

NOTES
ON
THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

by

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"Things new and old."

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by

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Numbers 20

"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" (Verse 1).

The chapter which now opens before us furnishes a very remarkable record of wilderness life and experience. In it, we see Moses, the servant of GOD, passing through some of the most trying scenes of his eventful life. First of all, Miriam dies. The one whose voice was heard, amid the brilliant scenes of Exodus 15 chanting a hymn of victory, passes away, and her ashes are deposited in the wilderness of Kadesh. The timbrel is laid aside. The voice of song is hushed in the silence of death. She can no longer lead in the dance. She had sung sweetly, in her day; she had, very blessedly, seized the key note of that magnificent song of praise sung on the resurrection side of the Red Sea. Her charms embodied the great central truth of redemption. **"Sing ye to the Lord. for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea."** This was, truly, a lofty strain. It was the suited utterance for the joyous occasion.

But now the prophetess passes off the scene, and the voice of melody is exchanged for the voice of murmuring. Wilderness life is becoming irksome. The trials of the desert put nature to the test; they bring out what is in the heart. Forty years' toil and travail make a great change in people. It is very rare indeed to find a case in which the verdure and freshness of spiritual life are kept up, much less augmented, throughout all the stages of Christian life and warfare. It ought not to be

such a rarity. It ought to be the very reverse, inasmuch as it is in the actual details, the stern realities of our path through this world, that we prove what GOD is. He, blessed be His name, takes occasion from the very trials of the way to make Himself known to us in all the sweetness and tenderness of love that knows no change. His loving kindness and tender mercy never fail. Nothing can exhaust those springs which are in the living GOD. He will be what He is, spite of all our naughtiness. GOD will be GOD, let man prove himself ever so faithless and faulty.

This is our comfort, our joy, and the source of our strength. We have to do with the living GOD. What a reality! Come what may, He will prove Himself equal to every emergency - amply sufficient for exigence of every hour. His patient grace can bear with our manifold infirmities, failures, and shortcomings; and His strength is made perfect in our utter weakness. His faithfulness never fails. His mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. Friends fail or pass away. Links of fond friendship are snapped in this cold, heartless world. Fellow-labourers part company. Miriams and Aarons die; but GOD remaineth. Here lies the deep secret of all true and solid blessedness. If we have the hand and the heart of the living GOD with us, we need not fear. If we can say, "**The Lord is my shepherd,**" we can, assuredly add, "**we shall not want.**"

Still there are the scenes of sorrow and trial in the desert; and we have to go through them. Thus it was with Israel, in the chapter before us. They were called to meet the keen blasts of the wilderness, and they met them with accents of impatience and discontent.

"And there was no water for the congregation: and they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people chode with Moses, and spake, saying, Would God that we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! And why have ye brought up the congregation of the Lord into this wilderness, that we and our cattle should die there? And wherefore have ye made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us 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" (Verses 2-5).

This was a deeply trying moment to the spirit of Moses. We can form no conception of what it must have been to encounter six hundred thousand murmurers, and to be obliged to listen to their bitter invectives, and to hear himself charged with all the misfortunes which their own unbelief had conjured up before them. All this was no ordinary trial of patience; and, most assuredly, we need not marvel if that dear and honoured servant found the occasion too much for him.

"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" (Verse 6).

It is deeply touching to find Moses, again and again, on his face before GOD.

It was a sweet relief, to make his escape from a tumultuous host, and betake himself to the only One whose resources were adequate to meet such an occasion. "**They fell upon their faces: and the glory of the Lord appeared unto them.**"

They do not appear, on this occasion, to have attempted any reply to the people; "**they went from the presence of the assembly**" and cast themselves upon the living GOD. They could not

possibly have done better. Who but the GOD of all grace could meet the ten thousand necessities of wilderness life? Well had Moses said, at the very beginning, "**If thy presence go not with us, carry as not up hence.**" Assuredly, he was right and wise in so expressing himself. The divine presence was the only answer to the demand of such a congregation. But that presence was an all-sufficient answer. GOD's treasury is absolutely inexhaustible. He can never fail a trusting heart. Let us remember this. GOD delights to be used. He never grows weary of ministering to the need of His people. If this were ever kept in the remembrance of the thoughts of our hearts, we should hear less of the accents of impatience and discontent, and more of the sweet language of thankfulness and praise. But, as we have had frequent occasion to remark, desert life tests every one. it proves what is in us; and, thanks be to GOD, it brings out what is in Him for us.

"And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, 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, and Moses took the rod from before the Lord as he commanded him. 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? 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" (Verse 7-11).

Two objects, in the foregoing quotation, demand the readers attention, namely, "**The Rock,**" and "**The Rod.**" They both present CHRIST, most blessedly, to the soul; but in two distinct aspects. In I Corinthians 10:4, we read, "**They drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.**" This is plain and positive. It leaves no room whatever for the exercise of the imagination. "**That Rock was Christ**" - CHRIST smitten for us.

Then, as regards "**the rod,**" we must remember that it was not the rod of Moses - the rod of authority - the rod of power. This would not suit the occasion before us. It had done its work. It had smitten the rock once, and that was enough. This we learn from Exodus 17, where we read, "**The Lord said unto Moses, go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river (see Exodus 7:20), take in thine hand and go. Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.**"

Here we have a type of CHRIST smitten for us, by the hand of GOD, in judgment. The reader will note the expression, "**Thy rod wherewith thou smotest the river.**" Why the river? Why should this particular stroke of the rod be referred to? Exodus 7:20 furnishes the reply. "**And he (Moses) lifted up the rod, and smote the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants; and all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood.**" It was the rod which turned the water into blood that was to smite "**that Rock which was Christ**" in order that streams of life and refreshment might flow for us.

Now, this smiting could only take place once. It is never to be repeated.

- "**Knowing that Christ, being raised from the dead, dieth no more; death hath no more**

dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God" (Romans 6:9, 10).

- **"But now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself . . . so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many."** (Hebrews 9:26, 27).

- **"For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God"** (I Peter 3:18).

There can be no repetition of the death of CHRIST; and hence Moses was wrong in smiting the rock twice with his rod - wrong in smiting it at all.

He was commanded to take the rod, Aaron's rod - the priestly rod, and speak to the rock. The atoning work is done, and now our great High Priest has passed into the heavens, there to appear in the presence of GOD for us, and the streams of spiritual refreshment flow to us, on the ground of accomplished redemption, and in connection with CHRIST's priestly ministry, of which Aaron's budding rod is the exquisite figure.

Hence, then, it was a grave mistake for Moses to smite the rock a second time - a mistake to use his rod in the matter at all. To have smitten with Aaron's rod would, as we can easily understand, have spoiled its lovely blossom. A word would have sufficed, in connection with the rod of priesthood - the rod of grace. Moses failed to see this - failed to glorify GOD. He spoke unadvisedly with his lips; and as a consequence he was prohibited going over Jordan. His rod could not take the people over - for what could mere authority do with a murmuring host - and he was not suffered to go over himself because he failed to sanctify the Lord in the eyes of the congregation.

But the Lord took care of His own glory. He sanctified Himself before the people; and, notwithstanding their rebellious murmurings, and Moses' sad mistake and failure, the congregation of the Lord received a gushing stream from the smitten rock.

Nor was this all. It was not merely that grace triumphed in furnishing Israel's murmuring hosts with drink; but even in reference to Moses himself, it shines out most brilliantly, as we may see in Deuteronomy 34.

It was grace that brought Moses to the top of Pisgah and showed him the land of Canaan from thence. It was grace that led the Lord to provide a grave for His servant and bury him therein. It was better to see the land of Canaan, in company with GOD, than to enter it in company with Israel. And yet we must not forget that Moses was prevented entering the land because of the unadvised speaking. GOD, in government, kept Moses out of Canaan. GOD, in grace, brought Moses up to Pisgah. These two facts, in the history of Moses, illustrate, very forcibly, the distinction between grace and government - a subject of the deepest interest, and of great practical value. Grace pardons and blesses; but government takes its course. Let us ever remember this. **"Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap."** This principle runs through all the ways of GOD in government, and nothing can be more solemn; nevertheless **"grace reigns through righteousness, unto eternal life, by Jesus Christ our Lord."** All praise to Him who is at once, the fountain and the channel of this grace!

From verses 14-20 of our chapter, we have the correspondence between Moses and the king of

Edom. It is instructive and interesting to notice the style of each, and to compare it with the history given in Genesis 32, 33.

Esau had a serious grudge against Jacob; and albeit, through the direct interposition of GOD, he was not suffered to touch a hair of his brother's head, still, on the other hand, Israel must not meddle with Esau's possessions. Jacob had supplanted Esau; and Israel must not molest Edom.

"Command thou the people, saying, Ye are to pass through the coast of your brethren the children of Esau, which dwell in Seir; and they shall be afraid of you: take ye good heed unto yourselves therefore. Meddle not with them; for I will not give you of their land, no, not so much as a foot breadth, because I have given mount Seir unto Esau for a possession. Ye shall buy meat of them for money, that ye may eat; and ye shall also buy water of them for money, that ye may drink" (Deuteronomy 2:4-6).

Thus we see that the same GOD who would not suffer Esau to touch Jacob, in Genesis 33, now will not suffer Israel to touch Edom, in Numbers 20).

The closing paragraph of Numbers 20 is deeply touching. We shall not quote it, but the reader should refer to it, and compare it carefully with the scene in Exodus 4:1-17. Moses had deemed Aaron's companionship indispensable; but he afterwards found him to be a sore thorn in his side, and here he is compelled to strip him of his robes and see him gathered to his fathers. All this is very admonitory, in whatever way we view it, whether as regards Moses or Aaron. We have already referred to this instructive piece of history, and therefore we shall not dwell upon it here; but may the good Lord engrave its solemn lesson deeply upon the tablets of our hearts!

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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