

NEARING THE END OF THE JOURNEY

(Numbers chapters twenty and twenty-one)

The Years of Wandering

It is important to realize that nearly thirty-eight years come and go between chapter nineteen and chapter twenty of Numbers. In Numbers 20:1 we are told that Miriam's death took place "in the first month." It is silent as to which year this happened. However we are told that her brother, Aaron, whose death is recorded later in this same chapter, occurred "in the fortieth year after the sons of Israel had come from the land of Egypt on the first day in the fifth month" (Num. 33:38). Commenting on Numbers 20:1, one commentary states, "It [the date of Miriam's death] appears to have been the first month of the fortieth, and last, year of wandering."¹

The greater part of the thirty-eight years is passed over without comment. They were merely marking time, wandering in the wilderness. What was life like for them? It must have been just a cheerless 'merry-go-round,' going around and around but getting nowhere.

We have noted earlier how gracious God was to His erring people, meeting their needs faithfully until the rebellious generation had died. However His very provisions were, no doubt, often a source of vexation to them. Their clothing did not wear out. Great! But can you imagine a woman wearing the same dress for thirty-eight years? Their feet did not swell. Wonderful! But they had no rest for their feet as they tramped over the desert. They had grumbled about having only manna to eat - at a time when they expected to be in the land, and eating the good corn of the land (Josh. 5:11, 12), within but a few days. They had complained, "Now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna" (Num. 11:6). Then, because of their rebellion, they had to look at "this manna" for thirty-eight more years!

Many of the things they were told to do when they came into the land would be very difficult, or impossible, to accomplish for the next thirty-eight years. God, of course, foreknew the years of delay that would be occasioned by their rebellion, but the instructions given them before it took place did not anticipate them. At least eight times, before Kadesh-barnea, such instructions were prefixed by "When you come into the land."

It must have been impossible to keep the feast of unleavened bread with only manna available. Surely they would have difficulty obtaining the flour, oil and wine to accomplish the offering described in Num. 15:2 - 7. By the time this instruction was given they were committed to long years of desert life, so they were specifically told to do this *when they came into the land*.

¹ The Pulpit Commentary, volume 2, page 252 of the commentary on Numbers

The instructions concerning houses (Lev. 14:34 & following), trees (Lev. 19:23 – 25), harvests (Lev. 23:10), giving the land a Sabbath rest (Lev. 25:2) and so on could not be followed in the desert. The Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:34 – 43) would be meaningless to them. During this feast they were to construct “booths” (the same Hebrew word translated “tabernacles” in this passage) and live in them for seven days to remind them of how they *had* dwelt in booths (tents or other temporary structures) in the wilderness (Lev. 23:42, 43). But they were still in the wilderness. They were already dwelling in booths. Even if they tried to keep this feast during their wanderings they would despair of finding, in the desert, “the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook” (Lev. 23:40) to build their booths.

As we have seen, many details of life prescribed in the Law at Sinai could not be executed in the desert, and were put off for 38 years by their rebellion at Kadesh-barnea. Similarly, many of the prospects presented to Israel in the Gospels and early Acts were rendered impossible, until this age of Grace is past, by the action of their leaders recorded in Acts seven:

-- They had been assured that their sacrifices on behalf of the kingdom would be more than repaid when the kingdom was established (Mark 10:28 - 30). The kingdom was a treasure (Matt. 13:44), and a pearl of great price (Matt. 13:45, 46) - worth selling all they had to possess. With the kingdom postponed, however, they found themselves poor. The fall, at Acts seven - that had bereft them of that kingdom, had become “riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles,” therefore God used Gentile believers to supply their needs. When Paul took up offerings for the poor saints in Jerusalem he acknowledged the Gentiles debt to Israel and said, “*If the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things*” (Rom. 15:25 - 27).

-- The lifestyle promised in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:25 – 34), and so on, became impractical when the kingdom was postponed (1 Tim. 5:8). Promises of full supply of their needs depended on their going into the kingdom (Matt. 6:33).

-- Promises of automatic and full answers to prayer presuppose millennial conditions (Isa. 65:24, 25).

-- The possibility of John the Apostle still being alive at the return of Christ (John 21:21 - 23) would require entry into the Millennium during his lifetime. Since he lived longer than any of the other disciples, he could have lived to see Christ's return if this had not been made impossible by the decision of Israel in Acts seven -- and the subsequent postponement of the kingdom to inaugurate this age of Grace.

Some things they should have done they evidently failed to do. They did not circumcise their children (Josh. 5:5). They also did not make use of the tabernacle as they should have (Acts 7:42, 43).

One outstanding purpose of sending Israel into Canaan at this time had been to destroy the wicked inhabitants of the land, whose cup of iniquity was full at last. But the army of over 600,000 men “able to go forth to war” never were able to lift a finger toward accomplishing this. It had not been for this thirty-eight years of empty, boring,

and useless thirty-eight years that God had laid hold of them and brought them out of Egypt. He had a glorious, victorious and productive future planned for them. Tragically, they did not lay hold of God's plan, and were not allowed to experience that future. The victorious march into the land of milk and honey was reserved for another army – the new generation registered in the second census.

When God 'laid hold' of me He had a life and ministry planned for me. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Because, too often, I have failed to walk in the Spirit and to walk by faith, I am sure I have not fully 'laid hold' of that plan.

Paul expressed this concern, even about himself, in Philippians. "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may *lay hold* of that for which Christ Jesus has also *laid hold* of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12 – 14). I wonder how much of my life will be passed over, like the years of Israel's wandering, without comment when the crowns are bestowed. I am confident that, by God's grace, I have "kept the faith," but fear I have failed to fully "fight the good fight" and finish the course He had laid out for me (2 Tim. 4:7).

Now the end of their prolonged journey approaches. Behind them are the many evidences of God's power, His love, His patience and His grace. They have also seen His glorious holiness displayed in judgments and chastenings. After nearly forty years of delays the nation stands at the very door of the Promised Land, with the assurance they will soon have arrived 'home' at long last!

This last year is taken up with preparations for the glad day when they will cross the Jordan and eat the good corn of the land. Their blessed hope – so long deferred – illuminates their horizon, even as our "Blessed Hope," so long delayed, should fill our hearts with joyous expectation today. Maranatha!

Miriam's Death (Numbers 20:1)

It seems strange that only part of one verse is given to record the death and burial of Miriam. As a girl she had played an important role in saving the life of Moses. She grew up to become a prophetess, and led the women in their song of praise for deliverance from the Egyptian army (Ex. 15:20, 21). She, along with her brothers, was sent before Israel when they left Egypt (Micah 6:4). The entire congregation had halted their march to Palestine for seven days to await her cleansing from leprosy (Num. 12:15). But it appears from this verse that they didn't even pause to mourn her passing, as they did for Aaron and Moses later. This slight may be a further rebuke for having taken it upon herself to reprimand Moses. She had demanded equality with him, but here she is almost totally ignored. I wonder how many who think themselves great leaders here will

be on the back row at the Bema when the crowns are given out?

A vivid illustration of the difference between the apparent value of a man during his days of activity, and his actual worth, is found in Second Samuel twenty-three. As David looked back over his life he listed and commended his “mighty men” who had stood by him in his battles. Joab had been the captain of his army all those years. Amazingly his name is found only incidentally in David’s list. In spite of all of his prominence before men, David did not see Joab as one his “mighty men.” His two brothers and his armor bearers are listed (2 Samuel 23:18, 24, 37), but not Joab! “Not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends,” Paul reminds us (2 Cor. 10:18).

Water from the Rock (Numbers 20:2 – 13)

In Exodus, chapter seventeen, God had miraculously provided them with water out of the rock. He had continued to meet their need for water in various ways for many years, as we have seen. But now they are thirsty again. This supply of physical water was a practical necessity. The way God provided it on this occasion demonstrates their total dependence on Him, and His gracious care for them, even while they are enduring chastening for their sin. However it is the rich and extensive typology of the passage that will occupy our attention.

The Water

In some passages, such as John 3:5, water is typical of the word of God, but it has other symbolic significance as well. In John chapter seven, the water speaks of the Holy Spirit. “‘He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:38, 39). Isaiah speaks of this also. Using water as a symbol for the Holy Spirit, he promises it will not only produce life, but will bring blessing and healthy growth “like willows by the watercourses” (Isa. 44:3, 4). He paints a lovely picture of those who walk in the Spirit. “The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail” (Isa. 58:11). He extends God’s invitation to the thirsty. “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Isa. 55:1).

In regard to water for Israel in the wilderness two passages stand out. In Exodus 17:1 – 7 the giving of the Spirit at conversion is typified.² In this chapter in Numbers the typology portrays the believer who is no longer enjoying the life-enriching ministry of

² The Old Testament believer was not given the Spirit at conversion, but the typology looks on to the New Covenant, which makes this provision in the day when all Israel will be saved (Ezek. 36:26, 27 & context). Although it is not prophesied for *us*, God graciously does give each believer today the Holy Spirit at conversion (Rom. 8:9).

the Spirit, because of unconfessed sin in his life. It denotes those who, like David in Psalm 51, have lost the joy of God’s salvation. How very thirsty one can become in such a situation!

The Rock

The “rock” is typical of Christ. It is most important to see this clearly. The largest segment of Christendom is suffering from a failure to recognize it. The Roman Catholic Church makes much of Matthew 16:18. “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” They make three serious errors in interpreting this verse.

They understand the “church” in this verse to be the church of this age. It is, instead, the kingdom church mentioned in Psalm 22:25. There Christ is portrayed as praising God in the midst of the great assembly (“ekklesia” in the Septuagint) after He has been brought to the dust of death (Psa. 22:15). Psalm 22:25 is quoted in the book of Hebrews. “I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the *church* [ekklesia] will I sing praise unto thee” (Heb. 2:12 – KJV). This seems to be a reference to His post-resurrection ministry. The “great assembly” (NKJV) could describe the time, before His ascension, when He appeared to “over five hundred brethren at once” (1 Cor. 15:6).

Also Roman Catholic theology eulogizes Peter as the chief of the apostles in the present day church. Peter did have a place of leadership in the kingdom church, but it is Paul who is the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 15:16). It is to Paul that this age of grace was entrusted (Eph. 3:2, 3). It is to Paul we must look for the truths peculiar to the church that is Christ’s Body (2 Tim. 2:1, 2; 1 Cor. 14:37). Paul did not instruct us to be followers of Peter. He said, “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

In the third place, because “Peter” means “a rock,”³ they dogmatically declare that the rock is a symbol of Peter, and teach that the church will be built on him. The Pope derives his authority from this consideration. Actually, the rock is symbolic of Christ Himself, as other Scripture makes crystal clear. They make three mistakes in one verse – and then build their theology and practice upon it!

Does the rock in Matthew 16:18 really represent Christ? It is a fruitful study to follow the word “rock” through both the Old and New Testaments to seek its significance.

The word “rock” is used symbolically at least forty-six times in the Old Testament. Over and over it is clearly typical, or symbolic, of God. In the Song of

³ “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). The Greek word for “Peter” is “petros” and the rock upon which Christ will build His church is “petra.” According to Strong’s Concordance “petros” is “a (piece of) rock,” while “petra” means “a (mass of) rock.”

Moses he refers repeatedly to God as the Rock. He opens his song by declaring, “He is the Rock, His work is perfect” (Deut. 32:4). As we learn from him, more than water is brought forth from the Rock. There is honey and oil out of the Rock (Deut. 32:13), denoting sweetness and the “oil of gladness” (Heb. 1:9). He speaks of the Rock of his salvation (Deut. 32:15) and reminds Israel that God is “The Rock who begot you... the God who fathered you” (Deut. 32:18). He warns them that their Rock will sell them into bondage if they go their own way (Deut. 32:30). In Judges 6:21 fire came out of the Rock to consume the offering of Gideon. In the Psalms also God is frequently referred to as the Rock.

As to the rock in Numbers we are not left in doubt. “That Rock was Christ” is the declaration of Paul (1 Cor. 10:4). Concerning a rock as a foundation, Paul states, “No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11).

Knowing his Old Testament, as surely he did, Peter would have considered it blasphemous to consider himself as a “rock,” and would have recoiled in horror from the thought. After all, David had said, “Who is God, except the LORD? And *who is a rock, except our God?*” (Psa. 18:31).

(Strike the Rock [Exodus 17:1 – 7])

In order to fully understand and appreciate the typical significance of Numbers 20:8 – 13 we must review a former, somewhat similar, incident in their history. It is recorded in Exodus 17:1 – 6.

1 Then all the congregation of the children of Israel set out on their journey from the Wilderness of Sin, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped in Rephidim; but there was no water for the people to drink.

2 Therefore the people contended with Moses, and said, “Give us water, that we may drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you contend with me? Why do you tempt the LORD?”

3 And the people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses, and said, “Why is it you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”

4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!”

5 And the LORD said to Moses, “Go on before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel. Also take in your hand your rod with which you struck the river, and go.

6 “Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.

This passage records the initial provision of water out of the rock. Israel at that time was, nationally, a redeemed people. Their sins have been recognized, judged worthy of death, and put away by the death of the substitute – the Passover lamb. This

lamb typifies Christ, of course. “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Cor. 5:7). They have experienced redemption by blood, satisfying God’s holiness. They have also experienced redemption by power, for the Red Sea crossing has delivered them from Pharaoh, a type of Satan.

We need to understand the relationship between these two aspects of redemption. I recall an evangelist who pictured our redemption in a very moving way. His illustration went something like this.

“Satan had us tightly caged up as his prisoners. Christ longed to set us free, so He offered Satan the cattle on a thousand hills, and the gold in all the mines, as a ransom. When Satan refused His offer He asked him, ‘What is the price you want?’ Satan answered, ‘I want your life’s blood!’ Christ agreed and went to the cross to set us free.”

The story is rich in emotional appeal, but it does not have scriptural support. The blood of Christ was shed to meet our obligation to the holiness of God, not to satisfy the demands of Satan. Satan was not “bought off” – he was “destroyed.” “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might *destroy* [‘render powerless’ – NASB] him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14). So in Exodus seventeen the congregation, as a nation, are a redeemed people.⁴ They have been redeemed, both by blood and by the mighty power of God exercised at the Red Sea. But they are thirsty! The story of Calvary is typified again. The smiting of the rock looks at the cross, as the Passover did, but with a new emphasis. In the Passover it was deliverance from death and bondage. Here Calvary is typified as being the basis for the giving of the Spirit to satisfy their thirsty souls.

Today, when we have put our trust in Christ, we are forever redeemed individuals. Unlike the Israelites in Numbers, we have already received the Spirit and are in no danger of having Him leave us. But we thirst for the godliness of life and blessing of fellowship with God that only the ministry of the Holy Spirit can produce. This ministry of the Spirit, sadly, can be curtailed when we grieve Him (Eph. 4:30), and all but discontinued when we quench Him (1 Thess. 5:19). How thirsty we then become!

While the multitude assembled around the rock did not receive the Holy Spirit, what happened was typical of that which would one day be available to Israel. When the Passover had been fulfilled by Christ at Calvary and the descent into, and safe passage through, the Red Sea (a place of death) had been fulfilled in His resurrection, the disciples received the Holy Spirit (John 7:38, 39 with John 20:21, 22).

As the story unfolds we see the grumbling congregation, who deserve judgment, gathered around the rock. The rock, on the other hand, picturing Christ, deserves none of God’s wrath. In the hand of Moses is the “rod of God” with which he had brought judgment after judgment on the Egyptians. He lifts the rod to strike – but it is the rock

⁴ This does not mean that each individual was saved, but that the nation, as a nation, is on redemption ground.

that receives the blow, not the guilty people! Then the water flows in great abundance, like a river (Psa. 78:15, 16; 105:41).

All of this finds its fulfillment in Christ. It was those gathered around the cross, representative of a lost race of men, who were guilty and deserving the penalty of death. But it was Christ, holy, harmless and undefiled, totally innocent of any crime, who received the stroke of the Father's poured out wrath. "Who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? ... He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth. But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering..." (Isa. 53:8 – 10 – NASB).

Then the host of redeemed sinners had water in abundance. It was given on the basis of the smiting of the rock. For us also the gift of the Spirit, and the enjoyment of His ministry in our lives, is based on the death of Christ and can only come to us when we put our full trust in that death for our sin.

Speak to the Rock (Numbers 20:2 - 11)

"Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and Aaron. And the people contended with Moses and spoke, saying: 'If only we had died when our brethren died before the LORD! Why have you brought up the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we and our animals should die here? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us to this evil place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates; nor is there any water to drink'" (Num. 20:2 – 5).

This is almost totally the new generation venting their unbelief. They are little different from their fathers. Their complaint is the latest version of the dirge Israel has been intoning for forty years. They show no gratitude for the many years God has met their every need – including their need for water. There is no recognition of blame for their situation. They do not admit that their fathers would still be alive, and they would be drinking milk and feasting on honey, if they had not rebelled against the Lord and against the leadership of Moses. They are no better than their parents' generation, and fail to appreciate that they are much better off! There is no recognition that (since the forty years specified for their sojourn in the wilderness is about up) they will soon be in the land. They are guilty and deserve the judgment of God. Amazingly, judgment does not fall on them.

"Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals.' So Moses took the rod from before the LORD as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted his hand and

struck the rock twice with his rod; ⁵ and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank” (Num. 20:8 – 11).

While this passage is somewhat similar to that in Exodus seventeen, there are numerous and very significant differences. The background is similar. Here again the guilty and thirsty people are gathered around the rock. Moses stands before them with a rod in his hand, and again waters flow forth like a river. Even though this is not the same place ⁶ or the same rock, the rock is typical of the same Savior.

It is the differences that grip our attention, enlighten our minds and satisfy our hearts. In Exodus seventeen, Moses alone was involved. In Numbers, Aaron was associated with him in seeking water for the people. His presence was not incidental, for God commanded it, and he shared the blame for the disobedience manifested. In Exodus it was the rod of Moses that was used. In Numbers it was the rod of Aaron. Earlier Moses was instructed to strike the rock, and he obeyed. This time he was told to speak to the rock. Instead he spoke to the people and struck the rock – twice! In the first instance Moses was not reprimanded, as both he and Aaron were in the second one.

What was typified in all of this?

Moses symbolized the law in both cases. ⁷ The law required that sin be punished. In Exodus God identified Himself with the rock by standing on it. Thus, in type, the stroke of justice was laid on Him instead of on the guilty congregation. This was an advance over the typology of the Passover. There the *lamb*, typical of Christ of course, was slain. Here the rod of judgment is, more clearly and specifically than in many other types, laid on the Lord Himself. It was only to be struck once, for the death of Christ for sinful men, pictured here, was to be a once for all offering. As the waters gushed forth out of the stricken rock, so the death of Christ in our place makes it possible for Him to give us His Holy Spirit, that His blessed ministry in us may satisfy our thirsty souls.

In Numbers Moses is there again, typical of the truth today that the law has not been “made void,” but “established” (Rom. 3:31). ⁸ The rod of judgment is no longer in his hand, however. This typifies the truth that there is no penal judgment for the believer.

⁵ It was “his” rod only in the sense that it was in his hand.

⁶ The word “Meribah” is used in both passages. However the word means “contention.” It was a name bestowed in Rephidim because of what happened there rather than a name existing before the incident (Ex. 17:7). In other occurrences of the word it can be translated “waters of contention,” referring not to a place, but to an event. See Num. 20:24; 27:14; Deut. 33:8; Psa. 81:7; Psa. 95:8.

⁷ Even though the Law had not yet been given at Exodus seventeen.

⁸ In a context that places law and grace over against one another as contrasting systems of God’s relationship with men, it says that the law IS “made void.” In 2 Cor. 3:11, the expression “done away” (KJV) is the same word rendered “make void” in Rom. 3:31. While the law, as a system, has been set aside today and God is not relating to us on the basis of law, it is nevertheless retained as a historical testimony to man’s utter guilt and God’s complete righteousness in having met its every demand at Calvary.

His penalty has already been paid (John 5:24; Rom. 8:1 – NASB). Moses stands here as a testimony that the resumption of the flow of water is not because the righteousness of God has been ignored, or bypassed, but because it has been fully satisfied.

The rod in the hand of Moses is the rod of Aaron that we read about in Numbers seventeen. In Exodus Moses had been told, “Take in your hand your rod with which you struck the river” (Ex. 17:5). In Numbers the instruction is to take the rod (the same Hebrew word as is used in Num. 17:10) “from before the Lord” (Num. 20:9). The rod of Aaron has very recently been deposited “before the Lord” where, overnight, it was brought to life, bearing ripe almonds (Num. 17:7, 8). It was displayed as evidence that Aaron was God’s choice to be High Priest, and then “put back” where it was, “before the testimony” (Num. 17:9, 10). There is not even a hint in Scripture that the rod of Moses was ever placed there.

This dead rod that came to life pictured the resurrection of Christ. It established Aaron’s place as High Priest. So Christ, in resurrection, became a High Priest after the order of Melchizedec “according to the power of an endless life” (Heb. 7:16). “Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

Now see the picture in Numbers.

The people, still with guilt staining their lives, have known the blessedness of the water from the rock, but it has ceased to flow and they are thirsty.

At one time in his life, David experienced the thirst typified here. He had known a rich fellowship with God, as is evidenced in his many lovely psalms. But grievous sin came into his life and he lost the joy of his salvation – the waters had ceased to flow. He describes the depth of his thirst in some of the Psalms he has written. “When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer” (Psa. 32:3, 4 - NASB). “For Your arrows pierce me deeply, and Your hand presses me down. There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor any health in my bones Because of my sin” (Psa. 38:2, 3).

In Numbers twenty the rock is there, but it does not have to be struck again. Moses is there, but he does not have the rod of judgment in his hand, it is the rod of resurrection. Aaron is there also, established firmly as High Priest by the resurrection-rod. Now all that is required is to speak to the rock.

David experienced this also. He spoke to the Rock. “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. ... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ... Restore to

me the joy of Your salvation...” (Psa. 51: 1 – 3, 7, 10, 12). When the joy of God’s salvation was restored to him, when the water was flowing again, he could expect to have a renewed testimony for the Lord. “Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be converted to You” (Psa. 51:13).

When our thirst is satisfied the water Christ gives us will be in us (as was promised to the woman at the well) a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life (John 4:14) -- flowing out to others. When our well goes dry, for the sake of others as well as for our own sake, we need to speak to the Rock!

(Sing to it [Numbers 21:16 – 18])

This study would not be complete without reaching into Numbers chapter twenty-one for one more reference to water.

“From there they went to Beer, which is the well where the LORD said to Moses, ‘Gather the people together, and I will give them water.’ Then Israel sang this song: ‘*Spring up, O well! All of you sing to it; the well the leaders sank, dug by the nation's nobles, by the lawgiver, with their staves.*’” (Num. 21:16 – 18).

The well, as much as the rock of chapter twenty, speaks of Christ. This time the water is not given in response to the angry demands of the people. God graciously and freely offers it to them. This water comes to them when the people are gathered together - not in anger and unbelief, but in expectation - as a result of the labor of Moses and the other leaders. It is not the rod of Moses here, nor even the rod of Aaron, but the staves, the ‘walking sticks,’ of the leaders. There is at least a suggestion here that one source of refreshing for God’s people depends on their gathering themselves together, and results from the efforts of their leaders. It is a dug well, but, when they sing to it, it becomes an artesian well – “*spring up, O well!*”

This completes a lovely trilogy of truth. “Strike the rock” – salvation: “Speak to the rock” – sanctification: “Sing to [the well]” – worship.

Moses and Aaron Reprimanded (Numbers 20:12, 13)

“Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank” (Num. 20:11).

The humble and patient Moses became, understandably, angry with these people he had been enduring for so many years. Paul advises us, “Be angry, and do not sin” (Eph. 4:26) or, as it is paraphrased, “When angry, beware of sinning.” In his anger, Moses sinned. Instead of speaking to the rock, he scolded the people. Accusing them of being rebels, he became a rebel himself. He struck the rock twice, typifying repeated judgment on Christ, and brought chastening on himself. In spite of the failure of Moses and Aaron to obey God, however, God did not deprive the people of the water. The water gushed forth again, like a river. How very gracious God is!

“Moses, provoked to anger, smote the rock instead of speaking to it as the Lord commanded. What happened? The people still were supplied with the water. Thereby we learn a solemn principle. God’s blessing is not necessarily a sign of His approval of a man or a method. It is only a proof of His own faithfulness. God always honors His promise; but the servant will give an answer for his methods, motives and the manner of his service, as to what ‘sort’ it is.”⁹

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them’” (Num. 20:12).

How much Moses and Aaron had done to bring Israel out of Egypt, bring them to the very border of the Promised Land, and then guide them through the years of wandering! With this in mind, it surely must have been a shock to Moses and Aaron to be told they will not be allowed to enter the land. Like the generation that rebelled at Kadesh they will die in the wilderness. Why is their punishment so severe? What have they done?

First of all, it seems they should have seen the need of the people before it became a serious problem and taken the matter before the Lord. But perhaps they were “waiting on the Lord,” and the people mistook it for unconcern.

Moses lost his temper and scolded the people instead of speaking to the rock. How often we condemn and scold the people when it would accomplish much more if we spoke to the Rock about the people!

Moses and Aaron disobeyed the Lord. While Moses was the active one of the two, Aaron was his collaborator, for God held them both accountable. Moses took Aaron’s rod from before the Lord *as the Lord had commanded him* (Num. 20:9). So far, so good. But then he departed from the commandment of the Lord. He not only failed to speak to the rock, he struck it – twice! Disobedience is never a trivial thing with God, and its seriousness is magnified when the disobedient one is in a place of responsibility and leadership. One well-known and loved hymn advises every believer to, “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”

He made the mistake of forgetting who it was that could bring them water. The people were putting the responsibility for the lack of water on Moses. Moses was drawn into playing their game and accepted that responsibility. He answered, “Must *we* [Moses and Aaron] bring water for you out of this rock?”

⁹ J. Boyd Nicholson, cited in the 1992 issue of “Choice Gleanings,” published by Gospel Folio Press, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

They were a bad testimony before the children of Israel. “But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.’” (Num. 20:12 - NASB).

Our testimony before others is very important in God’s eyes! This was driven home to David when Nathan faced him with his guilt. He was forgiven, his thirst was quenched and his testimony was restored, as we have seen. But what he had done had “given occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme” (2 Sam. 12:14), so God chastened him severely for the rest of his life.

When the Psalmist, Asaph, had his heart filled with doubts he, wisely, refrained from voicing them lest he be a stumbling block to others. “If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’ Behold, I should have betrayed the generation of Thy children” (Psa. 73:15). When his doubts had been resolved he had something to say that was worth saying. “I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all Your works” (Psa. 73:28 – NASB).

Possibly the greatest justification for the harsh discipline of Moses and Aaron is seen when we consider the typology of the occasion. This is not mentioned in Numbers, for they evidently did not know about the typology involved. But God knew, and for the sake of those of us later who would see the lessons pictured here, the type must not be spoiled. When Moses was told to take the rod of Aaron and speak to the rock, it was intended to teach important truth, strongly and clearly, through the typology.

The offering of the Red Heifer demonstrated how the merits of one offering could be applied over a period of many years. This chapter typifies emphatically that there is ultimately to be *only one offering!*

The fact that Christ need die but once is clear all through Scripture, but is specifically and emphatically taught in the book of Hebrews. At least three times it is described as a “once for all” sacrifice. It is put in contrast to the repeated offerings of the sacrificial system under the law. “[Christ] does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did *once for all* when He offered up Himself” (Heb. 7:27). By striking the rock again and yet again Moses, typically, equated the sacrifice of Christ with that of animals. The great distinction between the never-ending work of the high priest in the temple and the completed work of Christ is blurred when the rock is smitten with the lash of judgment a total of three times.

The repeated sacrifice of animals bore testimony to the fact that they were not a final answer to sin, that their deaths could not pay the price of redemption. The original smiting of the rock had a different story to tell. In that incident God stood on the rock (Ex. 17:6). This identified Him with the rock more clearly than He was identified with any of the animal sacrifices except the Passover lamb. As Paul put it, “That rock was Christ.” To strike the rock was to strike Him! To strike it again was to declare the

insufficiency of His death. To see that the sacrifice of *animals* could not pay the price of sin is reasonable and scriptural. But to imagine that the death of *God's own Son* could not fully pay the price of sin is unreasonable, unscriptural and actually blasphemous.

Philip P. Bliss put it well in his hymn “Once for All!”

Free from the law – O happy condition!
 Jesus hath bled and there is remission;
 Cursed by the law and bruised by the fall,
 Christ hath redeemed us once for all.

The once for all death of Christ does raise some vital theological problems however. If the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sin, how could God have forgiven those whose sins were lived out before Christ was even born?

Down through the centuries before Christ, God revealed more and more what He would one day do for sinful man, but it was never made totally clear that He would give the life of His Son as the ultimate sacrifice (1 Pet. 1:10, 11). No one was specifically told to believe that Christ would die and rise again. Not every Old Testament believer received the same revelation from God (Compare Hebrews eleven). However, as men responded in faith to the various messages He did give them, God acted on the basis of what He knew He would one day do, and justified them (Heb. 11:1, 2). The animal sacrifices had their proper and important place of course. They were to typify Christ and cover sin until it could be taken away by Him. They also taught their lessons, both practical and typical, about the righteousness of God, the seriousness of sin, and the necessity for redemption. They pointed ahead to the ultimate and final sacrifice on Calvary.

Another problem surfaces. When Christ died, He died for all the sins that had already been committed (Rom. 3:25). But what about the future sins of those not yet born? The Red Heifer points to the solution of this problem. The Word of God, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, bears testimony to that death, and, in so doing, extends the merits of the sacrifice into the future. God knew in the Old Testament what He would do about sin, and acted on the basis of it as if it were already an accomplished fact. Christ is the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). Somewhat similarly, at Calvary He knew of all the sins still to come in the centuries ahead, and on this basis dealt with them as though they were already an accomplished fact. He laid them all – a great repulsive mass of mankind’s sins – on Christ, who died for them.

The realization that all our sins, even those still in our future, were paid for at Calvary makes the Roman Catholic doctrine of the continuing death of Christ in the “mass” not only unnecessary, but blasphemous.

This glorious truth also gives assurance to the true believer that he will not lose his salvation. If any sin can send him to hell after he has been “*justified from all things*”

(Acts 13:39), it would have to be a sin for which Christ did not die. Horatio G. Stafford put it well in his hymn, “It is Well With My Soul.”

My sin – O the bliss of this glorious thought –
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
 Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more:
 Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

To this might be added a verse from another hymn found in “The Believers Hymn Book” – hymn # 51.

If Thou hast my discharge procured,
 And freely in my place endured
 The whole of wrath divine;
 Payment God will not twice demand,
 First at my bleeding Surety’s hand,
 And then again at mine.

Moses not only struck the rock, he failed to speak to it. This, too, stripped a glorious truth from the type.

To know that our salvation is secure through His once for all offering of Himself brings another serious matter to our attention. If the sins of believers are not to result in the death prescribed by the law (Ezek. 18:20; Rom. 6:23) how shall they be handled? It is by speaking to the Rock. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Several misconceptions need to be cleared up in regards to this verse. First of all, it does not involve confessing our sins to any man on earth. Nor does it disregard the fact that we have already been forgiven the moment we believed the gospel. Here justification is not in question, it is sanctification that is in view. We are not dragged back into court to face the legal significance of our sin. We have already been there, our sin considered, the death penalty assigned and executed upon our Substitute, and we have been justified. The law has been fully satisfied. We will never face the law in court again (John 5:24; Rom. 8:1 - NASB). It is now a matter of the relationship between our Father and ourselves as His sons.

Confession involves seeing our actions as God sees them. When we do, how can we either say, “We have no sin,” or “we have not sinned” (1 John 1:8, 10). To do so would be to deceive ourselves and make God a liar. Paul is not silent in this matter. “For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world” (1 Cor. 11:31, 32). The forgiveness that is mentioned in 1 John 1:9 involves being spared from chastening as a son, not being saved from legal guilt before the law. If we just go blissfully on our way, ignoring our sins as believers, we will still be God’s sons, even

“saints.” But we will not be enjoying water from the Rock, and will be inviting the loving, but serious - and sometimes severe - chastening of the Lord.

All of this truth was deleted from the type when Moses struck the rock twice. No wonder God was angry! The very seriousness of His sentence against Moses and Aaron deeply underlines the vital importance of the message the type was supposed to bring to us. For us today sin is surely not ‘good,’ but when worked together with appropriate chastening, gracious understanding, and wise instruction by our Father, it can be made to *result* in good (Rom. 8:28; Heb. 12:10).

Confrontation with the Edomites (Numbers 20:14 – 21)

It appears that Israel remained at Kadesh-barnea as their principle location for almost thirty-eight years. They may have dispersed somewhat during that time, for Numbers 20:1 says, “Then the children of Israel, *the whole congregation*, came into the Wilderness of Zin in the first month [as though they were being regathered], and the people stayed in Kadesh.”

For reasons to be discussed later they were directed to approach Canaan from the East instead of from the South. The shortest route would take them through Edom, so Moses requested permission to pass through Edom as they made their way to the eastern side of the Jordan.

The Edomites were descendents of Esau. “Esau was the father of the Edomites” (Gen. 36:43). The message sent to the king of Edom was a masterpiece of humility and tact. Moses had over half a million fighting men at his command, but he did not threaten or demand. He humbly approached the king diplomatically, representing Israel as relatives who have gone through many hardships and are now in need of a right to peacefully cross his land. He pointed out that they were being led by an angel of the Lord, and promised they would not cause any problems to him and his people.

When the request was turned down with a threat to meet him in battle, he pleaded with him again, offering additional assurances of their peaceful and friendly intentions. In response the Edomite army was sent to guard their borders against Israel. Moses did not retaliate in force and fight the Edomites. “They went along through the wilderness and bypassed the land of Edom” (Judges 11:18).

The Israelites had been told, when they left Egypt, that they could expect to see war. “When Pharaoh ... let the people go ... God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, ‘Lest perhaps the people change their minds *when they see war*, and return to Egypt’” (Ex. 13:17). In the census taken earlier the men were described, repeatedly and specifically, as those able to go out to war. They had no reason to fear a defeat, for they must surely have outnumbered the Edomites, and the Edomites were not “giants” in heavily fortified cities. Yet Moses meekly took the people the long way around and left the Edomites no one to fight with. Moses was willing to fight, but not against his relatives.

How greatly we need to learn this lesson. We, too, are told we are engaged in a war. We have the armor, but it is spiritual armor (Eph. 6:13 – 17). We have weapons, but they are not of the flesh (2 Cor. 10:4). We have an enemy, but it is not a “flesh and blood” enemy (Eph. 6:12). We are sure of eventual victory (2 Cor. 2:14; 10:5). However we need to know who the enemy is. Too often we are busy fighting other believers. Paul warns, “If you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!” (Gal. 5:15).

Against the wrath of Edom Moses refused to answer in kind. The story is told of a young man who approached Dwight L. Moody and asked him if he believed in ‘the manly art of self defense.’ When assured that he most emphatically did, the young man asked, “Do you favor the Sullivan system or the Jeffrey system?” “Oh, I favor the Solomon system” replied Moody. “I never heard of that one. What is his system of self defense?” Mr. Moody smiled and replied, “Read Proverbs fifteen, one. There it says, ‘A soft answer turns away wrath!’”

This confrontation between the nations of Israel and Edom reminds us of an earlier one between the man Israel (Jacob) and his brother, Esau, recorded in Genesis thirty-three. Esau, accompanied by four hundred men, came to meet Jacob upon his return from Paddan-aram. At that time Esau was in a position to destroy him. However, softened by Jacob’s generous gifts, he met him with a show of friendliness and forgiveness. Here in Numbers the situation is reversed, it is Israel that has the capacity to destroy Edom, but they turn away in peace instead.

The later history of Edom makes one wonder whether or not they should have responded to Edom’s threat and destroyed them. They became enemies to Israel during the period of the Kings (1 Kings 11:14; 2 Kings 8:20, 22; 1 Chron. 18:13). When Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar the sons of Edom stood by and cried out in glee, “Raze it, raze it, To its very foundation!” (Psa. 137:7). Or, as the residents of the Watts area in Los Angeles shouted as their battle cry when, years ago, they were burning their own Neighborhood, “Burn, baby, burn!” They pursued those being taken captive with the sword, casting off all pity (Amos 1:11). The entire book of Obadiah was written as a prophecy against Edom. He lists their offences in dramatic detail.

“In the day that you stood on the other side; in the day that strangers carried captive his forces, when foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem; even you were as one of them. But you should not have gazed on the day of your brother in the day of his captivity; nor should you have rejoiced over the children of Judah in the day of their destruction; nor should you have spoken proudly in the day of distress. You should not have entered the gate of My people in the day of their calamity. Indeed, you should not have gazed on their affliction in the day of their calamity, nor laid hands on their substance in the day of their calamity. You should not have stood at the crossroads to cut off those among them who escaped; nor should you have delivered up those among them who remained in the day of distress” (Obadiah 10 – 14).

Paul gives us instructions that are beautifully illustrated by the response of Moses to the Edomites. “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to [God’s] wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom. 12:18, 19).

Moses made no mistake when he left the punishment of Edom in the hands of the Lord. They are yet to be judged for their undying hatred for Israel. “Thus says the LORD: ‘For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because he pursued his brother with the sword, and cast off all pity; his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath forever’” (Amos 1:11). “They shall be called the Territory of Wickedness, and the people against whom the LORD will have indignation forever” (Mal. 1:4). “The house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame; but the house of Esau shall be stubble; they shall kindle them and devour them, and no survivor shall remain of the house of Esau,’ for the LORD has spoken” (Obadiah 18).

The Death of Aaron (Numbers 20:24 – 29)

Aaron was not the strong man that Moses was. He had provided a golden calf for Israel to worship when they thought Moses had died on the mountaintop. He joined with Miriam in her rebellion against the authority of Moses, and had at least been consenting to the striking of the rock but a short time before his death. However he was God’s anointed High Priest, and this had been dramatically authenticated when his rod had budded and borne fruit overnight. As God’s High Priest, he was the only one who could maintain Israel’s close ties with Jehovah through the tabernacle worship. Now he is to die.

This is the first time Israel has had to face the fact that they do not have an unchangeable priesthood (Heb. 7:24). Their priest is prevented by death from continuing his ministry (Heb. 7:23). They are not allowed to see him die, however, nor do they witness the transfer of the priestly garments from Aaron to Eleazar. They see Aaron in his High Priestly garments ascending Mount Hor, and then they behold Eleazar returning. It is a different man, but the same garments. There has been a change, but not a break in the priesthood. This detail may have been intended by God to bear a veiled promise of a High Priest to come who will not die, bringing them a totally unchangeable priesthood that Aaron could not provide (Heb. 7:23, 24).

The people honored Aaron by spending thirty days mourning his death (Num. 20:39). What a blessing it is that we do not need to mourn the death of our High Priest! He did, indeed, die, but not as High Priest. He died as the sacrifice. He was not High Priest until the resurrection, for his priesthood is “according to the power of an endless life” (Heb. 7:16). “Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). It is this resurrection life of Christ Paul has in view when he writes, “If when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His [resurrection] life” (Rom. 5:10).

The “cities of refuge” established when Israel arrived in the land are typical of Christ. Those who took refuge there were safe, from any who would take their lives, until the death of the High Priest (Num. 35:25 – 28). I can never leave my “City of Refuge” and my High Priest will never die! Praise the Lord!

Initial Victories over the Canaanites (Numbers 21:1 – 35)

After the death of Aaron God gave them their first victory over the Canaanites (Num. 21:1). The reprieve these wicked people had been enjoying for thirty-eight years, because of the unbelief and rebellion of Israel at Kadesh-barnea, had come to its conclusion. The new generation was to bring about their destruction – a judgment that had been graciously held in abeyance for over four hundred years. The victories over Arad, the Amorites (Num. 21:21 – 26) and Og, king of Bashan (Num. 21:31 – 35), were encouraging tokens of their coming victories in their conquest of the land, under Joshua.

No sooner did they experience the victory over the Canaanite, the king of Arad, however, than they fell back into the ways of their ancestors and began to complain of their situation - and blame both God and Moses. “The people became impatient because of the journey. And the people spoke against God and Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food’” (Num. 21:4, 5).

In self-pity, they exaggerated their plight. They did have food – good food, bread from heaven - but they lusted for variety. They must have had *some* water or they would have died, but they evidently didn’t have it in the quantities they longed for. They did not remember that if it had not been for their rebellion they would already be in the land, and what they described as “miserable food” would long ago have been replaced with milk, honey, and the good corn of the land.

They refused to admit that those who were slain in the wilderness had died because of their own unbelief and disobedience. Their complaining, too, was the direct result of unbelief. If they had believed that they were to spend only forty years in the wilderness – as God had told them – they would have realized that the end of their journey was less than a year away! They should have been looking forward eagerly and joyfully to what lay before them in their near future. Instead they were grumbling about their plight of the moment.

We also, sometimes, have wilderness experiences in our lives. When we do, however, we have Scriptures to guide and encourage us that were not available to them. David implores believers to “Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him” (Psa. 37:7). Like Paul we must learn to be content in whatever state we are in. Through the strength Christ gives we can learn how to be abased, to be hungry and suffer need - as well as how to abound (Phil. 4:11 – 13). Of course we do not have the cloud that never deserted Israel, but we do have God’s promised presence. “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will

never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5). Even if we have *nothing* else we have *Him* – and we can be content!

In spite of their rebelliousness God did not sentence them to die in the wilderness as He had their forefathers. He had already specifically promised they would enter the land. He had told the previous generation, “Your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised” (Num. 14:31). Nevertheless, He did not overlook their sin. He chastened them for it. In Numbers 21:6 – 9 there is a short account of how He dealt with them.

They had been bitten by fiery serpents that God sent among them. Many of the people died, and those still living cried out to Moses, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us.” Happily, God knew better than they did what they needed. It would have served little purpose to remove the serpents, for verse six says, “they bit the people.” It was too late for a preventive measure – they needed a remedy! God may have removed the snakes, but it does not say so. He did what was imperative - He provided a remedy. He had Moses place a bronze snake on a pole so that those who had been bitten could look to it and live. “When Israel murmured, the serpent’s bite was the answer: when Israel confessed, God’s grace was the answer.”¹⁰ See Psa. 78:34, 35, 38.

This short account becomes very important due to its typology. To appreciate this fully we need to make a brief study of the third chapter of John’s gospel where this incident plays an important part in Christ’s discussion with Nicodemus.

After confronting Nicodemus with his need for a new birth, Christ reminded him of this account in Numbers. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:14 – 16).

Being a Pharisee, and a ruler of the Jews, Nicodemus no doubt came to Christ feeling somewhat secure - in spite of the questions Christ’s ministry and teaching had aroused in his mind. After all, he reasoned, he had a place of favor with God because of his birth – he was a descendent of Abraham! That descent from Abraham secured their acceptance with God, was a common misconception among the leaders in Israel. Christ had warned them against saying confidently to themselves, “We have Abraham as our father!” (Luke 3:8). Nicodemus was shocked out of his pride of birth when Christ said, “You must be born again” (John 3:7). He needed to be reminded that by natural birth he was not only a son of Abraham, but also a son of Adam.

With his mind still set on his physical birth, Nicodemus exclaimed, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4). Christ informed him that he needed a spiritual birth. He set forth a

¹⁰ “Notes on Numbers” by C. H. MacIntosh. Published by Loizeaux Brothers, New York. Page 401.

principle that is trans-dispensational, as true for us as for Nicodemus.¹¹ “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’” (John 3:6, 7).

How does this relate to the serpent lifted up in the wilderness? The need for the new birth is rooted in the fact that all men are descendents of Adam. As an inherited result of what happened in the Garden of Eden the serpent of sin has already bitten them. They are already dead in trespasses and sins and only a life-giving remedy will do.

But how can God justly deliver them from the spiritual death they so richly deserve? In the case of the rebels in Numbers twenty-one, a bronze serpent was lifted up for them. This was typical of Christ of course. A serpent was fittingly chosen as the icon for it speaks of how Christ was made to be sin for us (2 Cor. 5:2). It was made of bronze, since bronze in Scripture is symbolic of judgment – and our sins were judged at Calvary. It was lifted up on a pole. From a practical viewpoint, this was so everyone could see it. Typically, however, it pointed forward to the day Christ would be lifted up on the cross, bearing the judgment of God upon our sin. It was not the holiness of Christ, His righteousness, His example or His teaching, glorious as they were, that were typified by this bronze serpent. It was His death, bearing the judgment for our sin, that was portrayed! Just as the instrument of healing in Numbers was the bronze serpent, so the new life, which comes through the new birth, is provided through the instrumentality of the cross.

Under what circumstances could that bronze serpent be an instrument to bring life to the dying? Notice that this cure was available to everyone who realized his need. It was not provided just for some predetermined group in Israel, it was lifted up so all could see it. They didn’t have to wonder “Will it work for me?” They just had to look. It was not looking *at* the serpent that availed, but looking *to* it. “It came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked *to* the bronze serpent, he lived” (Num. 21:9 - NASB). It is entirely possible that there were at least some who looked *at* it, in curiosity, and knew why it was there, but did not look *to* it, assured that it would save their lives. Unless they believed God, when He promised that everyone who looked would live, they would die - with the remedy in plain sight.

So Christ was lifted up, not for a pre-chosen few, but for all – for *the world* – that *whosoever* looked to Him in faith would live (John 3:16).

How is the new birth to be brought about? Christ’s answer to Nicodemus was “[You must be] born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). The Spirit, of course, refers to God’s Holy Spirit. But what does the water represent? Theologians differ here. Some teach (in light of Mark 15:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; etc.) that the water is symbolic of water

¹¹ Nicodemus was mistakenly counting on his physical birth to assure a right relationship with God, and needed another *birth*. Gentiles have no such false hope, there is no Abraham in their genealogy! The same experience described as a birth to Nicodemus is put in different terms – terms that have a real meaning to the Gentiles. To them the new life is described as a new *creation* (2Cor. 5:17).

baptism. Others see the water as referring to the water breaking forth from the womb in physical birth. However several scriptures indicate that the water here is the “water of the word” (Eph. 5:26). Peter told those to whom he was writing, “[You have] been *born again*, ... through the *word of God* which lives and abides forever” (1 Pet. 1:23). Since the Word of God is so important to the new birth that it is singled out by Peter as providing it, surely Christ would not fail to mention it. Mention it He did – symbolized by water.

In order to be saved, to be born again, a man must believe – as is emphasized in John three. But how does faith come? It comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Rom. 10:17). Therefore the word of God, as Peter declared, is instrumental in the new birth. As to the Spirit, He has inspired men to write that word, brings conviction when it is preached, and accomplishes the miracle of that birth. Truly one who is saved has been born again by the *word of God* and the *Spirit of God*. Further indication that this is the true interpretation is found in the Old Testament.

Nicodemus was expected to know about the new birth. “Jesus ... said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?’” (John 3:10). Therefore “these things” must be found in the Old Testament Scriptures. Personal new birth seems to be at least suggested by name changes (Gen. 17:5, 15; 32:28). It is *taught* regarding Israel as a nation. “Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall the earth be made to give birth in one day? Or *shall a nation be born* at once? For as soon as Zion was in labor, She gave birth to her children” (Isa. 66:8). This national new birth of the nation, in the day when all Israel shall be saved (Rom. 11:26; Zech. 12:10; etc.), is described, in Ezekiel thirty-seven, in terms of a resurrection.

The resurrection of the valley full of dry bones is not a physical resurrection of believing Israelites – in spite of the repetition of the word “graves” in verses twelve and thirteen. Such a physical resurrection will, of course, take place (Rev. 11:18), but that is not in view here. This becomes clear when we consider the enlightening preview of Ezekiel thirty-seven in the preceding chapter.

“For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land.

²⁵ Then I will sprinkle *clean water* on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.

²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

²⁷ I will put *My Spirit* within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

²⁸ Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God” (Ezek 36:24-28).

Here, as in chapter thirty-seven, God accomplishes this new birth – this giving of spiritual life – through “clean water” and the Spirit of God (“breath” in chapter 37). In

Ezek. 36:25 the clean water evidently symbolizes the word of God, the prophesying that is related in the next chapter.

In chapter thirty-seven this rebirth, of every Israelite who is alive when Christ appears to them at the close of the Tribulation, is brought about by the word of God and the “breath” which, entering into them, causes them to live. “He said to me, ‘*Prophecy* to these bones, and say to them, “O dry bones, hear *the word of the LORD!*” Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: “Surely I will cause *breath* to enter into you, and you shall live” ’ ” (Ezek 37:4-5).

All the dying man in the wilderness had to do to experience healing for himself was to *look* to the bronze serpent. All that the sinner today must do to have eternal life is also to *look*, in faith, to Christ as his sin bearer. Life through the new birth is available to the world, but is experienced only by “whoever believes.” Our need is greater than that of the Israelites, for it involves eternal life, not just a few more years of physical life. May we not be guilty of looking *at* the *cross* instead of looking *to* the *Christ* of the cross in faith!

It is instructive to read that Israel kept the bronze serpent and eventually began to worship it. “[Hezekiah] broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it” (2 Kings 18:4). Religious relics were as much an offense to God then as they are today. Looking to the serpent on the pole had brought life to dying men, for that serpent prefigured Christ. But they were not commanded to burn incense to it, nor did God permit them to do so. To look to it at God’s command was faith. To burn incense to it was idolatry. It had served its purpose and should have been cast aside so they could keep their eyes on the God who had seen fit to use it.

Sadly men are inclined to treasure physical reminders of the past more than the spiritual realities of the present or the glorious expectations of the future. Millions can become excited about ‘The Robe’ in which Christ was buried who have missed the robe of righteousness that His death purchased for them. ‘A piece of the true [?] Cross’ is all but worshipped, while “the preaching of the cross” is shamefully neglected. Even a beautiful ‘Family Bible,’ set carefully on the mantel and dusted every week, is but a relic of the lifestyle of earlier believers in the family - unless it is read and believed. Many denominations are but lifeless relics of previous generations who loved the Lord and believed and preached His word.

A morality inherited from godly parents, apart from the same regenerating work in our hearts that motivated them, admirable as it may be, is but a relic. It is a deadly relic if it provides us with a false sense of security. It is not a “futile way of life inherited from our fathers” – outwardly religious, and even orthodox, though it may appear – that redeems us, but the personal application of the precious blood of Christ to our hearts (1 Pet. 1:18, 19 - NASB). When we think that we are Christians because our parents are (as I did before I was saved), we are trusting in our physical birth as much as Nicodemus

was, and need a new birth just as much as he did. We must become *children of God*, for He doesn't have any *grandchildren*!

We must take care that we do not become satisfied with lifeless externals of devotion, and fail to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth. It was not the bronze serpent that later generations in Israel should have honored with their incense, but the God who, in His way and in His time only, had used it for His purpose.

As they approached the end of their journey they passed through hostile territory. These people were not the ones they had specifically been sent to destroy, though God – knowing they would end up in conflict with them – promised they would conquer them (Ex. 33:2; 34:11). It was not the original intention that the lands east of the Jordan would be taken over as a permanent dwelling place for Israel. It later was a problem when two and a half tribes chose to dwell there. Moses tried, when possible, to be at peace with them. The king of Arad, unprovoked, attacked Israel (Num. 21:1) and paid the price of his folly – he and his people were destroyed. Sihon was approached peacefully (Num. 21:21, 22) but went out against Israel – and he, to, was defeated. It even appears that Og, king of Bashan, initiated the battle that spelled his doom (Num. 21:33).

In the very midst of this warfare God not only gave them military victories, but provided deliverance from the serpents, gave them water from the well, and a song to sing (Num. 21:16 – 18).

Barak, as narrated in the following chapters, launched a different kind of attack. He sought to turn Israel's own God against them. One might think that this would not be difficult considering the record of unbelief, disobedience and rebellion they had amassed. However, in a special and limited way, "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." Their God did not turn against them – He defended them. This attack was launched in the spiritual realm and was so significant that the next three chapters are devoted to it.

In our warfare also the real battle is spiritual. Not much is said by Paul as to how to combat the persecution we may face, but he has a lot to say about the spiritual warfare.

The last place we should expect to see a battle is with fellow believers. Sadly, however, this is where the battle often rages, and Paul warns against it. "If you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!" (Gal. 5:15). Even opposition by purveyors of false doctrine are to be handled with graciousness.¹² "A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will" (2 Tim. 2:24 – 26). In any

¹² Even those who preach "another gospel" are not to be engaged in physical warfare. It is left up to God to curse them (Gal. 1:9). "Their mouths must be stopped," warns Paul (Titus 1:11), but that may best be accomplished by faithful and powerful teaching of the Word – speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) - not by burning them at the stake.

case, “Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor. 10:3, - 5). “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12).

We will find, as Israel did, that living at peace with all men is not always possible. But, for us, we are not to engage in physical conflict as Israel, under God’s guidance, did. “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. Therefore ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:18 - 21).

In their physical conflict God gave Israel victory after victory. In our spiritual battle, because He has already disarmed principalities and powers, making a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them (Col. 2:15), we are promised victory also. “Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ” (2 Cor. 2:14).