ordinary for most of us, and it is the whole point about this Old Testament history that it typifies and illustrates the normal spiritual life and pilgrimage of believers in the Christian way. Consequently, more important than spectacular climaxes at the end of a series of studies is the knowledge that guidance is given to God's people in the Scriptures in matters that are basic to the practical life of discipleship. It is in this direction that the final chapter of Numbers has value for us today.

206)36:113

It will be useful to remind ourselves of the lessons we learned from chapter 27. An unprotected, defenceless family of daughters, who seemed to have no provision made for them within the known and declared legislation inheritance in the Promised Land appealed to the justice and mercy of God for recognition and redress, and their appeal was upheld and honoured: legislation was instituted, and it became law that the inheritance due to those who died could and should indeed pass to their daughters. But the legislation having been instituted and accepted, and examined, it began to be seen that it could raise certain problems. What would happen if and when the daughters of Zelophehad, having received their inheritance, should marry? Was there not the possibility that the inheritance could pass out of the tribe by marriage, if they married outwith their own tribe? This, of course, was a possibility, and the elders of the tribe brought the matter before Moses, and before the Lord, for a judgment. And the judgment was that the daughters of Zelophehad were to marry only within their own tribe, so that marriage could not jeopardise their inheritance or take it out of the tribe, and so alter the divine provision and pattern for the division of the land among the twelve tribes.

207)36:113

What are the spiritual lessons for us, in all this? The question of inheritance as such is not a living issue with us today in any sense that was important for the Israelites, but the story does point some significant lessons, for all that. For one thing, here is what we might call marriage by the will and guidance of God. Some marriages would be suitable and right, and others would be unsuitable and wrong. The lesson therefore for us as Christians is what relationships are unwise and unsuitable and harmful for the furtherance of the purposes of God in our lives and in His kingdom. This is a subject on which not a little is said in the Scriptures, and in the New Testament in particular, and it is one that we do well to consider with particular care. One of the lessons we are to learn in this connection is that the prime consideration for the believer, should be the kingdom of God and His purposes in the gospel, just as in this case the primary concern was the preservation of the divine pattern for the division of the land in Canaan. Nothing was to be allowed to interfere with that, and the marriage of Zelophehad's daughters was to fit in and harmonise with it accordingly.

208)36:113

The modern temper of thought is very impatient of such a viewpoint, however. Human considerations are always considered paramount. We are so man-centred in all our thinking and even in religion man tends to be the centre of things, and God is made our lackey, to cater for our every caprice. It is perhaps significant, however, that this is also the day when marriage is regarded as a lottery, and the divorce rate high and rocketing, and the incidence of unhappy marriages very great indeed. The fallacy, of course, in modern thinking is to suppose that it is hard on people to make the divine purposes so primary in human life and relationships. But, in fact, no one ever suffers for putting God and His will first in his life. God is no man's debtor: 'Them that honour Me I will honour', He says. 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you', says Jesus. Not only so: when God's will is put first, He does not ride roughshod over our human needs and desires, but caters for them in the most signal kind of way. That is how much He is no man's debtor. Here, then, is the first lesson: marriage must be in the will of God, and be such that it preserves and enhances, not hinders, the purposes of God in His work and in our lives. And when it is, it will enrich, not impoverish our lives.

209)36:113

Is it possible to go further than the general statement in the previous Note? Well, Paul is very blunt and unequivocal in this matter in his teaching. He says in 2 Corinthians 6:14, 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers'. Here is something that can certainly hinder and frustrate the purposes of God, both in His work and in the lives of His people. It is in the highest degree tragic that believers should marry those who in the very nature of the case, cannot share their deepest and most cherished experiences, and it is almost inevitable that in such a union the believer will be dragged down, and lose the fine edge of his consecration and devotion to the Lord. This kind of incompatibility is incompatibility indeed, and it will prove fatal to any chance of making a real success of marriage. For two such people will always necessarily be moving and pulling in opposite directions. And there is no warrant given in scripture to make us suppose that the believer will win the unbeliever to Christ, although this is fondly and optimistically assumed. Experience proves very much otherwise (the promise in 1 Corinthians 7:14 is made to a believer who has become a believer after marriage, and stands in an entirely different category).

But this situation does not properly find a foreshadowing in the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, for the men of other tribes whom they were forbidden to marry were also of Israel, and therefore within the fellowship of the faith. They were not unbelievers, but believers. And the real lesson here is therefore that even within the fold of the Christian Church it does not inevitably follow that because the persons concerned are both believers it is therefore necessarily right for them to marry. Other considerations also come in, and we shall consider this matter further.

210)36:113

A believer wishes to marry another believer: this is right in principle, but it is not necessarily right for him to marry that particular believer simply because she is a believer. The fact of her faith does not of itself 'qualify' her and make her the right person. There are other considerations also. Perhaps the real application of this Old Testament story, in which Zelophehad's daughters were to marry only within their own tribe, is that believers should marry (in the faith) only within the limits of the kind of group in which they share a true spiritual, cultural and temperamental affinity. Some idea of the importance of this kind of harmony may be gathered from the extreme care with which adoption societies seek to 'match' the children who are to be adopted with the prospective adoptive parents, to ensure, as far as is humanly possible, that the child gets the optimum chance in the kind of home it would in normal circumstances have been brought up in. It could be put this way: where two believers cannot, because of the conflict of cultural, spiritual, emotional or temperamental interests, share in a common life in the things of God, these factors constitute a barrier to successful and advisable marriage. The word the Bible uses is 'help-meet' that is, taken literally, the partner must be a help spiritually and otherwise, to enable one to be all one can be and is meant to be, in the full flowering of personality; and the partner must be suitable (meet), that is, a match, not a mismatch.

211)36:113

Affinity of interest, however is not the same as identity of interest, and it is not identity that is the norm, so much as compatibility. For example, the fact that one partner loves music and the other is tone deaf would not necessarily, of itself, be an insurmountable barrier either to human happiness or to the furtherance of the interests of the kingdom although one could perhaps imagine some rather trying situations because of this! But there can be insurmountable barriers when there is the constitutional impossibility of true understanding between two people, and when this is so, the fact that they are both genuine and sincere believers can never make it right for them to marry. It would be disastrous for them to do so. In situations like these, the value of the counsel of some wise and mature older Christian can be very great indeed. For there is a real blind spot here in most people: emotional involvement is a great distorting force for most young people, and few can see or think straight in such situations without help. How wise, and far seeing, is the teaching of Scripture in this realm, when properly understood!

212) I Corinthians 10:1-13

Here is a suitable and worthy passage with which to end our study of the book of Numbers. It is one of the more important chapters of the New Testament, in the definitive interpretation it puts upon the Old Testament history of the people of God and the kind of spiritual application that history has for the Church. It is heightened and confirmed by the fact that it was written to a Church - Corinth - in which the spiritual problems that beset the Israelites were evidently proving a hazard and a danger to its spiritual life. It is significant that the chapter is prefaced by a solemn word about the danger of becoming 'castaway' (1 Corinthians 9:27). This is what happened to that unfortunate generation of Israelites after Kadesh Barnea, and there is little doubt that this is why Paul speaks as he does in this chapter. The lesson is pointed in 11 'these things are written for our admonition', and we have the best of all possible assurances in 13 about the faithfulness of God, and His provision of a way of escape from temptation: Israel need not have failed in her calling, nor need we. His grace is sufficient to see us through and make us more than conquerors.