

HOMEWARD BOUND – AT LAST! (Numbers 10:11 – 12:33)

The Tribes Set Out on the Journey (Numbers 10:11 – 28)

God's people were told they would be taken to a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey, but they have spent over a year in the bleak desert with only the manna to eat. Now, at long last, the careful and extensive preparations are completed and they are on their way 'home!' How excited they must have been to be finally on the move!

We are told that it was an eleven days journey from Horeb to Kadesh-barnea (Deut. 1:2). This, no doubt, was how long it normally took a caravan, traveling every day, to make the trip. It would take the Israelites longer due to the time consumed in setting up and breaking camp. They would not be travelling on the Sabbath and probably would take times of rest at the discretion of the guiding cloud. Even so, it should not have taken them very long to arrive at their destination. At this point no one dreamed that, even though they would arrive at Kadesh-barnea in only a few months at most, it would be over thirty eight years before any of them would arrive in the good land, and that most of them would never see it at all.

What a spectacle it must have been to see the cloud rise majestically from the tabernacle, hear the trumpets begin to sound, and see the joyous multitudes respond to form the orderly procession that had been so well planned for them!

As the silver trumpets sounded the tribes took their places in the order of march, with their standards proudly displayed. What an honor it would have been for each of their leaders to bring his tribe into the Promised Land! What a tragedy that they ended up dying in the wilderness instead!

Notice that the order of march allowed those who were transporting the holy tent itself to arrive before those who were entrusted with the furniture to be placed in it. By the time the Kohathites arrived with the furniture the tabernacle could already be assembled to receive it.

A Question of Leadership (Numbers 10:29 – 32)

The conversation between Moses and his brother-in-law (or father-in-law?)¹ has been viewed in different ways by expositors. Some see it as a kindness extended to

¹ There is a problem in regard to the name of Moses' father-in-law. He is called "Reuel" in Ex. 2:18; "Jethro" in Ex. 3:1; 4:18 and 18:12; and Hobab" in Judges 4:11. Here in Num. 10:29 the problem is further complicated by the assertion that Hobab was the son of Reuel! For a scholarly and lengthy discussion of this problem see The Pulpit Commentary, vol. 2, page 92 in the section on the book of Numbers. It is an interesting problem, but it does not affect either the inspiration of Scripture or its message. The name used in the particular passage under consideration will be used in the comments upon it.

Hobab, offering him an honored place of leadership, recognizing his worth to them, and promising him he will share in the blessings in store for Israel. This interpretation looks at the incident with Hobab's interests, and the respect of Moses for his brother-in-law, in the foreground. Moses is seen as graciously giving Hobab something to do that will make him feel needed.

It is pointed out by some that this passage indicates the wisdom of Moses. They suggest that under the over-all guidance of God, Moses recognized the value of whatever human resources were available to him.

It would be strange indeed, however, if Moses thought he needed the knowledge and the eyes of Hobab when God Himself had been their guide for over a year. How very easy it is to let sentiment rule in our thinking, or to trust in the arm (or eye!) of the flesh instead of in the living God. What did Hobab know about where they should camp in this wilderness? Surely it would have been better to trust Him who promised "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with *My* eye" (Psa. 32:8)! Could Hobab's eyes have seen better than those of the One who made them? David said of God, "The darkness shall not hide from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You" (Psa. 139:12). Hobab had no such 'night vision.' He would have been helpless at night if it had not been for God's pillar of fire. Should not Moses have committed his way unto the Lord (Psa. 37:6)?

Of course Moses did not have the psalms quoted above to guide him, but he did have the pillar of cloud and fire. He had already experienced its guidance for over a year. David recalled Israel's wilderness experience in one of his psalms. "O God, when You went out before Your people, when You marched through the wilderness, the earth shook; the heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God; Sinai itself was moved at the presence of God, the God of Israel" (Psa. 68:7, 8). When God is guiding anyone His power is also available to care for those who follow His leadership. Even if Hobab picked the right way he would be powerless to provide the rain – or any of their other needs – or to make the mountain shake, as God did.

The inadvisability of Moses' offer to have Hobab lead them is dramatically revealed in Numbers 10:33, 34. The Ark of the Covenant, normally in the center of the procession, took the place of leadership that Moses had offered to Hobab, and went before them for the next three days. Before, when Pharaoh's army had been ready to attack Israel, both the cloud and the Angel of God had left their place before them and moved behind them to protect them (Ex. 13:19). Here the Ark of the Covenant moved from its place of centrality and went before them to lead them and to seek out a resting-place for them. Instead of Hobab seeking a resting-place for God, who would remain over Israel wherever they were, God sought out one for Hobab – if he was still with Israel. The cry of Moses was not, "Rise up, Hobab ... return, O Hobab," but "Rise up, O LORD! Let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You," and "Return, O LORD, to the many thousands of Israel" (Num. 10:35, 36).

We should give respectful attention to godly counsel when it is offered (Prov. 11:14), but the ultimate guidance to which we must respond in unquestioning obedience is that which comes from the Lord. Men might, or might not, know the path we should take, but they cannot enable us to follow it. Only God has promised to work all things together for good (Rom. 8:28). Only God is able to work in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). It is only Christ who can strengthen us so we can do all things (Phil. 4:13). Only God can transform and renew our minds so we will be enabled to follow His will and both know for ourselves, and demonstrate to others, just how good and acceptable and perfect His will is (Rom. 12:2). We may appreciate and listen to advice of the Hobabs in our lives, but only God can effectively lead us. Hobab could have been a great blessing to Moses and Israel if he had said, “I will be glad to encourage you and help you when I can, but *keep your eye on the cloud!*”

Troubles on the Way (Numbers chapters 11, 12)

The Murmuring of the People (Numbers chapter 11)

“We have traveled over the first ten chapters, and seen in them the illustration of the wisdom, goodness, and forethought of Jehovah, the God of Israel. But now we reach a point at which dark clouds gather around us. Up to this, God and His actings have been before us; but now we are called to contemplate man and his miserable ways. This is ever sad and humiliating. Man is the same everywhere. In Eden, in the restored earth, in the wilderness, in the millennium, man is proved to be a total failure. The very moment he moves, he breaks down.”²

No sooner had they started on their way to the long anticipated Land of Promise than they began to complain. We are not told specifically what they were grumbling about, but the trials of the trail after a year of relative inactivity, and the hardships of the desert through which they were marching, were probably involved. A grumbler can always find something to grumble about!³ The Lord not only hears His people’s prayers, He hears their grumbling also, and it does not please Him! In their case it resulted in the fire of the Lord burning among them as the outflow of His wrath.

God often revealed Himself in fire in the Old Testament. At the outset, when Moses had been called to deliver His people, He spoke to him from a burning bush. Twice God is referred to as “consuming fire.” Near the end of the forty years in the wilderness Moses encouraged them to go against the Anakim without fear by reminding them that God would fight for them. “Therefore understand today that the LORD your God is He who goes over before you as a *consuming fire*. He will destroy them and bring them down before you; so you shall drive them out and destroy them quickly, as the LORD has said to you” (Deut. 9:3). But he informed them that the fire of the Lord could

² “Notes on Numbers” by C. H. Macintosh. Published by Loizeaux Brothers, New York. Pages 201, 202.

³ We have no excuse for falling into this trap for we have been taught, “In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:18).

burn against Israel also. Warning them against idolatry, Moses reminded them, “The LORD your God is a *consuming fire*, a jealous God” (Deut. 4:24).

At the time of their march to Kadesh-barnea they had already seen Nadab and Abihu consumed when fire went out from the Lord (Lev. 10:1, 2). Now that fire consumes many of the complainers. Moses, faithful as always, prays for them - and God, in His grace, extinguishes the fire. But the fire was easier to extinguish than the people’s ingratitude. Those who have just been rescued from the fire begin to complain again, more specifically this time. “Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: ‘Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!’” (Num. 11:4 – 6).

The leaders in this ‘pity party’ are evidently from the outskirts of the camp, where the fire burned. They are called the “mixed multitude,” and are probably those who were of mixed ancestry, and thus were not encamped with the tribes of Israel, but had found their place outside the camp. Their ancestry was at least in question. Were they Israelites, Egyptians, or half-and-half? There is all too often a mixed group (hopefully not a multitude!) in our churches whose ‘ancestry’ is in question. Are they really children of God who happen to have a poor testimony? Or are they, knowingly or unknowingly, only children of Adam trying to act like Children of God? There can be no half-and-half in our spiritual ancestry! It is to this “mixed multitude” among us that Paul wrote, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you-- unless indeed you fail the test?” (2 Cor. 13:5 - NASB).

The trouble began with those who were farthest from the tabernacle – where the presence of God was manifested - but quickly spread to the rest of the people. “Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so *the children of Israel also* wept again and said: ‘Who will give us meat to eat?’” (Num. 11:4). Today it is often those who are the farthest from the Lord who initiate problems in the church, but what a tragic influence they exert on the rest of the congregation! “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” (1 Cor. 5:6).

They had no reason to whimper and whine over the manna – it was bread from heaven, angel’s food! It not only was a complete and perfect diet for them, and supplied to them regularly and without fail, but it tasted good! “The taste of it was like wafers made with *honey*” (Ex. 16:31).

What had happened? Here it is said, “the taste of it was as the taste of *fresh oil*” (KJV). It seems to me that instead of eating it fresh from the hand of God they had been trying to improve it. “The people went about and gathered it, ground it on millstones or beat it in the mortar, cooked it in pans, and made cakes of it” (v. 8). In their attempts to gain some variety in their diet they had lost the taste of honey!

We face a similar situation. Today all too many of God's people have lost their appetite for the Bread from heaven. Paul dealt with this problem among the Corinthians. "But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Cor. 11:). Today many have left this simplicity and have come up with a tasteless, if not altogether erroneous, view of both the living and written Word of God. Their religious recipes have robbed them of the taste of honey and they no longer delight in the Lord. When this happens it is but a short step to longing for the leeks, garlic and onions they enjoyed when they were in the world. The lust for variety takes over and there is a demand for ever more 'up to date' paraphrases of Scripture, humanistic descriptions of the 'real Jesus,' more emotionally exciting meetings, and programs that try to outdo Hollywood. Nothing is as sweet to the believing soul as a quiet and personal daily fellowship with the Savior in all the beautiful simplicity of Scripture!

Their repudiation of the manna was unwarranted for another reason also. They had every reason to expect that within a few weeks at most they would have no more need for the manna, but would have a wonderfully varied diet. Just ahead of them, if they had but followed the Lord, was a land where they not only would have milk and honey but also wheat and barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, and olives. They would be eating bread without scarcity, and would lack nothing (Deut. 8:8, 9)! Instead of looking back to the leeks, garlic and onions they should have been anticipating the rich diet of the Promised Land, with gratitude in their hearts to the God who was going to make it available

It is understandable why God was angry and Moses was displeased. Not only was Moses displeased – he was deeply discouraged. "Moses said to the LORD, 'Why have You afflicted Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I beget them, that You should say to me, "Carry them in your bosom, as a guardian carries a nursing child," to the land which You swore to their fathers?'" (Num. 11:11, 12). He was so despondent that he thought it would be more loving of the Lord to take his life than to leave him in charge of such a rebellious people. "If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now; if I have found favor in Your sight; and do not let me see my wretchedness!" (v. 15).

Once before Moses had suggested that the Lord should take his life. "Yet now, if You will forgive their sin--; but if not, I pray, *blot me out of Your book which You have written*" (Ex. 32:32). In both instances God had a better solution than death for the problems facing Moses. In Exodus His answer was, "Go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you. Behold, My Angel shall go before you" (Ex. 32:34). Here God's answer was, "Gather to Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tabernacle of meeting, that they may stand there with you" (Num. 11:16).

Earlier, soon after Israel had arrived at Sinai, Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, foresaw the same problem and suggested much the same answer. "Both you and these

people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself” (Ex. 18:18). “Moses heeded the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people: rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. So they judged the people at all times; the hard cases they brought to Moses, but they judged every small case themselves” (Ex. 18:24 – 26).

It is not clear whether this plan failed to work, or whether Moses needed more help in his present situation. There is one important difference between the proposal of Jethro and the solution God provided. Jethro suggested an organization, but God asked for a small group of recognized leaders and *put His Spirit upon them*. As today, a committee may be of great help, but it will never really meet the need fully unless it is composed of Spirit filled men. “I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone” (Num. 11:17). When God took of the Spirit that was on Moses and put it upon His helpers he did not suffer a loss. The Spirit is a person and, having the attribute of omnipresence, He was able to be in each of the men (including Moses) in all His glorious fullness. As evidence that God’s Spirit was indeed upon them they began to prophesy.

Eldad and Medad, for some undisclosed reason, did not appear around the tabernacle with the others. When they began to prophesy where they were, Joshua thought they should be silenced. Moses had a better idea. “Are you zealous for my sake? Oh, that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!” (Num. 11:29). There is coming a day when that is exactly what God will do for His people. “And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28, 29). A foretaste of that glorious day was experienced at Pentecost, but it will find its full realization, not in the church of today, but in the day when all Israel will be saved (Acts 2:16, 17; Rom. 11:26).

Having solved the problem Moses had presented, God now addresses the complaint of the people. It seems strange that Moses should ask, “Where am I to get meat to give to all these people?” He should have remembered one of the very first miracles God had wrought to meet the need for food. “I have heard the complaints of the children of Israel. Speak to them, saying, “At twilight you shall eat meat . . . And you shall know that I am the LORD your God.”” So it was that quails came up at evening and covered the camp” (Ex. 16:12, 13). This had met their need for food until the next morning when they first received the manna. In Numbers eleven it is not a need to be met, as before, but a lusting to be rebuked.

Moses may have recalled the method God had used before, but was overwhelmed with the offer of meat for so many people for a whole month. “The people whom I am among are six hundred thousand men on foot; yet You have said, ‘I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month.’ Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to

provide enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to provide enough for them?” (Num. 11:21, 22). God’s answer was ‘short and sweet,’ as my mother used to say. “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Has the Lord’s arm been shortened? Now you shall see whether what I say will happen to you or not’” (v. 23).

When the quail came flying “about two cubits above the surface of the ground” (Num. 11:31) it was easy to catch them. The people were so greedy that they gathered them in fantastic quantities and (evidently having prepared them suitably) spread them out on the ground to dry in the hot desert sun. Not only did they suffer a very severe plague before they could even swallow their first bite, and become so tired of meat that it became loathsome to them, but their journey to the Land of Promise suffered a further delay of an entire month while they learned their lesson. Another price they paid for their greed is related in the Psalms. They “lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tested God in the desert. And He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul” (Psa. 106:14, 15).

There is only one safe way to get everything we want. “Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart” (Psa. 37:4). When we delight ourselves in the Lord He changes our wants! We then want, above all else, to do His will. As a matter of fact God has riches more than sufficient to provide ‘wants’ that we would not even dare dream of. He “is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Eph. 3:20). We are encouraged to let our request be made known unto God (Phil. 4:6), but our prayer time should not degenerate into listing our ‘wants’ or giving God His ‘orders for the day.’ It should be chiefly a time of thanksgiving for who He is, what He has already done, and what He is now doing for us – as we await *His* ‘orders for the day’ for *us*! I am sure this approach in prayer to Him will greatly alter our requests.

The Murmuring of Miriam and Aaron (Numbers chapter 12)

Moses has had his hands full with the rebelliousness of the people. At this point it was none other than his older sister and brother who rebelled. The occasion for this questioning of his authority was a wife he had taken. “Zipporah, Moses’ wife, seems to have died some time before. Marriage with a Canaanite was forbidden, but not with an Egyptian or Cushite [“Ethiopian” in NKJV]. Joseph’s wife [for instance] was an Egyptian (Gen. 41:45).”⁴

Moses had not acted against the word of God, but it seems it was, for some unspecified reason, displeasing to his sister. It may have been only an excuse for expressing her desire for ‘equal rights.’ The feminine resentment against men’s place of authority is nothing new. That Miriam, not Aaron, was the instigator of the attack is indicated both by the fact that she is mentioned first and that the chastening was decreed upon her alone.

⁴ The Amplified Bible, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Mich. Footnote on Numbers 12:1.

Miriam had been given a place of vital service when she had a part in saving the life of her baby brother. Later she had led the women as they sang praise to God for the destruction of Pharaoh's army, and was indeed, along with her brothers, "sent before" Israel in the exodus (Micah 6:4). She was not given a place of authority, however, and perhaps an inner resentment broke out when a suitable situation came before her.

The arrogance of Aaron in this confrontation is in sharp contrast with the humility of Moses. "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). Whether this statement was written by Moses or added later by an editor of the text is beside the point. It is a part of the divine record and, fittingly, calls attention to the difference between Moses and his brother. Aaron has been led into a display of pride, while Moses humbly steps aside and turns the vindication of his authority over to God.

Aaron did not have the strength of character displayed by Moses. We are told that Moses was faithful in all God's house (Num. 12:7). In contrast, Aaron had, earlier, been influenced to set up an idol for Israel to worship. He had known at the time that it was wrong to worship an idol, for the Ten Commandments had but very recently been revealed to them. Here he allowed his sister to turn him against the leadership of his brother. He, more than anyone else, knew of the God-given authority bestowed upon his brother. In both cases he was just too easily led.

The preeminence of Moses is indicated by the fact that his name is used 850 times in the Bible. He was a prophet, but he was much more than a prophet - an entire dispensation had been entrusted to him. He was the revelator and administrator of the dispensation of law. All that followed his ministry in Israel until, at least, the cross, found its foundation and doctrine in his writings. At times his name is used to designate the dispensation he introduced. "For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). "We are Moses' disciples. . . We know that God spoke to Moses" (John 9:28, 29). "Until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the *Old Testament [Old Covenant]*, . . . when *Moses* is read, a veil lies on their heart" (2 Cor. 3:14, 15).

To destroy his authority would have been to lose his message. He would have been justified in vigorously defending his divine commission. When he, humble man that he was, did not do so God stepped in and put an end to the defiance he faced.

In much the same way Paul became the revelator and administrator of the dispensation of grace. "The dispensation of the grace of God . . . *was given to me* for you" (Eph. 3:2). He is named 156 times in Acts and the epistles of the New Testament. This prominence is not to exalt him, but to establish and emphasize his message.

As with Moses earlier, Paul's authority was questioned, and even denied by some. Unlike Moses, he vigorously replied to his critics – taking up most of chapters ten through thirteen in Second Corinthians to do so. He was no fool in defending himself, for he was contending for his divinely appointed responsibility as the apostle to the Gentiles,

and his special revelations concerning this age of grace. However he was willing to be *thought* a “fool” for the sake of his message. “I say again, let no one think me a fool. If otherwise, at least receive me as a fool, that I also may boast a little ... Are they ministers of Christ? I speak as a fool; I am more” (2 Cor. 11:16, 23). He realized that if his apostleship could be discredited his message would be lost!

Some years ago I reviewed lesson plans for a year of Sunday School classes to be taught throughout much of Protestant Christendom. I was astonished to find that they were almost totally taken from the Gospels. The only lessons based on the epistles of Paul were passages dealing with some non-doctrinal issues. They had effectively ignored or rejected Paul’s authority and had surely lost his message. It is true, as Paul himself reminds us, that all Scripture is profitable, not only for “reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” but also for doctrine (2 Tim. 3:16). But he told Timothy, specifically, “you have carefully followed my doctrine, ... But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom [from Paul ⁵] you have learned them” (2 Tim. 3:10, 14). It is as important for us to be ‘Pauline’ in our theology as it was for Israel to be ‘Mosaic’ in theirs.

The chastening visited upon Miriam is suggestive. Not only does the certainty, duration, and intensity of it indicate the seriousness of her offense, but the nature of it is significant. In several instances God used leprosy as a curse to reply to serious sin. The legalism of Gehazi caused him to become a leper (2 Kings 5:20 – 27), as did the pride of Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:16 –21).

Paul received his gospel through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:12) and he emphasizes the seriousness of departing from it. To reject Paul’s authority, and lose his message, will bring the New Testament counterpart of leprosy upon one. “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8).

The progress of the people was interrupted for a week as they awaited the cleansing of Miriam. This, together with the month spent stuffing themselves with meat, delayed them five weeks on their way to the Promised Land. Finally, however, they arrived at Kadesh-barnea and were only a day’s march from their treasured goal. It was a landmark of progress, a demonstration of God’s matchless love and grace, a product of His miraculous power, and an opportunity for heartfelt gratitude and joyous expectation! It is revealing to see how they responded to that banner day!

Today, as we see the developments in the world, in our own beloved land, and even in the church, it appears that we too have come very near to our banner day. That which has been the “blessed hope” of believers for nearly two thousand years must surely

⁵ An interpretive paraphrase of 2 Tim. 3:14 – 16 could read as follows. “Continue in my teaching, remembering you have received it from me as ‘the apostle to the Gentiles.’ But don’t forget what you learned from your mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5), the Old Testament, for all Scripture – Old Testament and New Testament alike – are inspired of God!”

take place very soon. What is our response? Are we looking joyously for that blessed hope? Or are we (in this year of 1999) depressed with the situation in which the world finds itself, and quaking in our boots as the year 2,000 draws near? If those in the Tribulation are to “look up and lift up [their] heads, because [their] redemption [at the coming in glory] draws near” (Luke 21:28), how much more we should be looking up in expectation today as the Rapture approaches! It is not a time to ignore it, deny it, or put it off until after the Tribulation. We should straighten our theology here, but that is not enough. We must be daily looking for Him and longing for His coming. Our hearts should be crying out in joyous expectation, “Maranatha!”