

# Maclaren on Numbers

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## Numbers

Sermons by  
Alexander Maclaren

### Numbers 4:23

### The Warfare of Christian Service

**“All that enter in to perform the service, to do the work in the tabernacle.” Nu 4:23**

These words occur in the series of regulations as to the functions of the Levites in the Tabernacle worship. The words “to perform the service” are, as the margin tells us, literally, to “war the warfare.” Although it may be difficult to say why such very prosaic and homely work as carrying the materials of the Tabernacle and the sacrificial vessels was designated by such a term, the underlying suggestion is what I desire to fix upon now—viz., that work for God, of whatever kind it be, which Christian people are bound to do, and which is mainly service for men for God’s sake, will never be rightly done until we understand that it is a warfare, as well as a work.

The phrase on which I am commenting occurs again and again in the regulations as to the Levitical service, and is applied, not only as in my text to those who were told off to bear the burdens on the march, but also to the whole body of Levites, who did the inferior services in connection with the ritual worship. They were not, as it would appear, sacrificing priests, but they belonged to the same tribe as these, and they had sacred functions to discharge. So we come to this principle, that Christian service is to be looked at as warfare.

Now, that is a principle which ought to be applied to all Christians. For there is no such thing as designating a portion of Christ’s Church to service which others have not to perform. The distinction of “priest” and “layman” existed in the Old Testament; it does not exist under the New Covenant, and there is no obligation upon any one Christian man to devote himself for Christ’s sake to Christ’s service and man’s help (which is Christ’s service), that does not lie equally upon all Christian people. The function is the same for all; the methods of discharging it may be widely different. Within the limits of the priestly tribe there may still be those whose office it is to carry the vessels, and those whose office it is to act more especially as ministering priests; but they are all of the tribe of Levi. We, if we are Christian people at all, are all bound to do this work of “the tabernacle,” and war this warfare.

It is important that we Christian people should elevate our thoughts of our duties in the world to the height of this great metaphor. The metaphor of the Christian life as being a “warfare” is familiar enough, but that is not exactly the point which I wish to dwell upon now. When we speak about “fighting the good fight of faith,” we generally mean our wrestle and struggle with our own evils and with the things that hinder us from developing a Christlike character, and “growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” But it is another sort of warfare about which I am now speaking, the warfare which every Christian man has to wage who flings himself into the work of diminishing the world’s miseries and sins, and tries to make people better, and happier because they are better. That is a fight, and will always be so, if it is rightly done.

#### I. Think of the foes.

Speaking generally, society is constituted upon a non-Christian basis. We talk about “Christian” nations. There is not one on the face of the earth. There is not a nation whose institutions and maxims and politics and the practices of its individual members are ruled and moulded predominantly by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So every man that has come into personal touch with that

Lord, and has felt that His commandments are the supreme authority in his own individual life, when he goes out into society, comes full tilt against a whole host of things that are in pronounced antagonism, or in real though unacknowledged contradiction, to the principles by which a Christian has to live for himself, and to commend to his brethren. So we have to fight. There are two things to be done—the imparting of good which will increase the sum of the world’s happiness, and the destruction of evil, which will subtract some of the world’s sorrows. The latter is always a conflict, for there are arrayed in defence of the evil vested interests, and the influence of habit, and the lowered vitality and sensitiveness of conscience which has come from breathing the polluted atmosphere which evil has vitiated. So that if we set ourselves, in humble, quiet, out-and-out dependence on Jesus Christ and submission to His will, to lead other people to submit to His will, there is nothing in the world more certain than that we shall find against us, starting up, as it were, out of the mist and taking form suddenly, a whole host of enemies. So we Christian men, as individuals, as members of a community and able to bring some influence to bear upon the conscience of society, have to fight against popular social evils, and to war for righteousness’s sake.

There is another foe. There is nothing that men dislike more than being lifted up into a clearer atmosphere and made to see truths which they do not see or care for. When we first become Christians we are all hot to go and teach and preach; and we fancy that we have only to stand up, with a Bible in our hand, and read two or three texts, and our fellows will grasp them as gladly as we have done. But soon we find out that it is not so easy to draw men to Christ as we thought it would be. We have to fight against gravitation and unwillingness, when we would lift a poor brother into the liberty and the light that we are in. We have to struggle with the men that we are trying to help. We have to war, in order to bring “the peace of God which passes understanding” into their hearts.

But the worst of all our foes, in doing Christian service, is our own miserable selves, with our laziness, and our vanity, and our wondering what A, B, and C will think about us, and the mingling of impure motives with nobler ones, and our being angry with people because they are so insensible, not so much to Christ’s love as to our words and pleadings. Unless we can purge all that devil’s leaven out of ourselves, we have little chance of working “the work of the tabernacle,” or warring the warfare of God. Ah! brethren, to do anything for this world of unbelief and sin, of which we ourselves are part, is a struggle. And I know of no work that needs more continual putting a firm heel upon self, in all its subtle manifestations, than the various forms of Christian service. Not only we preachers, but Sunday-school teachers, mothers in their nurseries, teaching their children, and all of us, if we are trying to do anything for men, for Christ’s sake, must feel, if we are honest with ourselves and about our work, that the first condition of success in it is to fight down self, and that only then, being emptied of ourselves, are we ready to be filled with the Spirit, by which we are made mighty to pull down the strongholds of sin.

## **II. The weapons of this warfare.**

There are two great passages in the New Testament, both of which deal with the Christian life under this metaphor of warfare. One of these is the detailed description of the Christian armour in the Epistle to the Ephesians. There we have described the equipment for that phase of the fight of the Christian life which has to do mainly with the perfecting of the individual character. But somewhat different is the armour which is to be worn, when the Christian man goes out into the world to labour and to wage war there for Jesus Christ. We may turn, then, rather to the other of the two passages in question for the descriptions of the equipment, armour, and weapons of the Christian in his warfare for the spread of truth and goodness in the world. The passage to which I refer is in 2 Cor 6. What are the weapons that Paul specifies in that place? I venture to alter their order, because he seems to have put them down just as they came into his mind, and we can put some kind of logical sequence into them.

“By the Word of God” that is the first one.

By the Holy Ghost, which is otherwise given as “by the power of God,” is the next.

Get your minds and hearts filled with the truth of the Gospel, and dwell in fellowship with God, baptized with His Holy Spirit; and then you will be clothed “as with a vesture down to your heels” with the power of God. These are the divine side, the weapons given us from above—the Word of God which is “the sword of the Spirit,” and the indwelling Holy Ghost manifesting Himself in power. Then follow a series of human qualities which, though they are “the fruit of the Spirit,” are yet not produced in us without our own co-operation. We have to forge and sharpen these weapons, though the fire in which they are forged is from above, and the metal of which they are made is given from heaven, like meteoric iron. These are “kindness, long-suffering, love unfeigned.” We have to dismiss from our minds the ordinary characteristics of warfare in thinking of that which Christians are to wage. Like the old Knights Templars, we must carry a sword which has a cross for its hilt, and must be clad in gentleness, and long-suffering, and unfeigned love. “The wrath of men worketh not the righteousness of God.” You cannot bully people into Christianity, you cannot scold them into goodness. There must be sweetness in order to attract, and he imperfectly echoes the music of the voice that came from “the lips into which grace was poured,” whose words are harsh and rough, and who preaches the Gospel as if he were thundering damnation into people’s ears.

Brethren, whatever be our warfare against sin, we must never lose our tempers. Harsh words break no bones indeed, but neither

do they break hearts. A character like Jesus Christ—that is the victorious weapon. Let a man go and live in the world with these weapons that I have been naming, the truth of God in his heart, the Holy Spirit in his spirit, the power that comes therefrom animating his deadness and strengthening his weakness, and himself an emblem and an embodiment of the redeeming love of Christ—and though he spoke no word he would be sure to preach Christ; and though he struck no blow he would be a formidable antagonist to the hosts of evil, and the icebergs of sin and godlessness would run down into water before his silent and omnipotent shining. These are the weapons.

### III. Note the temper, or disposition, of the Christian warrior-servant.

Courage goes without saying. If a man expects to be beaten, and to do nothing by his Christian witness but clear his conscience, he deserves nothing else than what he will get—viz. that his expectation will be fulfilled and he will do nothing else but clear his conscience, and that imperfectly. That is why so many preachers and Sunday-school teachers never see any conversions in their congregation or classes—because they do not expect any; because they go to their work without the enthusiastic boldness which would give power to their utterances.

I suppose concentration, too, goes without saying. When a man is on the battlefield with the swords whirling about his head, and the bayonets an inch from his breast, he does not go dreaming of scenes a hundred miles off, or think anything else than the one thing, how to keep a whole skin and wound an enemy. If Christian men will do their work in the dawdling, half-interested, and half-indifferent way in which so many of us promenade through our Christian service as if it was a review and not a fight, they are not likely to bring back many trophies of victory. You must put your whole selves into the battle. I said we must subdue ourselves ere we begin to fight. That is no contradiction to what I am saying now, for, as we all know, there is a distinction between the two selves in us—the self-centred self, which is to be crucified, and the God-centred self, which is to be nourished. You must put your whole selves into the battle.

There must, too, be discipline. One difference between a mob and an army is that the mob has as many wills as there are heads in it, and the army has only one will, that of the commander. He says to one man “Go!” and he goes, and gets shot; and to another one “Come!” and he comes; and to a third one “Do this!” and, no matter what it is, straightway he goes and does it. So if we are soldiers we have to take orders from headquarters, and to be sure that we pay no attention to any other commands. Suppose a man is set at a certain post by his captain, and a corporal comes and says, “You go and do this other thing; never mind your post, I will look after that,” to obey that is mutiny. If Jesus Christ tells you to do anything, and any others say “Do not do it just yet!” neglect them, and obey Him. If your own heart says, “Stop a little while and try something other and easier before you tackle that task,” be sure of the Captain’s voice, and then, whatever happens, obey, and obey at once. Warfare is a diabolical thing, but there is a divine beauty in one aspect of it—

Their’s not to make reply,

Their’s not to reason why,

Their’s but to do—

even if it mean to die.

Thus let us wage warfare.

### IV. The Relieving Guard.

This metaphor of warfare is used in the Book of Job, in a passage where our English Version does not show it. So I venture to substitute the right translation for the one in the Authorised Version, “All the days of my warfare will I wait till my change comes. The guard will be relieved some day, and the private that has been tramping up and down in the dark or the snow, perhaps within rifle’s length of the enemy, will shoulder his gun and go into the comfortable guardhouse, and hang up his knapsack, and fling off his dirty boots, and sit down by the fire, and make himself comfortable. There is a heavenly manner of relieving guard. Soon it will be the end of the sentry’s time, and then, as one of those that had done a good day’s work, and a long one, said with a sigh of relief, “I have fought a good fight. Henceforth the helmet is put off, which is the hope of salvation, and the crown is put on, which is salvation in its fullness. All the days of my warfare will I wait till my Captain relieves the guard.”

## Numbers 9:16

### The Guiding Pillar

So it was always: the cloud covered [the tabernacle] by day, and the appearance of fire by

## night.â€™â€™ Nu 9:16

(see discussion of related topic [Glory of the LORD: Past, Present, Future](#) )

The children of Israel in the wilderness, surrounded by miracle, had nothing which we do not possess. They had some things in an inferior form; their sustenance came by manna, ours comes by Godâ€™s blessing on our daily work, which is better. Their guidance came by this supernatural pillar; ours comes by the reality of which that pillar was nothing but a picture. And so, instead of fancying that men thus led were in advance of us, we should learn that these, the supernatural manifestations, visible and palpable, of Godâ€™s presence and guidance were the beggarly elements: â€˜God having provided some better thing for us that they without us should not be made perfect.â€™

With this explanation of the relation between the miracle and symbol of the Old, and the reality and standing miracle of the New, Covenants, let us look at the eternal truths, which are set before us in a transitory form, in this cloud by day and fiery pillar by night.

### **I. Note, first, the double form of the guiding pillar.**

The fire was the centre, the cloud was wrapped around it. The former was the symbol, making visible to a generation who had to be taught through their senses, the inaccessible holiness and flashing brightness and purity of the divine nature; the latter tempered and veiled the too great brightness for feeble eyes.

The same double element is found in all Godâ€™s manifestations of Himself to men. In every form of revelation are present both the heart and core of light, which no eye can look upon, and the merciful veil which, because it veils, unveils; because it hides, reveals; makes visible because it conceals; and shows God because it is â€˜the hiding of His power.â€™ So, through all the history of His dealings with men, there has ever been what is called in Scripture language the â€˜face,â€™ or the â€˜name of Godâ€™; the aspect of the divine nature on which the eye can look; and manifested through it, there has always been the depth and inaccessible abyss of that Infinite Being. We have to be thankful that in the cloud is the fire, and that round the fire is the cloud. For only so can our eyes behold and our hands grasp the else invisible and remote central Sun of the universe. God hides to make better known the glories of His character. His revelation is the flashing of the uncreated and intolerable light of His infinite Being through the encircling clouds of human conceptions and words, or of deeds which each show forth, in forms fitted to our apprehension, some fragment of His lustre. After all revelation, He remains unrevealed. After ages of showing forth His glory, He is still â€˜the King invisible, whom no man hath seen at any time nor can see.â€™ The revelation which He makes of Himself is â€˜truth and is no lie.â€™ The recognition of the presence in it of both the fire and the cloud does not cast any doubt on the reality of our imperfect knowledge, or of the authentic participation in the nature of the central light, of the sparkles of it which reach us. We know with a real knowledge what we know of Him. What He shows us is Himself, though not His whole self.

This double aspect of all possible revelation of God, which was symbolised in comparatively gross external form in the pillar that led Israel on its march, and lay stretched out and quiescent, a guarding covering above the Tabernacle when the weary march was still, recurs all through the history of Old Testament revelation by type and prophecy and ceremony, in which the encompassing cloud was comparatively dense, and the light which pierced it relatively faint. It reappears in both elements in Christ, but combined in new proportions, so as that â€˜the veil, that is to say, His flesh,â€™ is thinned to transparency and all aglow with the indwelling lustre of manifest Deity. So a light, set in some fair alabaster vase, shines through its translucent walls, bringing out every delicate tint and meandering vein of colour, while itself diffused and softened by the enwrapping medium which it beautifies by passing through its purity. Both are made visible and attractive to dull eyes by the conjunction. â€˜He that hath seen Christ hath seen the Father,â€™ and he that hath seen the Father in Christ hath seen the man Christ, as none see Him who are blind to the incarnate deity which illuminates the manhood in which it dwells.

But we have to note also the varying appearance of the pillar according to need. There was a double change in the pillar according to the hour, and according as the congregation was on the march or encamped. By day it was a cloud, by night it glowed in the darkness. On the march it moved before them, an upright pillar, as gathered together for energetic movement; when the camp rested it â€˜returned to the many thousands of Israelâ€™ and lay quietly stretched above the Tabernacle like one of the long-drawn, motionless clouds above the setting summer sun, glowing through all its substance with unflashing radiance reflected from unseen light, and â€˜on all the gloryâ€™ (shrined in the Holy Place beneath) was â€˜a defence.â€™

Both these changes of aspect symbolise for us the reality of the Protean capacity of change according to our ever-varying needs, which for our blessing we may find in that ever-changing, unchanging, divine Presence which will be our companion, if we will.

It was not only by a natural process that, as daylight declined, what had seemed but a column of smoke in the fervid desert sunlight, brightened into a column of fire, blazing amid the clear stars. But we may well believe in an actual admeasurement of the degree of light, correspondent to the darkness and to the need for certitude and cheering sense of Godâ€™s protection, which the defenceless camp would feel as they lay down to rest.

When the deceitful brightness of earth glistens and dazzles around us, our vision of Him may be "a cloudy screen to temper the deceitful ray"; and when "there stoops on our path, in storm and shade, the frequent night," as earth grows darker, and life becomes greyer and more sombre, and verges to its eventide, the pillar blazes brighter before the weeping eye, and draws nearer to the lonely heart. We have a God who manifests Himself in the pillar of cloud by day, and in flaming fire by night.

## II. Note the guidance of the pillar.

When it lifts the camp marches; when it glides down and lies motionless the march is stopped, and the tents are pitched. The main point which is dwelt upon in this description of the God-guided pilgrimage of the wandering people is the absolute uncertainty in which they were kept as to the duration of their encampment, and as to the time and circumstances of their march. Sometimes the cloud tarried upon the Tabernacle many days; sometimes for a night only; sometimes it lifted in the night. "Whether it was by day or by night that the cloud was taken up, they journeyed. Or whether it were two days, or a month, or a year that the cloud tarried upon the Tabernacle, remaining thereon, the children of Israel abode in their tents, and journeyed not: but when it was taken up they journeyed." So never, from moment to moment, did they know when the moving cloud might settle, or the resting cloud might soar. Therefore, absolute uncertainty as to the next stage was visibly represented before them by that hovering guide which determined everything, and concerning whose next movement they knew absolutely nothing.

Is not that all true about us? We have no guiding cloud like this. So much the better. Have we not a more real guide? God guides us by circumstances, God guides us by His word, God guides us by His Spirit, speaking through our common-sense and in our understandings, and, most of all, God guides us by that dear Son of His, in whom is the fire and round whom is the cloud. And perhaps we may even suppose that our Lord implies some allusion to this very symbol in His own great words, "I am the Light of the world. He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." For the conception of "following" the light seems to make it plain that our Lord's image is not that of the sun in the heavens, or any such supernal light, but that of some light which comes near enough to a man to move before him, and behind which he can march. So, I think, that Christ Himself laid His hand upon this ancient symbol, and in these great words said in effect, "I am that which it only shadowed and foretold." At all events, whether in them He was pointing to our text or no, we must feel that He is the reality which was expressed by this outward symbol. And no man who can say, "Jesus Christ is the Captain of my salvation, and after His pattern I march; at the pointing of His guiding finger I move; and in His footsteps, He being my helper, I try to tread," need feel or fancy that any possible pillar, floating before the dullest eye, was a better, surer, or diviner guide than he possesses. They whom Christ guides want none other for leader, pattern, counsellor, companion, reward. This Christ is our Christ "for ever and ever, He will be our guide even unto death" and beyond it. The pillar that we follow, which will glow with the ruddy flame of love in the darkest hours of life "blessed be His name!" will glide in front of us through the "valley of the shadow of death," brightest then when the murky midnight is blackest. Nor will the pillar which guides us cease to blaze, as did the guide of the desert march, when Jordan has been crossed. It will still move before us on paths of continuous and ever-increasing approach to infinite perfection. They who here follow Christ afar off and with faltering steps shall there "follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth."

In like manner, the same absolute uncertainty which was intended to keep the Israelites (though it failed often to do so) in the attitude of constant dependence, is the condition in which we all have to live, though we mask it from ourselves. That we do not know what lies before us is a commonplace. The same long tracts of monotonous continuance in the same place and doing the same duties befall us that befell these men. Years pass, and the pillar spreads itself out, a defence above the unmoving sanctuary. And then, all in a flash, when we are least thinking of change, it gathers itself together, is a pillar again, shoots upwards, and moves forwards; and it is for us to go after it. And so our lives are shuttlecocked between uniform sameness which may become mechanical monotony, and agitation by change which may make us lose our hold of fixed principles and calm faith, unless we recognise that the continuance and the change are alike the will of the guiding God, whose will is signified by the stationary or moving pillar.

## III. That leads me to the last thing that I would note—viz. the docile following of the Guide.

In the context, the writer does not seem to be able to get away from the thought that whatever the pillar indicated, immediate prompt obedience followed. He says so over and over and over again. "As long as the cloud abode they rested, and when the cloud tarried long they journeyed not"; and "when the cloud was a few days on the Tabernacle they abode"; and "according to the commandment they journeyed"; and "when the cloud abode until the morning they journeyed"; and "whether it were two days, or a month, or a year that the cloud tarried they journeyed not, but abode in their tents." So, after he has reiterated the thing half a dozen times or more, he finishes by putting it all again in one verse, as the last impression which he would leave from the whole narrative—"at the commandment of the Lord they rested in their tents, and at the commandment of the Lord they journeyed." Obedience was prompt; whensoever and for whatsoever the signal was given, the men were ready. In the night, after they had had their tents pitched for a long period, when only the watchers' eyes were open, the pillar lifts, and in an instant the alarm is given, and all the camp is in a bustle. That is what we have to set before us as the type of our lives. We are to be as ready for every indication of God's will as they were. The peace and blessedness of our lives largely depend on

our being eager to obey, and therefore quick to perceive, the slightest sign of motion in the resting, or of rest in the moving, pillar which regulates our march and our encamping.

What do we need in order to cultivate and keep such a disposition? We need perpetual watchfulness lest the pillar should lift unnoticed. When Nelson was second in command at Copenhagen, the admiral in command of the fleet hoisted the signal for recall, and Nelson put his telescope to his blind eye and said, "I do not see it." That is very like what we are tempted to do. When the signal for unpleasant duties that we would gladly get out of is hoisted, we are very apt to put the telescope to the blind eye, and pretend to ourselves that we do not see the fluttering flags. We need still more to keep our wills in absolute suspense, if His will has not declared itself. Do not let us be in a hurry to run before God. When the Israelites were crossing the Jordan, they were told to leave a great space between themselves and the guiding ark, that they might know how to go, because they had not passed that way heretofore. Impatient hurrying at God's heels is apt to lead us astray. Let Him get well in front, that you may be quite sure which way He desires you to go, before you go. And if you are not sure which way He desires you to go, be sure that He does not at that moment desire you to go anywhere.

We need to hold the present with a slack hand, so as to be ready to fold our tents and take to the road, if God will. We must not reckon on continuance, nor strike our roots so deep that it needs a hurricane to remove us. To those who set their gaze on Christ, no present, from which He wishes them to remove, can be so good for them as the new conditions into which He would have them pass. It is hard to leave the spot, though it be in the desert, where we have so long encamped that it has come to feel like home. We may look with regret on the circle of black ashes on the sand where our little fire glinted cheerily, and our feet may ache, and our hearts ache more, as we begin our tramp once again, but we must set ourselves to meet the God-appointed change cheerfully, in the confidence that nothing will be left behind which it is not good to lose, nor anything met which does not bring a blessing, however its first aspect may be harsh or sad.

We need, too, to cultivate the habit of prompt obedience. It is usually reluctance which puts the drag on. Slow obedience is often the germ of incipient disobedience. In matters of prudence and of intellect, second thoughts are better than first, and third thoughts, which often come back to first ones, better than second; but in matters of duty, first thoughts are generally best. They are the instinctive response of conscience to the voice of God, while second thoughts are too often the objections of disinclination, or sloth, or cowardice. It is easiest to do our duty when we are at first sure of it. It then comes with an impelling power which carries us over obstacles as on the crest of a wave, while hesitation and delay leave us stranded in shoal water. If we would follow the pillar, we must follow it at once.

A heart that waits and watches for God's direction, that uses common-sense as well as faith to unravel small and great perplexities, and is willing to sit loose to the present, however pleasant, in order that it may not miss the indications which say, "Arise, this is not your rest," fulfils the conditions on which, if we keep them, we may be sure that He will guide us by the right way, and bring us at last to "the city of habitation."

## Numbers 10:29: Hobab

**"And Moses said unto Hobab ... Come thou with us, and we will do thee good: for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel." NUM. x. 29 .**

There is some doubt with regard to the identity of this Hobab. Probably he was a man of about the same age as Moses, his brother-in-law, and a son of Jethro, a wily Kenite, a Bedouin Arab. Moses begs him to join himself to his motley company, and to be to him in the wilderness "instead of eyes." What did Moses want a man for, when he had the cloud? What do we want common-sense for, when we have God's Spirit? What do we want experience and counsel for, when we have divine guidance promised to us? The two things work in together. The cloud led the march, but it was very well to have a man that knew all about the oases and the wells, the situation of which was known only to the desert-born tribes, and who could teach the helpless slaves from Goshen the secrets of camp life. So Moses pressed Hobab to change his position, to break with his past, and to launch himself into an altogether new and untried sort of life.

And what does he plead with him as the reason? "We will do thee good, for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel." Probably Hobab looked rather shy at the security, for I suppose he was no worshipper of Jehovah, and he said, "No; I had rather go home to my own people and my own kindred and my father's house where I fit in, and keep to my own ways, and have something a little more definite to lay hold of than your promise, or the promise of your Jehovah that lies behind it. These are not solid, and I am going back to my tribe." But Moses pressed and he at last consented, and the following verses suggest that the arrangement was made satisfactorily, and that the journeyings began prosperously. In the Book of Judges we find traces of the presence of Hobab's descendants as incorporated among the people of Israel. One of them came to be somebody, the Jael who struck the tent-peg through the temples of the sleeping Sisera, for she is called "the wife of Heber the Kenite." Probably, then, in some sense Hobab must have become a worshipper of Jehovah, and have cast in his lot with his brother-in-law and his

people. I do not set Hobab up as a shining example. We do not know much about his religion. But it seems to me that this little glimpse into a long-forgotten and unimportant life may teach us two or three things about the venture of faith, the life of faith, and the reward of faith.

## **I. The venture of faith.**

I have already said that Hobab had nothing in the world to trust to except Moses's word, and Moses's report of God's Word. "We will do you good; God has said that He will do good to us, and you shall have your share in it." It was a grave thing, and, in many circumstances, would have been a supremely foolish thing, credulous to the verge of insanity, to risk all upon the mere promise of one in Moses's position, who had so little in his own power with which to fulfil the promise; and who referred him to an unseen divinity, somewhere or other; and so drew bills upon heaven and futurity, and did not feel himself at all bound to pay them when they fell due, unless God should give him the cash to do it with. But Hobab took the plunge, he ventured all upon these two promises—Moses's word, and God's word that underlay it.

Now that is just what we have to do. For, after all talking about reasons for belief, and evidences of religion, and all the rest of it, it all comes to this at last—will you risk everything on Jesus Christ's bare word? There are plenty of reasons for doing so, but what I wish to bring out is this, that the living heart and root of true Christianity is neither more nor less than the absolute and utter reliance upon nothing else but Christ, and therefore on His word. He did not even condescend to give reasons for that reliance, for His most solemn assurance was just this, "Verily, verily, I say unto you." That is as much as to say, "If you do not see in Me, without any more argument, reason enough for believing Me, you do not see Me at all."

Christ did not argue—He asserted, and in default of all other proof, if I might venture to say so, He put His own personality into the scales and said, "There, that will outweigh everything." So no wonder that they were astonished at His doctrine, "not so much at the substance of it as at the tone of it, for He taught them with authority."

But what right had He to teach them with authority? What right has He to present Himself there in front of us and proclaim, "I say unto you, and there is an end of it"? The heart and essence of Christian faith is doing, in a far sublimer fashion, precisely what this wild Arab did, when he uprooted himself from the conditions in which his life had grown up, and flung himself into an unknown future, on bare trust in a bare word. Jesus Christ asks us to do the same by Him. Whether His word comes to us revealing, or commanding, or promising, it is absolute, and, for His true followers, ends all controversy, all hesitation, all reluctance. When He commands it is ours to obey and live. And when He promises it is for us to twine all the tendrils of our expectations round that faithful word, and by faith to make "the anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast." The venture of faith takes a word for the most solid thing in the universe, and the Incarnate Word of God for the basis of all our hope, the authority for all our conduct, "the Master-light of all our seeing."

## **II. Hobab suggests to us, secondly—**

The sort of life that follows the venture of faith. The hindrances to his joining Moses were plainly put by himself. He said in effect, "I will not come; I will depart to mine own land and to my kindred. Why should I attach myself to a horde of strangers, and go wandering about the desert for the rest of my life, looking out for encampments for them, when I can return to where I have been all my days; and be surrounded by the familiar atmosphere of friends and relatives?" But he bethought himself that there was a nobler life to live than that, and because he was stirred by the impulse of reliance on Moses and his promise, and perhaps by some germ of reliance on Moses's God, he finally said, "The die is cast. I choose my side. I will break with the past. I turn my back on kindred and home. Here I draw a broad line across the page, and begin over again in an altogether new kind of life. I identify myself with these wanderers; sharing their fortunes, hoping to share their prosperity, and taking their God for my God." He had perhaps not been a nomad before, for there still are permanent settlements as well as nomad encampments in Arabia, as there were in those days, and he and his relatives, from the few facts that we know of them, seem to have had a fixed home, with a very narrow zone of wandering round it. So Hobab, an old man probably, if he was anything like the age of his connection by marriage, Moses, who was eighty at this time, makes up his mind to begin a new career.

Now that is what we have to do. If we have faith in Christ and His promise, we shall not say, "I am going back to my kindred and to my home." We shall be prepared to accept the conditions of a wanderer's life. We shall recognise and feel, far more than we ever have done, that we are indeed "pilgrims and sojourners" here. Dear Christian friends, we have no business to call ourselves Christ's men, unless the very characteristic of our lives is that we are drawn ever forward by the prospect of future good, and unless that future is a great deal more solid and more operative upon us, and tells more on our lives, than this intrusive, solid-seeming present that thrusts itself between us and our true home. That is a sure saying. The Christian obligation to live a life of detachment, even while diligent in duty, is not to be brushed aside as pulpit rhetoric and exaggeration, but it is the plainest teaching of the New Testament. I wish it was a little more exemplified in the daily life of the people who call themselves Christians.

If I am not living for the unseen and the future, what right have I to say that I am Christ's at all? If the shadows are more than

the substance to me; if this condensed vapour and fog that we call reality has not been to our apprehension thinned away into the unsubstantial mist that it is, what have the principles of Christianity done for us, and what worth is Christ's word to us? If I believe Him, the world is "I do not say, as the sentimental poet put it, "but a fleeting show, for man's illusion given;" but as Paul puts it, a glass which may either reveal or obscure the realities beyond; and according as we look at, or look through, "the things seen and temporal," do we see, or miss, "the things unseen and eternal." So, then, the life of faith has for its essential characteristic "because it is a life of reliance on Christ's bare word" that future good is consciously its supreme aim. That will detach us, as it did Hobab, from home and kindred, and make us feel that we are "pilgrims and sojourners."

### III. Lastly, our story suggests to us "The rewards of faith.

"Come with us," says Moses; "we are journeying unto the place of which the Lord said, I will give it you. Come thou with us, and we will do thee what goodness the Lord shall do unto us." He went, and neither he nor Moses ever saw the land, or at least never set their feet on it. Moses saw it from Pisgah, but probably Hobab did not even get so much as that.

So he had all his tramping through the wilderness, and all his work, for nothing, had he? Had he not better have gone back to Midian, and made use of the present reality, than followed a will-of-the-wisp that led him into a bog, if he got none of the good that he set out expecting to get? Then, did he make a mistake? Would he have been a wiser man if he had stuck to his first refusal? Surely not. It seems to me that the very fact of this great promise being given to this old "dare I call Hobab a "saint"? "to this old saint, and never being fulfilled at all in this world, compels us to believe that there was some gleam of hope, and of certainty, of a future life, even in these earliest days of dim and partial revelation.

To me it is very illuminative, and very beautiful, that the dying Jacob bursts in his song into a sudden exclamation, "I have waited for Thy salvation, O Lord!" It is as if he had felt that all his life long he had been looking for what had never come, and that it could not be that God was going to let him go down to the grave and never grasp the good that he had been waiting for all his days. We may apply substantially the same thoughts to Hobab, and to all his like, and may turn them to our own use, and argue that the imperfections of the consequences of our faith here on earth are themselves evidences of a future, where all that Christ has said shall be more than fulfilled, and no man will be able to say, "Thou didst send me out, deluding me with promises which have all gone to water and have failed."

Hobab dying there in the desert had made the right choice, and if we will trust ourselves to Christ and His faithful word, and, trusting to Him, will feel that we are detached from the present and that it is but as the shadow of a cloud, whatever there may be wanting in the results of our faith here on earth, there will be nothing wanting in its results at the last. Hobab did not regret his venture, and no man ever ventures his faith on Christ and is disappointed. "He that believeth shall not be confounded."

## Numbers 10:35-36

### The Hallowing of Work and of Rest

**"And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee. 36. And when it rested, he said, Return, O Lord, unto the many thousands of Israel." NUM. x. 35, 36 .**

The picture suggested by this text is a very striking and vivid one. We see the bustle of the morning's breaking up of the encampment of Israel. The pillar of cloud, which had lain diffused and motionless over the Tabernacle, gathers itself together into an upright shaft, and moves, a dark blot against the glittering blue sky, the sunshine masking its central fire, to the front of the encampment. Then the priests take up the ark, the symbol of the divine Presence, and fall into place behind the guiding pillar. Then come the stir of the ordering of the ranks, and a moment's pause, during which the leader lifts his voice "Rise, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered, and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee." Then, with braced resolve and confident hearts, the tribes set forward on the day's march.

Long after those desert days a psalmist laid hold of the old prayer and offered it, as not antiquated yet by the thousand years that had intervened. "Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered," prayed one of the later psalmists; "let them that hate Him flee before Him." We, too, in circumstances so different, may take up the immortal though ancient words, on which no dimming rust of antiquity has encrusted itself, and may, at the beginnings and the endings of all our efforts and of each of our days, and at the beginning and ending of life itself, offer this old prayer "the prayer which asked for a divine presence in the incipiency of our efforts, and the prayer which asked for a divine presence in the completion of our work and in the rest that remaineth.

**I. So, then, if we put these two petitions together, I think we shall see in them first, a pattern of that realisation of, and aspiration after, the divine Presence, which ought to fill all our lives.**



“Rise, Lord, let Thine enemies be scattered.”

But was not that moving pillar the token that God had risen? And was not the psalmist who reiterated Moses’ prayer asking for what had been done before he asked it? Was not the ark the symbol of the divine Presence, and was not its movement after the pillar a pledge to the whole host of Israel that the petition which they were offering, through their leader’s lips, was granted ere it was offered? Yes. And yet the present God would not manifest His Presence except in response to the desire of His servants; and just because the ark was the symbol, and that moving column was the guarantee of God’s being with the host as their defence, therefore there rose up with confidence this prayer, “Rise, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered.”

That twofold attitude, the realisation of, and therefore the aspiration after, the divine gifts, which are given before they are desired, but are not appropriated and brought into operation in our lives unless they are desired, is precisely the paradox of the Christian life. Having, we long for, and longing, we have, and because we possess God we pray, “Oh! that we might possess Thee.” The more we long, the more we receive. But unless He gave Himself in anticipation of our longing, there would be neither longing nor reception. Only on condition of our desiring to have Him does He flow into our lives, victorious and strength-giving, and the more we experience that omnipotent might and calming, guiding nearness, the more assuredly we shall long for it.

Let us then, dear brethren, blend these two things together, for indeed they are inseparable one from the other, and there can be no real experience in any depth of the one of them without the other. Blessed be God! there need be no long interval of waiting between sowing the seed of supplication and reaping the harvest of fruition. That process of growth and reaping goes on with instantaneous rapidity. “Before they call I will answer,” for pillar and ark were there ere Moses opened his lips; and “while they are yet speaking I will hear,” for, in response to the cry, the host moved triumphantly, guarded through the wilderness. So it may be, and ought to be, with each of us.

In like manner, coupling these two petitions together, and taking them as unitedly covering the whole field of life in their great antitheses of work and rest, effort and accomplishment, beginning and ending, morning and evening, we may say that here is an example, to be appropriated in our own lives, of that continuous longing and realisation which will encircle all life as with a golden ring, and make every part of it uniform and blessed. To begin, continue, and end with God is the secret of joyful beginning, of patient continuance, and of triumphant ending. There is no reason in heaven, though there are hosts of excuses on earth, why there should not be, in the case of each of us, an absolutely continuous and uninterrupted sense of being with God. O brethren! that is a stage of Christian experience high above the one on which most of us stand. But that is our fault, and not the necessity of our condition. Let us lay this to heart, that it is possible to have the pillar always guiding our march, and possible to have it stretching, calm and motionless, over all our hours of rest.

**II. Now, if, turning from the lessons to be drawn from these two petitions, taken in conjunction, we look at them separately, we may say that we have here an example of the spirit in which we should set ourselves, day by day, and at each new epoch and beginning, be it greater or smaller, to every task.**

There are truths that underlie that first prayer, “Rise up, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered,” which are of perennial validity, and apply to us as truly as to these warriors of God in the wilderness long centuries ago. The first of them is that the divine Presence is the source of all energy, and of successful endeavour after, and accomplishment of, any duty. The second of them is that that presence is, as I have been saying, granted, in its operative power, only on condition of its being sought. And the third of them is that I have a right to identify my enemies with God’s only on condition that I have made His cause mine. When Moses prayed, “Let Thine enemies be scattered,” he meant by these the hostile nomad tribes that might ring Israel round, and come down like a sandstorm upon them at any moment. What right had he to suppose that the people whose lances and swords threatened the motley host that he was leading through the wilderness were God’s enemies? Only this right, that his host had consented to be God’s soldiers, and that they having thus made His enemies theirs, He, on His part, was sure to make their enemies His. We are often tempted to identify our foes with God’s, without having taken the preliminary step of having so yielded ourselves to be His servants and instruments for carrying forward His will, as that our own wills have become a vanishing quantity, or rather have been ennobled and greatened in proportion as they have been moulded in submission to His. We must take God’s cause for ours, in all the various aspects of that phrase. And that means, first of all, that we make our own perfecting into the likeness of Jesus Christ the main aim of our own lives and efforts. It means, further, the putting ourselves bravely and manfully on the side of right and truth and justice, in all their forms. Above all, it means that we give ourselves to be God’s instruments in carrying on His great purposes for the salvation of the world through Jesus Christ. If we do these things, whatever obstacles may arise in our paths, we may be sure that these are God’s antagonists, because they are antagonists to God’s work in and by us.

Only in so far as they are such, can you pray, “Let them flee before Thee!” Many of the things that we call our enemies come to us disguised, and are mistaken by our superficial sight, and we do not know that they are friends. “All things work together for good to them that love God.” And, when we desire His Presence, the hindrances to doing His will—which are the only real

enemies that we have to fight will melt away before His power, as wax melteth before the ardours of the fire; and, for the rest, the distresses, the difficulties, the sorrows, and all the other things that we so often think are our foes, we shall find out to have been our friends. Make God's cause yours, and He will make your cause His.

That applies to the great things of life, and to the little things. I begin my day's work some morning, perhaps wearied, perhaps annoyed with a multiplicity of trifles which seem too small to bring great principles to bear upon them. But do you not think there would be a strange change wrought in the petty annoyances of every day, and in the small trifles of which all our lives, of whatever texture they are, must largely be composed, if we began each day and each task with that old prayer, "Rise, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered"? Do you not think there would come a quiet into our hearts, and a victorious peace to which we are too much strangers? If we carried the assurance that there is One that fights for us, into the trifles as well as into the sore struggles of our lives, we should have peace and victory. Most of us will not have many large occasions of trial and conflict in our career; and, if God's fighting for us is not available in regard to the small annoyances of home and daily life, I know not for what it is available. "Many littles make a mickle" and there are more deaths in skirmishes than in the field of a pitched battle. More Christian people lose their hold of God, their sense of His presence, and are beaten accordingly, by reason of the little enemies that come down on them, like a cloud of gnats in a summer evening, than are defeated by the shock of a great assault or a great temptation, which calls out their strength, and sends them to their knees to ask for help from God.

So we may learn from this prayer the spirit of expectance of victory which is not presumption, and of consecration, which alone will enable us to pass through life victorious. "Be of good cheer," said the Master, as if in answer to this prayer in its Christian form "I have overcome the world." We turn to the helmed and sworded Figure that stands mysteriously beside us whilst we are all unaware of His coming, and the swift question that Joshua put rises to our lips, "Art Thou for us or for our adversaries?" The reply comes, "Nay! but as Captain of the Lord's host am I come up." That is Christ's answer to the prayer, "Rise, Lord, let Thine enemies be scattered."

### III. Lastly, we have here a pattern of the temper for hours of repose.

"When the ark rested, he said, "Return, O Lord, unto the many thousands of Israel." As I said at the beginning of these remarks, the pillar of cloud seems to have taken two forms, braced together upright when it moved, diffused and stretched as a shelter and a covering over the host of Israel when it and they were at rest. In like manner, that divine Presence is Protean in its forms, and takes all shapes, according to the moment's necessities of the Christian trusting heart. When we are to brace ourselves for the march it condenses itself into an upright and moving guide. When we lay ourselves down with relaxed muscles for repose, it softly expands itself and "covers our head" in the hours of rest, "as in the day of battle."

Ah! brother, we have more need of God in times of repose than in times of effort. It is harder to realise His Presence in the brief hours of relaxation than even in the many hours of strenuous toil. Every one who goes for a holiday knows that. You have only to look at the sort of amusements that most people fly to when they have not anything to do, to see that there is quite as much, if not more, peril to communion of soul with God in times when the whole nature is somewhat relaxed, and the strings are loosened, like those of a violin screwed down a turn or two of the peg, than there is in times of work.

So let us take special care of our hours of repose, and be quite sure that they are so spent as that we can ask when the day's work is done, and we have come to slippared ease, in preparation for nightly rest, "Return, O Lord, unto Thy waiting servant." Work without God unfits for rest with Him. Rest without God unfits for work for Him.

We may take these two petitions as tests of the allowableness of any occupation, or of any relaxation. Dare I ask Him to come with me into that field of work? If I dare not, it is no place for me. Dare I ask Him to come with me into this other chamber of rest? If I dare not, I had better never cross its threshold. Take these two prayers, and where you cannot pray them, do not risk yourself.

But the highest form of the contrast between the two waits still to be realised. For life as a whole is a fight, and beyond it there is the "rest that remaineth" where there will be not merely God's "return unto the thousands of Israel," but the realisation of His fuller presence, and of deeper rest, which shall be wondrously associated with more intense work, though in that work there will be no conflict. The two petitions will flow together then, for whilst we labour we shall rest; and whilst we rest we shall labour, according to the great sayings, "they rest from their labours," and yet "they rest not day nor night."

## Numbers 11:14

### Moses Despondent

"I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me." NUM. xi. 14 .

Detail the circumstances.

The leader speaks the truth in his despondency. He is pressed with the feeling of his incapacity for his work. We may take his words here as teaching us what men need in him who is to be their guide, and how impossible it is to find what they need in mere men.

### **I. What men need in their guide.**

These Israelites were wandering in the wilderness; they were without natural supplies for their daily necessities; they had a long hard journey before them, an unknown road, at the terminus of which was a land where they should rest. We have precisely the same necessities as those which Moses despairingly said that they had.

Like them, we wander hungry, and need a Leader who can satisfy our desires and evermore give us bread for our souls even more than for our bodies. We need One to whom we can "weep," as the Israelites did to Moses, and not weep in vain. We need One who can do for us what Moses felt that the Israelites needed, and that he could not give them, when he almost indignantly put to God the despairing question, "Can I carry them in my bosom as a nursing father beareth the sucking child?" Our weakness, our ignorance, our heart-hunger, cry out for One who can "bear all this people alone," who in his single Self has resources of strength, wisdom, and sufficiency to meet not only the wants of one soul but those of the world. For He who can satisfy the poorest single soul must be able to satisfy all men.

### **II. The impossibility of finding this in men.**

Moses' experience here is that of all leaders and great men. He is overwhelmed with the work; feels his own utter impotence; has himself to be strengthened; loathes his work; longs for release from it. See how he confesses

His human dependence.

His incapacity to do and be what is needed.

His impatience with the people

His longing to be rid of it all.

That is a true picture of the experience of the best of men—a true picture of the limitations of the noblest leaders.

But it is not only the leaders who confess their inadequacy, but the followers feel it, for even the most enthusiastic of them come sooner or later to find that their Oracle had not learned all wisdom, nor was fit to be taken as sole guide, much less as sole defence or satisfaction. He who looks to find all that he needs in men must take many men to find it, and no multiplicity of men will bring him what he seeks. The Milky Way is no substitute for the sun. Our hearts cry out for One great light, for One spacious home. Endless strings of pearls do not reach the preciousness of One pearl of price.

### **III. The failures of human leaders prophesy the true Leader.**

Moses was prophetic of Christ by his failures as by his successes. He could not do what the people clamoured to have done, and what he in the mood of despair in which the text shows him, sadly owned that he could not. In that very confession he becomes an unconscious prophet. For that he should have so vividly set forth the qualifications of a leader of men, as defined by the people's cries, and should have so bitterly felt his incapacity to supply them, is a witness, if there is a God at all, that somewhere the needed Ideal will be realised in a Leader and Commander of the people, God-sent and "worthy of more glory than Moses."

The best service that all human leaders, helpers or lovers, can do us, is to confess their own insufficiency, and to point us to Jesus.

All that men need is found in Him and in Him alone. All that men have failed, and must always fail, to be, He is. Those eyes are blessed that "see no man any more save Jesus only." We need One who can satisfy our desires and fill our hungry souls, and Jesus speaks a promise, confirmed by the experience of all who have tested it when He declares: "He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger." We need One who will dry our tears, and Jesus, when He says "Weep not," wipes them away and stanches their sources, giving "the oil of joy for mourning." We need One who can hold us up in our journey, and minister strength to fainting hearts and vigour to weary feet, and Jesus "strengthens us with might in the inner man." We need One who will bring us to the promised land of rest, and Jesus brings many sons to glory, and wills that they be "with Him where He is." So let us turn away from the multiplicity of human insufficiencies to Him who is our one only help and hope, because He is all-sufficient and eternal.

## **Numbers 13:17-33**

# Afraid of Giants

We stand here on the edge of the Promised Land. The discussion of the true site of Kadesh need not concern us now. Wherever it was, the wanderers had the end of their desert journey within sight; one bold push forward, and their feet would tread on their inheritance. But, as is so often the case, courage oozed out at the decisive moment, and cowardice, disguised as prudence, called for "further information," that cuckoo-cry of the faint-hearted. There are three steps in this narrative: the despatch of the explorers, their expedition, and the two reports brought back.

## I. We have the despatch and instructions of the explorers.

A comparison with Deuteronomy i. shows that the project of sending the spies originated in the people's terror at the near prospect of the fighting which they had known to be impending ever since they left Egypt. Faith finds that nearness diminishes dangers, but sense sees them grow as they approach. The people answered Moses' brave words summoning them to the struggle with this feeble petition for an investigation. They did not honestly say that they were alarmed, but defined the scope of the exploring party's mission as simply to "bring us word again of the way by which we must go up, and the cities into which we shall come." Had they not the pillar blazing there above them to tell them that? The request was not fathomed in its true faithlessness by Moses, who thought it reasonable and yielded. So far Deuteronomy goes; but this narrative puts another colour on the mission, representing it as the consequence of God's command. The most eager discoverer of discrepancies in the component parts of the Pentateuch need not press this one into his service, for both sides may be true: the one representing the human feebleness which originated the wish; the other, the divine compliance with the desire, in order to disclose the unbelief which unfitted the people for the impending struggle, and to educate them by letting them have their foolish way, and taste its bitter results. Putting the two accounts together, we get, not a contradiction, but a complete view, which teaches a large truth as to God's dealings; namely, that He often lovingly lets us have our own way to show us by the issues that His is better, and that daring, which is obedience, is the true prudence.

The instructions given to the explorers turn on two points: the eligibility of the country for settlement, and the military strength of its inhabitants. They alternate in a very graphic way from the one of these to the other, beginning, in verse 18, with the land, and immediately going on to the numbers and power of the inhabitants; then harking back again, in verse 19, to the fertility of the land, and passing again to the capacity of the cities to resist attack; and finishing up, in verse 20, with the land once more, both arable and forest. The same double thought colours the parting exhortation to "be bold," and to "bring of the produce of the land." Now the people knew already both points which the spies were despatched to find out. Over and over again, in Egypt, in the march, and at Sinai, they had been told that the land was "flowing with milk and honey," and had been assured of its conquest. What more did they want? Nothing, if they had believed God. Nothing, if they had been all saints, which they were not. Their fears were very natural. A great deal might be said in favour of their wish to have accurate information. But it is a bad sign when faith, or rather unbelief, sends out sense to be its scout, and when we think to verify God's words by men's confirmation. Not to believe Him unless a jury of twelve of ourselves says the same thing, is surely much the same as not believing Him at all; for it is not He, but they, whom we believe after all.

There is no need to be too hard on the people. They were a mob of slaves, whose manhood had been eaten out by four centuries of sluggish comfort, and latterly crushed by oppression. So far as we know, Abraham's midnight surprise of the Eastern kings was the solitary bit of fighting in the national history thus far; and it is not wonderful that, with such a past, they should have shrunk from the prospect of bloodshed, and caught at any excuse for delay at least, even if not for escape. "We have all of us one human heart," and these cowards were no monsters, but average men, who did very much what average men, professing to be Christians, do every day, and for doing get praised for prudence by other average professing Christians. How many of us, when brought right up to some task involving difficulty or danger, but unmistakably laid on us by God, shelter our distrustful fears under the fair pretext of "knowing a little more about it first," and shake wise heads over rashness which takes God at His word, and thinks that it knows enough when it knows what He wills?

## II. We have the exploration (Nu 13:21-25).

The account of it is arranged on a plan common in the Old Testament narratives, the observation of which would, in many places, remove difficulties which have led to extraordinary hypotheses. Verse 21 gives a general summary of what is then taken up, and told in more detail. It indicates the completeness of the exploration by giving its extreme southern and northern points, the desert of Zin being probably the present depression called the Arabah, and "Rehob as men come to Hamath" being probably near the northern Dan, on the way to Hamath, which lay in the valley between the Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon. The account then begins over again, and tells how the spies went up into "the South." The Revised Version has done wisely in printing this word with a capital, and thereby showing that it is not merely the name of a cardinal point, but of a district. It literally means "the dry," and is applied to the arid stretch of land between the more cultivated southern parts of Canaan and the northern portion of the desert

which runs down to Sinai. It is a great chalky plateau, and might almost be called a steppe or prairie. Passing through this, the explorers next would come to Hebron, the first town of importance, beside which Abraham had lived, and where the graves of their ancestors were. But they were in no mood for remembering such old stories. Living Anaks were much more real to them than dead patriarchs. So the only thing mentioned, besides the antiquity of the city, is the presence in it of these giants. They were probably the relics of the aboriginal inhabitants, and some strain of their blood survived till late days. They seem to have expelled the Hittites, who held Mamre, or Hebron, in Abraham's time. Their name is said to mean "long-necked," and the three names in our lesson are probably tribal, and not personal, names. The whole march northward and back again comes in between verses 22 and 23 ; for Eshcol was close to Hebron, and the spies would not encumber themselves with the bunch of grapes on their northward march. The details of the exploration are given more fully in the spies' report, which shows that they had gone up north from Hebron, through the hills, and possibly came back by the valley of the Jordan. At any rate, they made good speed, and must have done some bold and hard marching, to cover the ground out and back in six weeks. So they returned with their pomegranates and figs, and a great bunch of the grapes for which the valley identified with Eshcol is still famous, swinging on a pole, "the easiest way of carrying it without injury.

III. We have next the two reports. The explorers are received in a full assembly of the people, and begin their story with an object-lesson, producing the great grape cluster and the other spoils. But while honesty compelled the acknowledgment of the fertility of the land, cowardice slurred that over as lightly as might be, and went on to dilate on the terrors of the giants and the strength of the cities, and the crowded population that held every corner of the country. Truly, the eye sees what it brings with it. They really had gone to look for dangers, and of course they found them. Whatever Moses might lay down in his instructions, they had been sent by the people to bring back reasons for not attempting the conquest, and so they curtly and coldly admit the fertility of the soil, and fling down the fruit for inspection as undeniably grown there, but they tell their real mind with a great "nevertheless." Their report is, no doubt, quite accurate. The cities were, no doubt, some of them walled, and to eyes accustomed to the desert, very great; and there were, no doubt, Anaks at Hebron, at any rate, and the "spies" had got the names of the various races and their territories correctly. As to these, we need only notice that the Hittites were an outlying branch of the great nation, which recent research has discovered, as we might say, the importance and extent of which we scarcely yet know; that the Jebusites held Jerusalem till David's time; that the "Amorites," or "Highlanders," occupied the central block of mountainous country in conjunction with the two preceding tribes; and that the "Canaanites," or "Lowlanders," held the lowlands east and west of that hilly nucleus, namely, the deep gorge of the Jordan, and the strip of maritime plain. A very accurate report may be very one-sided. The spies were not the last people who, being sent out to bring home facts, managed to convey very decided opinions without expressing any. A grudging and short admission to begin with, the force of which is immediately broken by sombre and minute painting of difficulty and danger, is more powerful as a deterrent than any dissuasive. It sounds such an unbiassed appeal to common-sense, as if the reporter said, "There are the facts; we leave you to draw the conclusions." An "unvarnished account of the real state of the case," in which there is not a single misstatement nor exaggeration, may be utterly false by reason of wrong perspective and omission, and, however true, is sure to act as a shower-bath to courage, if it is unaccompanied with a word of cheer. To begin a perilous enterprise without fairly facing its risks and difficulties is folly. To look at them only is no less folly, and is the sure precursor of defeat. But when on the one side is God's command, and on the other such doleful discouragements, they are more than folly, they are sin.

It is bracing to turn from the creeping prudence which leaves God out of the account, to the cheery ring of Caleb's sturdy confidence. His was "a minority report," signed by only two of the "Commission." These two had seen all that the others had, but everything depends on the eyes which look. The others had measured themselves against the trained soldiers and giants, and were in despair. These two measured Amalekites and Anaks against God, and were jubilant. They do not dispute the facts, but they reverse the implied conclusion, because they add the governing fact of God's help. How differently the same facts strike a man who lives by faith, and one who lives by calculation! Israel might be a row of ciphers, but with God at the head they meant something. Caleb's confidence that "we are well able to overcome" was religious trust, as is plain from God's eulogium on him in the next chapter ( Num. xiv. 24 ). The lessons from it are that faith is the parent of wise courage; that where duty, which is God's voice, points, difficulties must not deter; that when we have God's assurance of support, they are nothing. Caleb was wise to counsel going up to the assault "at once," for there is no better cure for fear than action. Old soldiers tell us that the trying time is when waiting to begin the fight. "The native hue of resolution" gets "sicklied o'er" with the paleness that comes from hesitation. Am I sure that anything is God's will? Then the sooner I go to work at doing it, the better for myself and for the vigour of my work.

This headstrong rashness, as they thought it, brings up the other "spies" once more. Notice how the gloomy views are the only ones in their second statement. There is nothing about the fertility of the land, but, instead, we have that enigmatical expression about its "eating up its inhabitants." No very satisfactory explanation of this is forthcoming. It evidently means that in some way the land was destructive of its inhabitants, which seems to contradict their former reluctant admission of its fertility. Perhaps in their eagerness to paint it black enough, they did contradict themselves, and try to make out that it was a barren soil, not worth conquering. Fear is not very careful of consistency. Note, too, the exaggerations of terror. "All the people" are sons of

Anak now. The size as well as the number of the giants has grown; “we were in our own sight as grasshoppers.” No doubt they were gigantic, but fear performed the miracle of adding a cubit to their stature. When the coward hears that “there is a lion without,” that is, in the open country, “he immediately concludes, “I shall be slain in the streets,” where it is not usual for lions to disport themselves.

Thus exaggerated and one-sided is distrust of God’s promises. Such a temper is fatal to all noble life or work, and brings about the disasters which it foresees. If these cravens had gone up to fight with men before whom they felt like grasshoppers, of course they would have been beaten; and it was much better that their fears should come out at Kadesh than when committed to the struggle. Therefore God lovingly permitted the mission of the spies, and so brought lurking unbelief to the surface, where it could be dealt with. Let us beware of the one-eyed “prudence” which sees only the perils in the path of duty and enterprise for God, and is blind to the all-sufficient presence which makes us more than conquerors, when we lean all our weight on it. It is well to see the Anakim in their full formidableness, and to feel that we are “as grasshoppers in our own sight” and in theirs, if the sight drives us to lift our eyes to Him who “sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof,” however huge and strong, “are as grasshoppers.”

## Numbers 14:1-10 Weighed and Found Wanting

**“And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night. 2. And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron; and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness! 3. And wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt? 4. And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt 5. Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel. 6. And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, which were of them that searched the land, rent their clothes. 7. And they spake unto all the company of the children of Israel, saying, The land, which we passed through to search it, is an exceeding good land. 8. If the Lord delight in us, then He will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey. 9. Only rebel not ye against the Lord, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defence is departed from them, and the Lord is with us: fear them not. 10. But all the congregation bade stone them with stones. And the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation before all the children of Israel.” NU xiv. 1-10 .**

Terror is more contagious than courage, for a mob is always more prone to base than to noble instincts. The gloomy report of the spies jumped with the humour of the people, and was at once accepted. Its effect was to throw the whole assembly into a paroxysm of panic, which was expressed in the passionate Eastern manner by wild, ungoverned shrieking and tears. What a picture of a frenzied crowd the first verse of this chapter gives! That is not the stuff of which heroes can be made. Weeping endured for a night, but to such weeping there came no morning of joy. When day dawned, the tempest of emotion settled down into sullen determination to give up the prize which hung within reach of a bold hand, ripe and ready to drop. It was one of the moments which come once at least in the lives of nations as of individuals, when a supreme resolve is called for, and when to fall beneath the stern requirement, and refuse a great attempt because of danger, is to pronounce sentence of unworthiness and exclusion on themselves. Not courage only, but belief in God, was tested in this crucial moment, which made a turning-point in the nation’s history. Our text brings before us with dramatic vividness and sharpness of contrast, three parties in this decisive hour—the faithless cowards, the faithful four, and the All-seeing presence.

### I. Note the faithless cowards.

The gravity of the revolt here is partly in its universality, which is emphasised in the narrative at every turn: “all the congregation” (v. 1), “all the children of Israel,” the whole congregation” (v. 2), “all the assembly of the congregation” (which implies a solemn formal convocation), “all the company” (v. 7), “all the congregation,” “all the children of Israel” (v. 10). It was no sectional discontent, but full-blown and universal rebellion. The narrative draws a distinction between the language addressed to Moses, and the whisperings to one another. Publicly, the unanimous voice suggested the return to Egypt as an alternative for discussion, and put it before Moses; to one another they muttered the proposal, which no man had yet courage to speak out, of choosing a new leader, and going back, whatever became of Moses. That could only mean murder as well as mutiny. The whispers would soon be loud enough.

In the murmurs to Moses, observe the distinct and conscious apostacy from Jehovah. They recognise that God “has brought” them there, and they slander Him by the assertion that His malignant, deliberate purpose was to kill them all, and make slaves of their wives and children. That was how they read the past, and thought of Him! He had enticed them into His trap, as a hunter might

some foolish animal, by dainties strewed along the path, and now they were in the toils, and their only chance of life was to break through. Often, already, had they raised that mad cry "back to Egypt" but there had never been such a ring of resolve in it, nor had it come from so many throats, nor had any serious purpose to depose Moses been entertained. If we add the fact that they were now on the very frontier of Canaan, and that the decision now taken was necessarily final, we get the full significance of the incident from the mere secular historian's point of view. But its bearing on the people's relation to Jehovah gives a darker colouring to it. It is not merely faint-hearted shrinking from a great opportunity, but it is wilful and deliberate rejection of His rule, based upon utter distrust of His word. So Scripture treats this event as the typical example of unbelief ( Psa. xcv. ; Heb. iii. and iv). So regarded, it presents, as in a mirror, some of the salient characteristics of that master sin. Bad as it is, it is not out of the range of possibility that it should be repeated, and we need the warning to "take heed lest any of us should fall after the same example of unbelief."

We may learn from it the essentials of faith and its opposite. The trust which these cowards failed to exercise was reliance on Jehovah, a personal relation to a Person. In externals and contents, their trust was very unlike the New Testament faith, but in object and essence it was identical. They had to trust in Jehovah; we, in "God manifest in the flesh." Their creed was much less clear and blessed than ours, but their faith, if they had had it, would have been the same. Faith is not the belief of a creed, whether man-made or God-revealed, but the cleaving to the Person whom the creed makes known. He may be made known more or less perfectly; but the act of the soul, by which we grasp Him, does not vary with the completeness of the revelation. That act was one for "the world's grey fathers" and for us. In like manner, unbelief is the same black and fatal sin, whatever be the degree of light against which it turns. To depart from the living God is its essence, and that is always rebellion and death.

Note the short memory and churlish unthankfulness of unbelief. It has been often objected to the story of the Exodus, that such extremity of folly as is ascribed to the Israelites is inconceivable in such circumstances. How could men, with all these miracles in mind, and manna falling daily, and the pillar blazing every night, and the roll of Sinai's thunders scarcely out of their ears, behave thus? But any one who has honestly studied his own heart, and known its capacity for neglecting the plainest indications of God's presence, and forgetting the gifts of His love, will believe the story, and see brethren in these Israelites. Miracles were less wonderful to them, because they knew less about nature and its laws. Any miracles constantly renewed become commonplace. Habit takes the wonder out of everything. The heart that does not "like to retain God in its knowledge" will find easy ways of forgetting Him, and revolting from Him, though the path be strewed with blessings, and tokens of His presence flame on every side. True, it is strange that all the wonders and mercies of the past two years had made no deeper impression on these people's hearts; but if they had not done so, it is not unnatural that they had made so slight an impression on their wills. Their ingratitude and forgetfulness are inexplicable, as all sin is, for its very essence is that it has no sufficient reason. But neither is inconceivable, and both are repeated by us every day.

Note the credulity of unbelief. The word of Jehovah had told them that the land "flowed with milk and honey," and that they were sure to conquer it. They would not believe Him unless they had verification of His promises. And when they got their own fears reflected in the multiplying mirror of the spies' report, they took men's words for gospel, and gave to them a credence without examination or qualification, which they had never given to God. I think that I have heard of people who inveigh against Christians for their slavish acceptance of the absolute authority of Jesus Christ, and who pin their faith to some man's teaching with a credulity quite as great as and much less warrantable than ours.

Note the bad bargain which unbelief is ready to make. They contemplated a risky alternative to the brave dash against Canaan. There would be quite as much peril in going back as forward. The march from Egypt had not been so easy; but what would it be when there were no Moses, no Jethro, no manna, no pillar? And what sort of reception would wait them in Egypt, and what fate befall them there? In front, there were perils; but God would be with them. They would have to fight their way, but with the joyous feeling that victory was sure, and that every blow struck, and every step marched, brought them nearer triumphant peace. If they turned, every step would carry them farther from their hopes, and nearer the dreary putting on of the old yoke, which "neither they nor their fathers were able to bear." They would buy slavery at as dear a price as they would have to pay for freedom and wealth. Yet they elected the baser course, and thought themselves prudent and careful of themselves in doing so. Is the breed of such miscalculators extinct? Far greater hardships and pains are met on the road of departure from God, than any which befall His servants. To follow Him involves a conflict, but to shirk the battle does not bring immunity from strife. The alternatives are not warfare or peace, God's service or liberty. The most prudent self-love would coincide with the most self-sacrificing heroic consecration, and no man can worse consult his own well-being than in seeking escape from the dangers and toil of enlisting in God's army, by running back through the desert to put his neck in chains in Egypt. As Moses said: "Because then servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart for the abundance of all things, therefore thou shalt serve thine enemies, in hunger, and in thirst, and in want of all things."

## II. The faithful four.

Moses and Aaron, Caleb and Joshua, are the only Abdiels in that crowd of unbelieving dastards. Their own peril does not move

them; their only thought is to dissuade from the fatal refusal to advance. The leader had no armed force with which to put down revolt, and stood wholly undefended and powerless. It was a cruel position for him to see the work of his life crumbling to pieces, and every hope for his people dashed by their craven fears. Is there anywhere a nobler piece of self-abnegation than his prostrating himself before them in the eagerness of his pleading with them for their own good? If anything could have kindled a spark of generous enthusiasm, that passionate gesture of entreaty would have done it. It is like: "We beseech you, in His stead, be ye reconciled to God." Men need to be importuned not to destroy themselves, and he will have most success in such God-like work who, as Moses, is so sure of the fatal issues, and so oblivious of all but saving men from self-inflicted ruin, that he sues as for a boon with tears in his voice, and dignity thrown to the winds.

Caleb and Joshua had a different task, "to make one more attempt to hearten the people by repeating their testimony and their confidence. Tearing their dresses, in sign of mourning, they bravely ring out once more the cheery note of assured faith. They first emphatically reiterate that the land is fertile, "or, as the words literally run, "good exceedingly, exceedingly." It is right to stimulate for God's warfare by setting forth the blessedness of the inheritance. "The recompense of the reward" is not the motive for doing His will, but it is legitimately used as encouragement, in spite of the overstrained objection that virtue for the sake of heaven is spurious virtue. If "for the sake of heaven," it is spurious; but it is not spurious because it is heartened by the hope of heaven. In Caleb's former report there was no reason given for his confidence that "we are well able to overcome." Thus far all the discussion had been about comparative strength, as any heathen soldier would have reckoned it. But the two heroes speak out the great Name at last, which ought to scatter all fears like morning mist. The rebels had said that Jehovah had "brought us into this land to fall by the sword." The two give them back their words with a new turn: "He will bring us into this land, and give it us." That is the only antidote to fear. Calculations of comparative force are worse than useless, and their results depend on the temper of the calculator; but, if once God is brought into the account, the sum is ended. When His sword is flung into the scale, whatever is in the other goes up. So Caleb and Joshua brush aside the terrors of the Anaks and all the other bugbears. "They are bread for us," we can swallow them at a mouthful; and this was no swaggering boast, but calm, reasonable confidence, because it rested on this, "the Lord is with us." True, there was an "if," but not an "if" of doubt, but a condition which they could comply with, and so make it a certainty, "only rebel not against the Lord, and fear not the people of the land." Loyalty to Him would give courage, and courage with His presence would be sure of victory. Obedience turns God's "ifs" into "verilys." There, then, we have an outline picture of the work of faith pleading with the rebellious, heartening them and itself by thoughts of the fair inheritance, grasping the assurance of God's omnipotent help, and in the strength thereof wisely despising the strongest foes, and settling itself immovable in the posture of obedience.

### III. The sudden appearance of the all-seeing Lord.

The bold remonstrance worked the people into a fury, and fidelity was about to reap the reward which the crowd ever gives to those who try to save it from its own base passions. Nothing is more hateful to resolute sinners than good counsel which is undeniably true. But just as the stones were beginning to fly, the "glory of the Lord," that wondrous light which dwelt above the ark in the inmost shrine, came forth before all the awestruck crowd. The stones would be dropped fast enough, and a hush of dread would follow the howling rage of the angry crowd. Our text does not go on to the awful judgment which was proclaimed; but we may venture beyond its bounds to point out that the sentence of exclusion from the land was but the necessary consequence of the temper and character which the refusal to advance had betrayed. Such people were not fit for the fight. A new generation, braced by the keen air and scant fare of the desert, with firmer muscles and hearts than these enervated slaves had, was needed for the conquest. The sentence was mercy as well as judgment; it was better that they should live in the wilderness, and die there by natural process, after having had more education in God's loving care, than that they should be driven unwillingly to a conflict which, in their state of mind, would have been but their butchery. None the less, it is an awful condemnation for a man to be brought by God's providence face to face with a great possibility of service and of blessing, and then to show himself such that God has to put him aside, and look for other instruments. The Israelites were excluded from Canaan by no arbitrary decree, but by their own faithless fears, which made their victory impossible. "They could not enter in because of unbelief." In like manner our unbelief shuts us out from salvation, because we can only enter in by faith; and the "rest that remains" is of such a nature that it is impossible for even His love to give it to the unbelieving. "Let us labour, therefore, to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief."

## Numbers 14:19

### Moses the Intercessor

"Pardon, I beseech Thee, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of Thy mercy, and as Thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now." NUM. xiv. 19 .

See how in this story a divine threat is averted and a divine promise is broken, thus revealing a standing law that these in Scripture



are conditional.

This striking incident of Moses's intercession suggests to us some thoughts as to

### **I. The ground of the divine forgiveness.**

The appeal is not based on anything in the people. God is not asked to forgive because of their repentance or their faith. True, these are the conditions on which His pardon is received by us, but they are not the reasons why it is given by Him. Nor does Moses appeal to any sacrifices that had been offered and were conceived to placate God. But he goes deeper than all such pleas, and lays hold, with sublime confidence, on God's own nature as his all-powerful plea. "The greatness of Thy mercy" is the ground of the divine forgiveness, and the mightiest plea that human lips can urge. It suggests that His very nature is pardoning love; that "mercy" is proper to Him, that it is the motive and impulse of His acts. He forgives because He is mercy. That is the foundation truth. It is the deep spring from which by inherent impulse all the streams of forgiveness well up.

What was true when Moses prayed for the rebels is true to-day. Christ's work is the consequence, not the cause, of God's pardoning love. It is the channel through which the waters reach us, but the waters made the channel for themselves.

### **II. The persistency of the divine pardon.**

"As thou hast forgiven ... even until now."

His past is the guarantee of His future. This is true of every one of His attributes. There is no limitation to the divine forgiveness; you cannot exhaust it.

Sometimes there may be long tracts of almost utter godlessness, or times of apathy. Sometimes there may be bursts of great and unsanctified evil after many professions of fidelity, as in David's case. Sometimes there may be but a daily experience in which there is little apparent progress, little consciousness of growing mastery over sin, little of deepening holiness and spiritual power. Be it so! To all such, and to every other form of Christian unfaithfulness, this blessed thought applies.

We are apt to think as if our many pardons in the past made future pardons less likely, whereas the truth is that we have received forgiveness so often in the past that we may be quite sure that it will never fail us in the future. God has established a precedent in His dealings with us. He binds Himself by His past.

As in His creative energy, the forces that flung the whole universe forth were not exhausted by the act, but subsist continually to sustain it, as "He fainteth not, neither is weary," so in the works of His providence, and more especially of His grace, there is nothing in the exercise of any of His attributes to exhaust that attribute, nothing in the constant appeal which we make to His forgiving grace to weary out that grace. And thus we may learn, even from the unfading glories of the heavens and the undimmed splendours of His creative works, the lesson that, in the holier region of His love, and His pardoning mercy, there is no exhaustion, and that all the past instances of His pardoning grace only make the broader, firmer ground of certainty as to His continuous present and future forgiveness for all our iniquity. He who has proposed to us the "seventy times seven" as the number of our forgivenesses will not let His own fall short of that tale. Our iniquities may be "more than the hairs of our heads," but as the psalmist who found his to be so comforted himself with thinking, God's "thoughts which are to usward" were "more than can be numbered." There would be a pardoning thought for every sin, and after all sins had been forgiven, there would be "multitudes of redemptions" still available for penitent souls.

There is but one thing that limits the divine pardon, and that is continuous rejection of it.

Whoever seeks to be pardoned is pardoned.

### **III. The manner of the divine forgiveness.**

He pardoned, but He also inflicted punishment, and in both He loves equally. The worst, that is the spiritual, consequences (which are the punishments) of sin, namely separation and alienation from God, He removes in the very act of forgiveness, but His pardon does not affect the natural consequences. "Thou wast a God that forgavest them and tookest vengeance of their inventions," says a psalmist in reference to this very incident. Thank God that He loves us too wisely and well not to let us by experience "know that it is a bitter thing to forsake the Lord." It is a blessing that He does so, and a sign that we are pardoned, if we rightly use it.

### **IV. The vehicle of the divine forgiveness.**

The Mediator. Moses here may be taken as a dim shadow of Christ.

"Moses was faithful in all his house" but Jesus is the true Mediator, whose intercession consists in presenting the constant efficacy of His sacrifice, and to whom God ever says, "I have pardoned according to Thy word."

Trust utterly to Him. You cannot weary out the forgiving love of God. â€˜Christ ever liveth to make intercessionâ€™; with God is â€˜plenteous redemption.â€™ â€˜He shall redeem Israel out of all his iniquities.â€™

## Numbers 18:7: Service A Gift

â€˜... I have given your priestâ€™s office unto you as a service of gift.â€™ NUM. xviii. 7

All Christians are priestsâ€™to offer sacrifices, alms, especially prayers; to make God known to men.

### I. Our priesthood is a gift of Godâ€™s love.

We are apt to think of our duties as burdensome. They are an honour and a mark of Godâ€™s grace.

1. They are His giftâ€™

( a ) The power to do. All capacities and possessions from Him.

( b ) The wish to do. â€˜Worketh in you to will.â€™

( c ) The right to do, through Christ.

2. They are a blessing.

( a ) Note the good effects on ourselvesâ€™the increase of fellowship with Him, the strengthening of all holy desires.

( b ) The future benefits. Apply this to prayer and to effort on behalf of our fellow-men.

II. **Our priesthood is to be done as a service**â€™under a sense of obligation to a master, with diligence (an [Greek: ergon], not a [Greek: parergon]).

III. **Our priesthood is to be done as a gift to God**â€™to be done joyfully, giving ourselves back to Him: â€˜Yield yourselves unto Godâ€™â€™your reasonable service.â€™

Then only do we really possess ourselves, and â€˜all things are ours, for we are Christâ€™s, and Christ is Godâ€™s.â€™

## Numbers 20:1-13 The Waters of Meribah

â€˜Then came the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, into the desert of Zin in the first month: and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there. 2. And there was no water for the congregation: and they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3. And the people chode with Moses, and spake, saying, Would God that we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! 4. And why have ye brought up the congregation of the Lord into this wilderness, that we and our cattle should die there? 5. And wherefore have ye made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink. 6. And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and they fell upon their faces: and the glory of the Lord appeared unto them. 7. And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, 8. Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock: so thou shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink. 9. And Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He commanded him. 10. And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock? 11. And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also. 12. And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed Me not, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them. 13. This is the water of Meribah; because the children of Israel strove with the Lord, and He was sanctified in them.â€™ NUM. xx. 1-13 .

Kadesh had witnessed the final trial and failure of the generation that came out of Egypt; now we see the first trial and failure of the new generation, thirty-seven years after, on the same spot. Deep silence shrouds the history of these dreary years; but, probably, the congregation was broken up, and small parties roamed over the country, without purpose or hope, while Moses and a few of the leaders kept by the tabernacle. There is a certain emphasis in the phrase of the first verse of this chapter, "the children of Israel, even the whole congregation," which suggests that this was the first reassembling of the scattered units since the last act of the "whole congregation." The first month was, then, the first of the fortieth year, and the gathering was either in obedience to the summons of Moses, who knew that the fixed time had now come, or was the result of common knowledge of the fact. In any case, we have here the first act of a new epoch, and the question to be tried is whether the new men are any better than the old. It is this which gives importance to the event, and explains the bitterness of Moses at finding the old spirit living in the children. It was his trial as well as theirs. He resumed the functions which had substantially been in abeyance for a generation, and by his conduct showed that he had become unfit for the new form which the leadership must take with the invasion of Canaan.

### **I. We note the old murmurings on the lips of the new generation.**

The lament of a later prophet fits these hereditary grumblers. "In vain have I smitten your children; they received no correction." The place where they reassembled might have taught them the sin of unbelief; their parents' graves should have enforced the lesson. But the long years of wandering, and two millions of deaths, had been useless. The weather-beaten but sturdy strength of the four old men, the only survivors, might have preached the wisdom of trust in the God in whose "favour is life." But the people "had learned nothing and forgotten nothing." The old cuckoo-cry, which had become so monotonous from their fathers, is repeated, with differences, not in their favour. They do not, indeed, murmur directly against God, because they regard Moses and Aaron as responsible. "Why," say they, "have ye brought up the congregation of the Lord?" They seem to use that name with a touch of pride in their relation to God, while destitute of any real obedience, and so they show the first traces of the later spirit of the nation. They have acquired cattle while living in the oases of the wilderness, and they are anxious about them. They acknowledge the continuity of national life in their question, "Wherefore have ye made us to come up out of Egypt?" though most of them had been born in the wilderness. The fear that moved their fathers to unbelief was more reasonable and less contemptible than this murmuring, which ignores God all but utterly, and is ready to throw up everything at the first taste of privation.

It is a signal instance of the solemn law by which the fathers' sins are inherited by the children who prove themselves heirs to their ancestors by repeating their deeds. It is fashionable now to deny original sin, and equally fashionable to affirm "heredity," which is the same thing, put into scientific language. There is such a thing as national character persistent through generations, each unit of which adds something to the force of the tendencies which he receives and transmits, but which never are so omnipotent as to destroy individual guilt, however they may lighten it.

Note, too, the awful power of resistance to God's educating power possessed by our wills. The whole purpose of these men's lives, thus far, had been to fit them for being God's instruments, and for the reception of His blessing. The desert was His school for body and mind, where muscles and wills were to be braced, and solitude and expectation might be nurses of lofty thoughts, and in the silence God's voice might sound. What better preparation of a hardy race of God-trusting heroes could there have been, and what came of it all? Failure all but complete! The instrument tempered with so much care has its edge turned at the first stroke. The old sore breaks out at the old spot. Man's will has an awful power to thwart God's training; and of all the sad mysteries of this sad mysterious world, this is the saddest and most mysterious, and is the root of all other sadness and mystery, "that a man can set his pin-point of a will against that great Will which gives him all his power, and when God beckons can say, "I will not," and can render His most sedulous discipline ineffectual.

Note, too, that trivial things are large enough to hide plain duties and bright possibilities. These men knew that they had come to Kadesh for the final assault, which was to recompense all their hardships. Their desert training should have made them less resourceless and desperate when water failed; but the hopes of conquest and the duty of trust cannot hold their own against present material inconvenience. They even seem to make bitter mockery of the promises, when they complain that Kadesh is "no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates," which were the fruits brought by the spies, "as if they had said, "So this stretch of waterless sand is the fertile land you talked of, is it? This is all that we have got by reassembling here." Do we not often feel that the drought of Kadesh is more real than the grapes of Eshcol? Are we not sometimes tempted to bitter comparisons of the fair promises with the gloomy realities? Does our courage never flag, nor our faith falter, nor swirling clouds of doubt hide the inheritance from our weary and tear-filled eyes? He that is without sin may cast the first stone at these men; but whoever knows his own weak heart will confess that, if he had been among that thirsty crowd, he would, most likely, have made one of the murmurers.

### **II. Note God's repetition of His old gift to the new generation.**

Moses makes no attempt to argue with the people, but casts himself in entreaty before the door of the Tabernacle, as if crushed

and helpless in face of this heart-breaking proof of the persistent obstinacy of the old faults. God's answer recalls the former miracle at Rephidim ( Exodus 17:1-7 ) in the early days of the march, when the same cries had come from lips now silent, and the rock, smitten at God's command by the rod which had parted the sea, yielded water. The only differences are that here Moses is bid to speak, not to smite; and that the miracle is to be done before all the congregation, instead of before the elders only. Both variations seem to have the common purpose of enhancing the wonder, and confirming the authority of Moses, to a generation to whom the old deliverances were only hearsay, and many of whom were in contact with the leader for the first time. The fact that we have here the beginning of a new epoch, and a new set of people, goes far to explain the resemblance of the two incidents, without the need of supposing, with many critics, that they are but different versions of one "legend." The repetition of scarcity of water is not wonderful; the recurrence of the murmurings is the sad proof of the unchanged temper of the people, and the repetition of the miracle is the merciful witness of the patience of God. His charity "is not easily provoked, is not soon angry," but stoops to renew gifts which had been so little appreciated that the remembrance of them failed to cure distrust. Unbelief is obstinate, but His loving purpose is more persistent still. Rephidim should have made the murmuring at Kadesh impossible; but, if it does not, then He will renew the mercy, though it had been once wasted, and will so shape the second gift that it shall recall the first, if haply both may effect what one had failed to do. When need is repeated, the supply is forthcoming, even when it is demanded by sullen and forgetful distrust. We can wear out men's patience, but God's is inexhaustible. The same long-suffering Hand that poured water from the rock for two generations of distrustful murmurers still lavishes its misused gifts on us, to win us to late repentance, "and upbraideth not" for our slowness to learn the lessons of His mercies.

### III. Note the breaking down at last of the long-trying leader's patience.

It is in striking contrast with the patience of God. Psalm cvi. 32, 33, describes the sin of Moses as twofold; namely, anger and speaking "unadvisedly." His harsh words, so unlike his pleadings on the former occasion of rebellion at Kadesh, have a worse thing than an outburst of temper in them. "Must we fetch you water out of the rock?" arrogates to himself the power of working miracles. He forgets that he was as much an instrument, and as little a force, as his own rod. His angry scolding betrays wounded personal importance, and annoyance at rebellion against his own authority, rather than grief at the people's distrust of God, and also a distinct clouding over of his own consciousness of dependence for all his power on God, and an impure mingling of thoughts of self. The same turbid blending of anger and self-regard impelled his arm to the passionately repeated strokes, which, in his heat, he substituted for the quiet words that he was bidden to speak. The Palestinian Tar gum says very significantly, that at the first stroke the rock dropped blood, thereby indicating the tragic sinfulness of the angry blow. How unworthy a representative of the long-suffering God was this angry man! "The servant of the Lord must not strive," nor give the water with which he is entrusted, with contempt or anger in his heart. That gift requires meek compassion in its stewards.

But the failure of Moses' patience was only too natural. The whole incident has to be studied as the first of a new era, in which both leader and led were on their trial. During the thirty-seven years of waiting, Moses had had but little exercise of that part of his functions, and little experience of the people's temper. He must have looked forward anxiously to the result of the desert hardening; he must have felt more remote from and above the children than he did to their parents, his contemporaries who had come with him from Egypt, and so his disappointment must have been proportionately keen, when the first difficulty that rose revealed the old spirit in undiminished force. For forty years he had been patient, and ready to swallow mortifications and ignore rebellion against himself, and to offer himself for his people; but now, when men whom he had seen in their swaddling-clothes showed the same stiff-necked distrust as had killed their fathers, the breaking-point of his patience was reached. That burst of anger is a grave symptom of lessened love for the sinful murmurers; and lessened love always means lessened power to guide and help. The people are not changed, but Moses is. He has no longer the invincible patience, the utter self-oblivion, the readiness for self-sacrifice, which had borne him up of old, and so he fails. We may learn from his failure that the prime requisite for doing God's work is love, which cannot be moved to anger nor stirred to self-assertion, but meets and conquers murmuring and rebellion by patient holding forth of God's gift, and is, in some faint degree, an echo of His endless long-suffering. He who would serve men must, sleeping or waking, carry them in his heart, and pity their sin. They who would represent God to men, and win men for God, must be "imitators of God ... and walk in love." If the bearer of the water of life offers it with "Hear, ye rebels," it will flow untasted.

### IV. Note the sentence on the leader, and the sad memorial name.

Moses is blamed for not believing nor sanctifying God. His self-assertion in his unadvised speech came from unbelief, or forgetfulness of his dependence. He who claims power to himself, denies it to God. Moses put himself between God and the people, not to show but to hide God; and, instead of exalting God's holiness before them by declaring Him to be the giver, he intercepted the thanks and diverted them to himself. But was his momentary failure not far too severely punished? To answer that question, we must recur to the thought of the importance of this event as beginning a new chapter, and as a test for both Moses and Israel. His failure was a comparatively small matter in itself; and if the sentence is regarded merely as the punishment of a sin, it appears sternly disproportionate to the offence. Were eighty years of faithful service not sufficient to procure the condonation of one moment's impatience? Is not that harsh treatment? But a tiny blade above-ground may indicate the presence of a poisonous

root, needing drastic measures for its extirpation; and the sentence was not only punishment for sin, but kind, though punitive, relief from an office for which Moses had no longer, in full measure, his old qualifications. The subsequent history does not show any withdrawal of God's favour from him, and certainly it would be no very sore sorrow to be freed from the heavy load, carried so long. There is disapprobation, no doubt, in the sentence; but it treats the conduct of Moses rather as a symptom of lessened fitness for his heavy responsibility than as sin; and there is as much kindness as condemnation in saying to the wearied veteran, who has stood at his post so long and has taken up arms once more, "You have done enough. You are not what you were. Other hands must hold the leader's staff. Enter into rest."

Note that Moses was condemned for doing what Jesus always did, asserting his power to work miracles. What was unbelief and a sinful obtrusion of himself in God's place when the great lawgiver did it, was right and endorsed by God when the Carpenter of Nazareth did it. Why the difference? A greater than Moses is here, when He says to us, "What will ye that I should do unto you?"

The name of Meribah-Kadesh is given to suggest the parallel and difference with the other miraculous flow of water. The two incidents are thus brought into connection, and yet individualised. "Meribah," which means "strife," brands the murmuring as sinful antagonism to God: "Kadesh," which means "holy," brings both the miracle and the sentence under the common category of acts by which God manifested His holiness to the new generation; and so the double name is a reminder of sin that they may be humble, and of mingled mercy and judgment that they may trust and obey.

## Numbers 21:4-9

### The Poison and the Antidote

**"And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to compare the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. 5. And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread. 6. And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. 7. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against thee; pray unto the Lord, that He take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. 8. And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. 9. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived."** NUM. xxi. 4-9 .

The mutinous discontent of the Israelites had some excuse when they had to wheel round once more and go southwards in consequence of the refusal of passage through Edom. The valley which stretches from the Dead Sea to the head of the eastern arm of the Red Sea, down which they had to plod in order to turn the southern end of the mountains on its east side, and then resume their northern march outside the territory of Edom, is described as a "horrible desert." Certainly it yielded neither bread nor water. So the faithless pilgrims broke into their only too familiar murmurings, utterly ignoring their thirty-eight years of preservation. "There is no bread." No; but the manna had fallen day by day. "Our soul loatheth this light bread." Yes; but it was bread all the same. Thus coarse tastes prefer garlic and onions to Heaven's food, and complain of being starved while it is provided. "There is no water." No; but the "rock that followed them" gushed out abundance, and there was no thirst.

Murmuring brought punishment, which was meant for amendment. "The Lord sent fiery serpents." That statement does not necessarily imply a miracle. Scripture traces natural phenomena directly to God's will, and often overleaps intervening material links between the cause which is God and the effect which is a physical fact. The neighbourhood of Elath at the head of the gulf is still infested with venomous serpents, "marked with fiery red spots," from which, or possibly from the inflammation caused by their poison, they are here called "fiery." God made the serpents, though they were hatched by eggs laid by mothers; He brought Israel to the place; He willed the poisonous stings. If we would bring ordinary events into immediate connection with the Divine hand, and would see in all calamities fatherly chastisement "for our profit," we should understand life better than we often do.

The swift stroke had fallen without warning or voice to interpret it, but the people knew in their hearts whence and why it had come. Their quick recognition of its source and purpose, and their swift repentance, are to be put to their credit. It is well for us when we interpret for ourselves God's judgments, and need no Moses to urge us to humble ourselves before Him. Conscious guilt is conscious of unworthiness to approach God, though it dares to speak to offended men. The request for Moses' intercession witnesses to the instinct of conscience, requiring a mediator, "an instinct which has led to much superstition and been terribly

misguided, but which is deeply true, and is met once for all in Jesus Christ, our Advocate before the throne. The request shows that the petitioners were sure of Moses's forgiveness for their distrust of him, and thus it witnesses to his meekness. His pardon was a kind of pledge of God's. Was the servant likely to be more gracious than the Master? A good man's readiness to forgive helps bad men to believe in a pardoning God. It reflects some beam of Heaven's mercy.

Moses had often prayed for the people when they had sinned, and before they had repented. It was not likely that he would be slow to do so when they asked him, for the asking was accompanied with ample confession. The serpents had done their work, and the prayer that the chastisement should cease would be based on the fact that the sin had been forsaken. But the narrative seems to anticipate that, after the prayer had been offered and answered, Israelites would still be bitten. If they were, that confirms the presumption that the sending of the serpents was not miraculous. It also brings the whole facts into line with the standing methods of Providence, for the outward consequences of sin remain to be reaped after the sin has been forsaken; but they change their character and are no longer destructive, but only disciplinary. Serpents still bite if we have broken down hedges, but there is an antidote.

The command to make a brazen or copper serpent, and set it on some conspicuous place, that to look on it might stay the effect of the poison, is remarkable, not only as sanctioning the forming of an image, but as associating healing power with a material object. Two questions must be considered separately, "What did the method of cure say to the men who turned their bloodshot, languid eyes to it? and What does it mean for us, who see it by the light of our Lord's great words about it? As to the former question, we have not to take into account the Old Testament symbolism which makes the serpent the emblem of Satan or of sin. Serpents had bitten the wounded. Here was one like them, but without poison, hanging harmless on the pole. Surely that would declare that God had rendered innocuous the else fatal creatures. The elevation of the serpent was simply intended to make it visible from afar; but it could not have been set so high as to be seen from all parts of the camp, and we must suppose that the wounded were in many cases carried from the distant parts of the wide-spreading encampment to places whence they could catch a glimpse of it glittering in the sunshine. We are not told that trust in God was an essential part of the look, but that is taken for granted. Why else should a half-dead man lift his heavy eyelids to look? Such a one knew that God had commanded the image to be made, and had promised healing for a look. His gaze was fixed on it, in obedience to the command involved in the promise, and was, in some measure, a manifestation of faith. No doubt the faith was very imperfect, and the desire was only for physical healing; but none the less it had in it the essence of faith. It would have been too hard a requirement for men through whose veins the swift poison was burning its way, and who, at the best, were so little capable of rising above sense, to have asked from them, as the condition of their cure, a trust which had no external symbol to help it. The singularity of the method adopted witnesses to the graciousness of God, who gave their feebleness a thing that they could look at, to aid them in grasping the unseen power which really effected the cure. "He that turned himself to it," says the Book of Wisdom, "was not saved by the thing which he saw, but by Thee, that art the Saviour of all."

Our Lord has given us the deepest meaning of the brazen serpent. Taught by Him, we are to see in it a type of Himself, the significance of which could not be apprehended till Calvary had given the key. Three distinct points of parallel are suggested by His use of the incident in His conversation with Nicodemus. First, He takes the serpent as an emblem of Himself. Now it is clear that it is so, not in regard to the saving power that dwells in Him, but in regard to His sinless manhood, which was made "in the likeness of sinful flesh, yet without sin." The symbolism which takes the serpent as the material type of sin comes into view now, and is essential to the full comprehension of the typical significance of the incident.

Secondly, Jesus laid stress on the "lifting up" of the serpent. That "lifting up" has two meanings. It primarily refers to the Crucifixion, wherein, just as the death-dealing power was manifestly triumphed over in the elevation of the brazen serpent, the power of sin is exhibited as defeated, as Paul says, "triumphing over them in it" ( Col. ii. 14, 15 ). But that lifting up on the Cross draws after it the elevation to the throne, and to that, or, rather, to both considered as inseparably united, our Lord refers when He says, "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me."

Thirdly, the condition of healing is paralleled. "When he looked unto the serpent of brass, he lived." "That whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life." From the serpent no healing power flowed; but our eternal life is "in Him, and from Him it flows into our poisoned, dying nature. The sole condition of receiving into ourselves that new life which is free from all taint of sin, and is mighty enough to arrest the venom that is diffused through every drop of blood, is faith in Jesus lifted on the Cross to slay the sin that is slaying mankind, and raised to the throne to bestow His own immortal and perfect life on all who look to Him. The bitten Israelite might be all but dead. The poison wrought swiftly; but if he from afar lifted his glazing eyeballs to the serpent on the pole, a swifter healing overtook the death that was all but conqueror, and cast it out, and he who was borne half unconscious to the foot of the standard went away a sound man, "walking, and leaping, and praising God." So it may be with any man, however deeply tainted with sin, if he will trust himself to Jesus, and from "the ends of the earth" "look unto Him" and be saved. His power knows no hopeless cases. He can cure all. He will cure our most ingrained sin, and calm the hottest fever of our poisoned blood, if we will let Him. The only thing that we have to do is to gaze, with our hearts in our eyes and

faith in our hearts, on Him, as He is lifted on the Cross and the throne. But we must so gaze, or we die, for none but He can cast out the coursing venom. None but He can arrest the swift-footed death that is intertwined with our very natures.

## Numbers 22:6 Balaam

“He sent messengers therefore unto Balaam the son of Beor to Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the children of his people, to call him, saying, Behold there is a people come out from Egypt: behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me.” NUM. xxii. 6 .

Give a general outline of the history. See Bishop Butler’s great sermon.

### I. How much knowledge and love of good there may be in a bad man.

Balaam was a prophet:

( a ) He knew something of the divine character,

( b ) He knew what righteousness was ( Micah v. 8 ).

( c ) He knew of a future state, and longed for “the last end of the righteous.”

He would not break the law of God, and curse by word of mouth:

But yet for all that he wanted to curse. He wanted to do the wrong thing, and that made him bad. And when he durst not do it in one way, he did it in another.

So he is a picture of the universal blending and mixture that there is even in bad men.

It is not knowledge that makes a man good.

It is not aspirations after righteousness. These dwell more or less in all souls.

It is not desire “to go to heaven” everybody has that desire.

Perfectly vicious men are devils. There is always the blending.

Many of us are trusting to these vagrant wishes, but my friends, it is not what a man would sometimes like, but what the whole set and tenor of his life tends towards, that makes him. There may be plenty of backwater eddies and cross-currents in the sea, but the tide goes on all the same.

“All these fancies and their whole array

One cunning bosom sin blows quite away,”

“Let no man deceive you; he that doeth righteousness is righteous.”

Do not trust your convictions; they are powerless in the fight.

### II. How men may deceive themselves about their condition, or the self-illusions and compromises of sin.

These convictions will never, by themselves, keep a man from evil, but they may lead men to try to compromise, just as Balaam did. He would go, but he would not, for the life of him, curse; and he evidently thought that he was a hero in firmness and a martyr to duty.

He would not curse in words, but he did it in another way “by means of Baal-peor.

So we find men making compromises between duty and inclination; keeping the letter and breaking the spirit; obeying in some respects and indemnifying themselves for their obedience by their disobedience in others; very devout, attentive to all religious observances, and yet sinning on. And we find such men playing tricks upon themselves, and really deluding themselves into the idea that they are very good men!

This is the great characteristic of sin, its deceitfulness. It always comes as an “angel of light,” like some of those weird stories in which we read about a strange guest at a banquet who discloses a skeleton below the wedding garment!

“Father of lies.” “Nihil imbecillius denudato diabolo.” The more one sins, the less capable he becomes of discerning evil. Conscience becomes sophisticated, and it is always possible to refine away its judgments.

“By reason of use have their senses exercised to discern.” “Take heed lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”

### III. The absurdity and unreasonableness of unrighteousness.

We look at Balaam, and think, how could a man purpose anything so foolish as to go on seeking for an opportunity to break a law which he knew to be irrevocable!

Yet what did he do but what every sinner does?

All sin is the breach of law which at the very moment of breaking is known to be imperative.

All sin is thus the overbearing of conscience, or the sophistication of conscience, and all sin is the incurring voluntarily of consequences which at the moment are or might be known to be certain, and far overbalancing any fancied “wages of unrighteousness.”

Thus all sin is the overbearing of reason or the sophisticating of reason by passion. Men know the absurdity of sin, and yet men will go on sinning. “A rogue is a roundabout fool.” All wrongdoing is a mighty blunder. It is only righteousness which is congruous with a man’s reason, with a man’s conscience, with a man’s highest happiness. “The fear of the Lord,” that is wisdom.

### IV. The wages of unrighteousness.

How Balaam’s experiment ended—his death. He tried to make the “best of both worlds,” so he ran with the hare and hunted with the hounds, and this was how it ended, as it always does, as it always will. How death ends all the illusions, sternly breaks down all the compromises, reveals all the absurdities!

Men are one thing or the other. Learn, then, the lesson that no gifts, no talents, no convictions, no aspirations will avail.

Let this sad figure which looks out upon us with grey streaming hair and uplifted hands from beside the altar on Pisgah speak to us.

How near the haven it is possible to be cast away! Like Bunyan’s way to hell from near the gate of the celestial city.

Balaam said, “Let me die the death of the righteous!” and his death was thus: “Balaam they slew with the sword,” and his epitaph is “Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness,” got them, and perished!

## Numbers 23:10, 31:8

### An Unfulfilled Desire

**Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!” NUM. xxiii.10**

**Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword.” NUM. xxxi.8**

Ponder these two pictures. Take the first scene. A prophet, who knows God and His will, is standing on the mountain top, and as he looks down over the valley beneath him, with its acacia-trees and swift river, there spread the tents of Israel. He sees them, and knows that they are “a people whom the Lord hath blessed.” Brought there to curse, “he blesses them altogether”; and as he gazes upon their ordered ranks and sees somewhat of the wondrous future that lay before them, his mind is filled with the thought of all the blessedness of that righteous nation, and the sigh of longing comes to his lips, “May I be with them in life and death; may I have no higher honour, no calmer end, than to lie down and die as one of the chosen people, with memories of a divine hand that has protected me all through the past, and quiet hopes of the same hand holding me up in the great darkness!” A devout aspiration, a worthy desire!

Look at the other picture. Midian has seduced Israel to idolatry and its constant companion, sensual sin. The old lawgiver has for his last achievement to punish the idolater. “Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites, afterwards thou shalt be gathered to thy people.” So each tribe gives its contingent to the fight, and under the fierce and prompt Phinehas, whose javelin had already smitten one of the chief offenders, they go forth. Fire and sword, devastation and victory, mark their track. The princes of Midian fall before the swift rush of the desert-born invaders. And “sad, strange company!” among them is the “man who saw the vision of the Almighty, and knew the knowledge of the Most High ! he who had taught Moab the purest lessons of morality, and Midian, alas! the practice of the vilest profligacy; he who saw from afar “the sceptre arise out of Israel and the Star from Jacob”; he who longed to “die the death of the righteous ! The onset of the avenging host, with the “shout of a king” in their midst; the terror of the flight, the riot of havoc and bloodshed, and, finally, the quick thrust of the sharp Israelite sword in some strong hand, and the grey hairs all dabbled with his blood—these were what the man came to who had once



breathed the honest desire, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!"

I. There is surely a solemn lesson for us all here—as touching the danger of mere vague religious desires and convictions which we do not allow to determine our conduct.

Balaam had evidently much knowledge. Look at these points—

( a ) His knowledge of the covenant-name of God.

( b ) His knowledge of a pure morality and a spiritual worship far beyond sacrificial notions, and in some respects higher than the then Old Testament standpoint.

( c ) The knowledge (which is implied in the text) of a future state, which had gone far into the background, even if it had not been altogether lost, among the Israelites. Is it not remarkable that the religious ideas of this man were in advance of Israel's at this time; that there seems to have lingered among these "outsiders" more of a pure faith than in Israel itself?

What a lesson here as to the souls led by God and enlightened by Him beyond the pale of Judaism!

But all this knowledge, of what use was it to Balaam? He knows about God: does he seek to serve Him? He preaches morality to Moab, and he teaches Midian to "teach the children of Israel to commit fornication." He knows something of the blessedness of a "righteous man's" death, and perhaps sees faintly the shining gates beyond—but how does it all end? What a gulf between knowledge and life !

What is the use of correct ideas about God? They may be the foundations of holy thoughts, and they are meant to be so. I am not setting up emotion above principle, or fancying that there can be religion without theology; but for what are all our thoughts about God given us?

( a ) That they may influence our hearts.

( b ) That they may subdue our wills.

( c ) That they may mould our practical life.

If they do not do that—then what do they do?

They constitute a positive hindrance—like the dead lava-blocks that choke the mouth of a crater, or the two deposits on the bottom of a boiler, soot outside and crust inside, which keep the fire from getting at the water. They have lost their power because they are so familiar. They are weakened by not being practised. The very organs of intelligence are, as it were, ossified. Self-complacency lays hold on the possession of these ideas and shields itself against all appeals with the fact of possessing them. Many a man mistakes, in his own case, the knowledge of the truth for obedience to the truth. All this is seen in everyday life, and with reference to all manner of convictions, but it is most apparent and most fatal about Christian truth. I appeal to the many who hear and know all about "the word," What more is needed? That you should do what you know ("Be not hearers only"); that you should yield your whole being to Christ, the living Word.

## **II. Balaam is an example of convictions which remain inefficacious.**

It was not without some sense of his own character, and some forebodings of what was possibly brooding over him, that he uttered these words of the text. But they were transitory emotions, and they passed away.

I suppose that every man who hears the gospel proclaimed is, at some time or other, conscious of dawning thoughts which, if followed, would lead him to decision for Christ. I suppose that every man among us is conscious of thoughts visiting him many a time when he least expects them, which, if honestly obeyed, would work an entire revolution in his life.

I do not wish to speak as if unbelieving men were the only people who were unfaithful to their consciences, but rather to deal with what is a besetting sin of us all, though it reaches its highest aggravation in reference to the gospel.

Such stings of conviction come to us all, but how are they deadened?

( a ) By simple neglect. Pay no attention to them; do not do anything in consequence, and they will gradually disappear. The voice unheard will cease to speak. Non-obedience to conscience will in the end almost throttle conscience.

( b ) By angry rejection.

( c ) By busy occupation with the outer world.

( d ) By sinful occupation with it.

Then consider that such dealing with our convictions leaves us far worse men than before, and if continued will end in utter insensibility.

What should we do with such convictions? Reverently follow them. And in so doing they will grow and increase, and lead us at last to God and peace.

Special application of all this to our attitude towards Christian truth.

III. Balaam is an instance of wishes that are never fulfilled.

He wished to die "as the righteous." How did he die? miserably; and why?

(1) Because his wish was deficient in character.

It was one among a great many, feeble and not predominant, occasioned by circumstances, and so fading when these disappeared. Like many men's relation to the gospel who would like to be Christians, and are not. These vagrant wishes are nothing; mere "catpaws" of wind, not a breeze. They are not real, even while they last, and so they come to nothing.

(2) Because it was partially wrong in its object.

He was willing to die the death, but not to live the life, of the righteous; like many men who would be very glad to "go to heaven when they die," but who will not be Christians while they live.

Now, God forbid that I should say that his wish was wrong! But only it was not enough. Such a wish led to no action.

Now, God hears the faintest wish; He does not require that we should will strongly, but He does require that we should desire, and that we should act according to our desires.

Let the close be a brief picture of a righteous death. And oh! if you feel that it is blessed, then let that desire lead you to Christ, and all will be well. Remember that Bunyan saw a byway to hell at the door of the celestial city. Remember how Balaam ended, and stands gibbeted in the New Testament as an evil man, and the type of false teachers. Finally, beware of knowledge which is not operative in conduct, of convictions which are neglected and pass away, of vague desires which come to nought.