Synopsis of the Books of the Bible

Numbers

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Introduction

Introduction

The scope and connection of Leviticus with Numbers

The Book of Leviticus contains the revelation of God sitting upon the throne, where He places Himself that He may be approached by the people, as far as they could come; that of the priesthood brought into proximity to the throne, as far as men could have access to it; and then the promulgation of the commandments relative to these two great facts, in that which concerned the generality of the people.

In Numbers we have the service and walk of the people, figuratively of the saints through this world: and, consequently, that which relates to the Levites, and the journey through the wilderness. Now, as Leviticus ended with regulations and warnings respecting the possession of the land, and that with regard to the rights of God, and consequently to the rights of His people, the Book of Numbers brings us through the wilderness to the moment before the entrance of the people into the land at the end of the wilderness journey, and speaks of that grace which justifies the people at the close, notwithstanding all their unfaithfulness.

The wilderness journey

It is important to keep in mind that as to the efficacy of redemption the people were brought to God at Sinai (Ex. 15:13 and Ex. 19:4). All in this respect was complete (compare the thief on the cross and Col. 1:12). The wilderness journey is a distinct thing; no part of the purpose of God, but of His ways with us. Hence it is here "if" comes in and the time of testing. Jordan coalescing with the Red Sea, coming out and going in (only the ark was in Jordan), there was no question of judgment or enemies. It is the experimental realisation of our death and resurrection with Christ. But as to the journey we must reach the goal to get in.

Chapters 1 and 2

God numbers and arranges His people around His tabernacle

The first thing to be noticed is, that God numbers His people exactly, and arranges them, once thus recognised, around His tabernacle: sweet thought, to be thus recognised and placed around God Himself! But here it had no reference to calling by faith, but to families, and households, and tribes. That order was carefully maintained when encamped at rest, or on their march; but it was the order of a nation and its tribes. God dwelt there, but the unity of the body, or of the Spirit — union in any sense had no place.

Three tribes on each side of the court kept the tabernacle of Jehovah. Levi alone was excepted, in order to be consecrated to the service of God: therefore the tribe of Levi encamped according to their families

immediately around the court. Moses, Aaron, and the priests were placed opposite the entrance whereby God was approached. The least things in the word deserve to be noticed. Psalm 80 is entirely opened by the position of the tribes. The spirit of the psalmist asks, in the last days of the desolation of Israel, for God to lead them and to manifest His power as He did when He led them through the wilderness; he asks for the power of His presence on the ark of testimony, as God manifested it when it was said, at the moment when Israel set forward, "Rise up, Jehovah, and let thine enemies be scattered." Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh were the three tribes nearest the ark in the camp of Israel; that is why it is said, in verse 2 of the Psalm, "before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh."

In the setting forward of the camp, the order given was that the tabernacle, surrounded by the Levites, should be in the midst of the tribes, as it was when the camp was at rest (Num. 2:17). It was in the midst of them as of an army that was its guard, as the rallying-point of worship and approach when the camp was at rest. They kept the charge of the Lord.

In Numbers 10 we shall find that another arrangement took place as a matter of fact: of this, in its place.

Chapter 3

The Levites set apart for service

In Numbers 3 we have the Levites set apart, according to the thoughts of God, for service. They are a figure of the church, or rather of the members of the church in their service, even as the priests are the figure of Christians drawing near to the throne of God, though both be a shadow, not a perfect image.

The Levites and the Church as firstfruits

The Levites were firstfruits offered to God, for they were instead of the firstborn in whom God had taken Israel to Himself, when He smote the firstborn of the Egyptians.

Thus it is that the church* is, as the firstfruits of the creatures of God, holy to the Lord. The number of the firstborn being greater than that of the Levites, those that were over were redeemed, as a sign that they belonged to God, and the Levites became God's possession for His service (vers. 12, 13). It is the same with regard to the church: it belongs wholly to God to serve Him down here. {* I speak always of the church here in its individual members as indicating the class of persons.}

The Church's service wholly dependent on Christ and His priesthood

But, besides, the Levites were entirely given to Aaron the high priest; for the service of the church, or of its members, is wholly dependent on Christ in the presence of God, and has no other object but that which concerns Him, and that which is connected with, and flows from the place and service which He Himself renders to God in the true tabernacle, carrying out in service here the ends for which He is in the holy place up there; but directly connected with the sanctuary — that is for us heaven, for we belong to heaven, and our walk and all our service is referred to, and characterised by our connection

with it. Our conversation (living association) is in heaven; we purify ourselves as He is pure, and are called to walk worthy of God, who has called to His own kingdom and glory, — worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing. Only, the veil being rent, we are much more fully connected with that than the Levites were even in figure. The service of the saints has no value (on the contrary, it is sin), except as it is united to the priesthood (that is to Christ on high, in the presence of God for us, with whom we, indeed, are also associated in this nearness, priests by grace); and hence all is accomplished in direct reference to Him in that heavenly character.

In all its details, consequently, our service is absolutely good for nothing, if it be not linked with our communion with the Lord and with the priesthood of Christ. Christ is "a Son over his own house." "There are differences of administrations, but the same Lord." The Holy Ghost gives the capacity and the gift for service; but in the exercise of this capacity and of this gift, we are the servants of Christ.

The three principles of service

Thus, as regards our service, we have these three principles: 1, we are redeemed, delivered from the judgments, under which are the enemies of God, being taken from the midst of those enemies; 2, as a consequence of this first fact, we belong absolutely to God; bought with a price, we are no longer our own, but God's, to glorify Him in our bodies which are His; 3, we are entirely given to Christ, who is the Head of the house of God, the Priest, for the service of His tabernacle. Blessed bondage, happy self-renunciation, true deliverance from a world of sin! Service is rendered in dependence on Christ, and in the communion of the Lord: it is linked to the priesthood and flows from and is connected with Himself, and the place where He is, and with which He has connected our hopes, our lives, and the affections of our hearts. We serve from, and in view of that: "to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus."

Service exercised in the midst of God's people

Service appears to be limited to the tabernacle, that is, to be exercised in the midst of God's people and in connection with their drawing near to God. For the preaching of the gospel to those without made no part of the Jewish system, which was the shadow, but not the perfect image, of the present state of things. The gospel is the expression of grace visiting sinners, to effect their salvation, a love that goes actively out. The institution of the Levites is here presented to us in principle: we shall find, further on, their purification and their consecration to God.

The difference between the service of the Levites and that of the Church

We may remark here, that with regard to that which is most elevated in the calling of the church, all her members are one. The priests, the high priest excepted, accomplished, all equally or together, the service of the offerings to God. And so it is with the church; all its members equally draw near unto God, and are in the same relationship with Him. (A priest acting for another Israelite who brought an offering, or who had sinned, represented rather Christ Himself).

The order of the service of the Levites, on the other hand, was according to the sovereignty of God, who put each one in his place. Thus, in the service of the church, the greatest differences are found, and each one has his own place assigned him.

Diversity of services dependent on the sole authority of the Master

The same thing will likewise, I believe, take place in the glory (compare Eph. 4; 1 Cor. 12). All are conformed to the likeness of the Son; but as each has been filled with the Holy Ghost for service, and thus according to the counsels of God, they — to whom it is given of the Father to sit on the right hand or on the left — are over ten cities or five. All enter together into the joy of their Lord. We are all brethren, having only one Master. But the Master gives grace to each according to His own will, according to the counsels of God the Father. He who denies brotherly unity denies the sole authority of the Master. He who denies the diversity of services equally denies the authority of the Master who disposes of His servants as He pleases, and chooses them according to His wisdom and His divine rights.

Chapter 4

Arrangements for the carriage of the utensils of God's service

Next in order come the arrangements prescribed for the carrying of the things which the tabernacle contained, as well as their coverings, when the camp journeyed in the wilderness. I shall point out what appears to be the typical meaning of these prescribed ordinances. This is full of interest and of practical importance.

After the instructions intended to teach us how it is given to us to draw near God, the connection between the manifestations of God in Christ, and our walk here below, are for us what is most essential.

Now, this last subject is the one treated of in type, in the arrangements made for the carriage of the chief utensils destined for the service of God. When they were in their place, while the camp rested, they were uncovered. Those which were shut up within the tabernacle had reference to heaven; the altar and the laver were outside, before coming to it.

In the wilderness, these utensils put on certain characters, one of them especially; but others also, in certain cases. I consider them, therefore, as the manifestation of certain relationships existing between the walk of the Christian, and various manifestations of God in Christ.* {* I say the walk of the Christian, applying it to our consciences; but the expression is imperfect, for the subject seems to me to embrace the life of Christ Himself upon earth, and even, in some respects, His life in the time to come, but always upon earth. They shew the relationship between the manifestation of life here below, the forms and the characters it assumes, and the sources of life in the manifestation of God in Christ: a subject of the deepest interest. The badgers' skins, and the circumstances with which this book is occupied, still suppose the walk to be in the wilderness. It is only when we abstract, as to these circumstances, that we see the manifestation of things to come. Thus faith, that of the thief on the cross

for example, saw, in Christ's suffering, the King, though all was hidden. I have therefore alluded to it without fear. I only present the idea contained in the type, without unfolding all the consequences of it.

The ark of the covenant

The ark of the covenant represented the throne of God in heaven, the holiness and the justice which are there manifested in God. It was first of all covered with the veil of the humanity of Christ, such as He was here below in His Person; that is, that divine holiness and righteousness have clothed themselves in humanity. Over this were the badgers' skins.

The badgers' skins coverings

We have seen, in these skins, that practical and watchful holiness down here which keeps itself from the evil to which we are liable in passing through the wilderness. However, when there is an immediate connection with what God is in heaven itself (and it is thus that He Himself was manifested in Christ), the entirely heavenly character, which results therefrom, manifests itself outside.

The covering wholly of blue

Hence, outside even the badgers' skins, there was a covering wholly of blue. This was what appeared in the wilderness. This is what took place with regard to Christ: the ark, by the way, in the wilderness finds no perfect antitype but Himself, considered in His personal walk down here. Nevertheless, the walk of the believer, in as far as it reaches towards this height, has also its expression in this type.

The table of shewbread, its loaves and coverings

After the ark comes the table of shewbread; it was a figure of Christ in the divine perfection of justice and holiness, according to the power of the eternal Spirit, in connection with the perfection of human administration, which manifests itself in the number twelve and in the loaves, of which the twelve tribes, and the twelve apostles, were the expression. Here the heavenly covering was placed immediately upon the golden table; the part properly divine put on the heavenly character. Upon this covering were put the utensils and the loaves, which were covered over with a second covering of scarlet (that is, as it appears to me, human glory and splendour).* This glory and this splendour were of God, but they were human. Over all were the badgers' skins to preserve the whole from evil. This external protection is always needful for any one, save the Person of Christ. Christ was assuredly sheltered from evil; but it was in an internal and deeper manner. That which was heavenly was seen in Him at the first glance by those who had eyes to see: "the second man is the Lord from heaven." {* It is the idea which has been suggested to me by the examination of all the passages in the word where scarlet is mentioned. Saul adorned the maidens of Israel with scarlet and other delights. Babylon is clothed with scarlet. The colour of the beast is scarlet. Scarlet was cast into the fire when the leper, and he who was defiled by a dead body, were purified. Scarlet is a very brilliant colour.}

As regards us, we have within ourselves that which is heavenly; but we must keep it carefully, with a vigilance most decided, and commensurate with the evil we are passing through, and from which it is of consequence we should keep ourselves. Therefore Christ, in His relationship with the government of the world in Israel in the age to come, will put on, in principle, that which is here represented by the badgers' skins, which, in the case of the ark, were inside. There will be in Him the divine character, then the heavenly, then the perfection of human government covered over with the brightness of the glory. In His passage in the wilderness, all this was guarded by a power which, in the wisdom of God, repelled all evil. In the manifestation of the kingdom it will be in the judicial exercise of power. But here we treat of the wilderness. The principle is the same, the repelling of evil, of all injury to the holy thing entrusted to be guarded; only one is moral and spiritual power, the other judicial (see Ps. 101).

The candlestick and its coverings

Next to the table of shewbread came the candlestick, covered with a cloth of blue and badgers' skins. It was the spiritual perfection of the light of the Spirit; that which covered it was simply heavenly, with the covering of badgers' skins, the guard against the injuries which the entrusted grace might receive in the wilderness. All its utensils bore the same character.

The altar of incense and its coverings

The altar of incense (spiritual intercession) was covered in the same manner. I leave these to the spiritual reflections of the reader, and the intelligence of that which has been explained in its principles. It was so with all that was contained in the holy place, for the sanctuary represented the heavenly places.

The brazen altar and its coverings

With regard to the brazen altar it was different. Its covering was a purple cloth, the royal colour. If we suffer, we shall reign. There is a connection between the cross and the crown upon the earth and in heaven. Thus was it with Christ, the King of the Jews, according to the superscription written on the cross; and the very throne of God was the answer to His sufferings, inasmuch as He was the burnt-offering, offered according to the power of the eternal Spirit acting in man, according to the exigency of the divine majesty.* But what was thus crowned was perfection itself; that which was being accomplished in man, according to the energy of the eternal Spirit, was also divine; so that the Lord could say, "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again." {* The comparison of Psalms 19, 20, 21, 22 is, under this point of view, most interesting. Psalm 19 contains testimonies of the creation and the law; Psalm 20 presents Messiah suffering, but externally, so that man can take an interest in Him; Psalm 21 Messiah exalted, and, as a consequence, vengeance striking His enemies who had rejected Him; Psalm 22 His sufferings as forsaken by God Himself. This is the expression of Christ alone, whilst in Psalms 20, 21 the Jewish remnant were speaking of His outward sufferings. There is no vengeance in connection with those sufferings consequent on His being forsaken of God, for it was expiation; there is nothing but blessing, which the

mouth of the Saviour announces, and to which He Himself responded by praising in the midst of His saints. This blessing will extend to the ends of the earth during the millennium.}

However, that which was divine in the act, was divine in the sense of the eternal Spirit acting in man, while the Godhead Itself was the source of it, and on that title it would claim the glory of the Godhead. The circumstances of the death of Jesus were consequent upon His humanity — a truth most precious to us. He was crucified through weakness; He was delivered into the hands of the Gentiles; His throat was dried up, whilst He waited on His God. He was perfect in all these things. They were manifested outwardly, seen of men: it was man. He who could look within saw Him who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God.

Thus all that related to the service was placed on purple; the altar was under this covering. The badgers' skins here, as always, were spread over all.* {* The laver is not among the things to which these commands relate. The reason for this omission is apparent from the explanation we have just given of these figures, and confirms this explanation. The laver did not represent a manifestation of God, the efficacy of which is reproduced in the christian life, or in the glory of Christ; but a means for the purification of man. These directions here, only summarily entered on seem to me, if entered into with spiritual intelligence, full of the deepest import and interest.}

Chapter 5

The purity of the camp as God's dwelling-place in its passage through the world

Let us pursue the study of the book. Chapter 5 presents three things, in connection with the purity of the camp, looked at as the dwelling-place of God, and in connection with our pilgrim passage through the wilderness, which is the great subject of the Book of Numbers; a passage in which all is put to the test, and in which the presence of God ungrieved in the midst of us is our only security, and guidance, and strength.

Defilement purged, wrong done amended, and jealousy tested

Every defilement was to be purged out.

God took knowledge of the wrong done there against a brother. If this be always true, it is the more so when applied to the wrong done to Him, who has not been ashamed to call us His brethren. When the trespass could not be recompensed to the person who had suffered the wrong, or to his kinsman, it was due to God in the person of the priest, beside the sin-offering. In God's camp no wrong could be committed without amends being made for it.

Then comes the question of jealousy. If the faithfulness of Israel, the church, or an individual, to God or to Christ, be questioned, there must be the trial of it. It seems to me that the dust of the tabernacle was the power of death in God's presence, fatal to the natural man, but precious, as the death of sin, for him

who has life. The water is the power of the Holy Ghost acting by the word on the conscience.

Unfaithfulness manifested annd judged by the Spirit of God

The power of the Holy Spirit judging thus (according to the sentence of death against the flesh), the state of unfaithfulness — which was thought to be hidden from the true husband of the people, makes the sin manifest, and brings down the chastening and the curse upon the unfaithful one, and that evidently by the just judgment of God. Drinking death, according to the power of the Spirit, is life to the soul. "By these things," says Hezekiah, "men live, and in all these things is the life of my spirit"; even when they are the effect of chastening, which is not always necessarily the case. But if any of the accursed things be hidden — if there be unfaithfulness towards Jesus, undetected, it may be, by man, and God puts it to the test; if we have allowed ourselves to be enticed by him who has the power of death, and the holy power of God is occupied with death, and comes to deal with this power of the enemy — the concealed evil is laid bare, the flesh is reached; its rottenness and its powerlessness are made manifest, however fair its appearances may be. But if we be free from unfaithfulness, the result of the trial is only negative; it shews that the Spirit of holiness finds nothing to judge, when He applies death according to the holiness of God.

The offering displaying God's judgment of our ways

In the offering without either oil or frankincense, the woman is set before God, according to the judgment of God displayed against sin, in His holiness and majesty, when Christ was made sin for us. Sin which is confessed has never that effect; for the conscience is purified from it by Christ. The unfaithfulness here spoken of, is that of the heart of Israel — of the church to Christ. All these things apply, not to the acceptance of the believer, or of the church as to righteousness — that is treated of where drawing near to God is in question — but to the judgment of our ways in the wilderness journey, inasmuch as God is in our midst.

Unfaithfulness in heart

The church would do well to consider how far she has given herself to another. There are some, assuredly, amongst its members who have not done it in heart. If Christ did not discover the iniquity, and cause it to be judged, He would be, so to speak, identified with the iniquity of the bride, and thus defiled thereby (ver. 31); He will therefore surely do so What is here said of the church may be equally said of each one of its members: remembering here also, that the question is one, not of salvation, but of the walk down here, the walk in the wilderness being ever the subject of this book.* Let us also observe that the soul, or the church, can, in other respects, shew a zeal, an extraordinary devotedness, which are indeed sincere, whilst it falls into a fault which it conceals from itself up to a certain point. But nothing can counterbalance unfaithfulness to one's husband. {* Looked at as a professing whole, or as an individual who makes profession, there may be the discovery that there is nothing real; as the case has been in Israel according to the flesh and will be also in the professing church. They have been unfaithful to their husband.}

Chapter 6

The Nazarite and His separation to God

The Nazarite presents to us another character connected with the walk of the Spirit down here — special separation and devotedness to God. They separated themselves unto Him. Christ is the perfect example of this. The church ought to tread in His footsteps. Cases of special call to devote oneself to the Lord come under this class.

Marks of the Nazarite

There were three things connected with this separation. The Nazarite was to drink no wine; he was to let his hair grow; and he was not to make himself unclean for the dead. Wine designated the joy derived from the pleasures of society, which rejoice the heart of those who give themselves up to them. "Wine which cheers God and man." From the moment Christ began His public service, He was separated from all that nature had its just part in. Invited with His disciples to a marriage, He says to His mother, "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" But in fact even His disciples knew Him "after the flesh."* His intercourse with them was, as to the capacity of their fellowship in it, on the ground of the presenting of the kingdom then as come in the flesh. {* It is a striking fact that in no one case did His disciples understand what He said when He expressed what was in His heart. This was utter isolation.}

The Nazarite character of Christ

As to this too, however, He must take His separate and Nazarite character, and, true as His affection was for His disciples, even in that human sphere where He, who saw through weakness, delighted in the true "excellent of the earth," the poor of the flock that waited on Him, yet He must be separated from this joy too. "I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine," says the Lord, "until that day when I shall drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." He separated Himself indeed from that intercourse which, miserable as even His own were, His love had led Him to desire to have with them. He had said, "With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you." These natural affections were already denied, because God's consecration was upon His head. "What have I to do with thee?" had already expressed this to His mother. It is not that He had not the most tender affection for her; but now He was separated from everything to be God's.* {* The difference of these two phases of the Nazarite character of Christ in His life and in His death is not so great as might appear. He was ever separated from human joy as from all evil — there was no honey as there was no leaven, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief as passing in holy love through a world of sinners — His love driven back, and thus Himself straitened and pent up: the atonement opened its sluices. He is now, in fact, outwardly made separate from sinners. The early rejection of His mother's claim in John has its natural place in John, because in that Gospel He stands from the beginning apart in own Person, and the Jews are a rejected people.}

Renunciation of self in consecration to God

Secondly, the Nazarite let his hair grow: it was neglecting self in yielding oneself to the will of God, renouncing one's dignity and rights as a man; for a long head of hair marked, on the one hand, in a man, the neglect of his person; and on the other, subjection — power on the head (1 Cor. 11:10). It was consecration to God in the giving up of the joy, the dignity, and the natural rights of man (man considered as the centre of the affections proper to him), and that to be wholly God's.

Christ the complete Nazarite

Man has his place as the representative and the glory of God, and in that place he is encompassed by a multitude of affections, joys, and rights, which have their centre in himself. He can give up this place for the special service of God, seeing that sin has entered into all these things, which, far from being bad in themselves, are, on the contrary, good in their proper place. This Christ has done. Having made Himself a Nazarite, He did not take His place as a man, His rights as Son of man; but, for the glory of God, He made Himself completely subject; He submitted to all that that glory required. He identified Himself with the godly remnant of the sinful people whom He had loved, and became a stranger to His mother's children. He did nothing that was not prescribed to Him; He lived by the word that proceeded out of the mouth of God; He separated Himself from all the links of human life to devote Himself to the glory, the service of God, and obedience to Him. If He found, in the love of His own, any consolation, which can only have been very small and poor, He had to give up this also, and with regard to this, as to everything else, become, in His death, a complete Nazarite, alone in His separation to God. The church should have followed Him; but alas! she has taken strong-drink; she has eaten and drunk with the drunken, and has begun to smite the servants of the house.

The believer may be called to deny himself, for the precious service of his Saviour, in things which are not bad in themselves. But this act is accomplished inwardly. "Her Nazarites were purer than snow," says Jeremiah. Devotedness is inward. It is proper to consider here to what those who fail in this separation expose themselves.

Failure and loss, seen in Samson's extreme and solemn case

If we have devoted ourselves to the Lord in a way which is pleasing in His sight, enjoyment follows this devotedness in the measure of the testimony which is rendered to Him. God is with His servant according to His call; but it is a secret between His servant and Himself, though the external effects are seen by others. If we have failed in this separateness, we must begin all afresh: divine influence and power in the work are lost. There may be nothing amiss in other respects; we may arise to shake ourselves, like Samson, but we have lost our strength without being aware of it. God is no longer with us. The case of Samson is an extreme but a solemn one; for it may be that our strength has placed us in the presence of evil, and then, if God be with us, His magnificent glory manifests itself; but if not with us, the enemy has the sad opportunity of glorying over one long known as a champion for God, and apparently over God Himself. In this second alternative the inward secret, the true strength of separation unto God, was lost.

Let us beware, in ordinary things, of the first step that would separate us from inward holiness, and that separation of heart to Him which gives us His secret, light from above on all that is around; for the secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him. If grace has called us to separation for an extraordinary service in anything whatever, let us keep ourselves from any lack of obedience to the word of the cross, whereby we are crucified to the world, sin, and the law.* {* These are the three things to which the cross is applied in the Epistle to the Galatians.}

Beginning again

Generally, the unfaithful Nazarite returns to his separation, through the sacrifice of Christ; he is consecrated anew to God.* But anything which brings us into contact with sin produces its effect on our Nazariteship. We lose the power attached to the communion of God, and the special presence of the Spirit with us, whatever be the measure in which this power was granted to us. Alas! the time which has preceded is lost: we must begin again. It is great grace that all privilege of serving God is not taken from us; but though it be not, we suffer something from the effects of our unfaithfulness, when the power is restored unto us. A blind Samson was obliged to kill himself in killing his enemies. It belongs to us, in any case, immediately to acknowledge our defilement, to go to Christ, and not pretend to be Nazarites externally, when we are not so in the eyes of God. Nothing is more perilous than the service of God, when the conscience is not pure: however, let us ever recollect that we are under grace. {* It is not here his own conscience repurified as to guilt. That is never done. All through here it is not redemption, but the walk of a professing people who have to say to God.}

Nazariteship not for ever

This separateness and this self-denial are not for ever. Even Christ will not always be a Nazarite. He will know fulness of joy with God and His own. He will say, "Eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved." It is by the alone power of the Spirit that we are separated from that which is evil, and often even from that which is natural, to be vessels of service and enjoyment, a testimony to God in the midst of evil. The time will come when, evil being removed, we shall be able to gratify our nature, but it will be a new one; a time in which the operation of the power of the Holy Spirit will only produce joy, and when everything surrounding us will be in communion with us. Then Christ will take a place which it was impossible for Him to take heretofore, although He was ever the perfect sociable man, perfectly accessible to sinners because He was thoroughly separated from them, and set apart for God inwardly, and had denied Himself,* to live only by the words of God. {* Not of course that there was any evil nature in Him to deny as there is in us, but in will and nature where there was no evil; as "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" which I take only as an example. On the cross when all was finished, He carefully owned her. Honey could not be in a sacrifice any more than leaven.}

Such is the life of God here below. That which He has created cannot be bad. God forbid we should think it! Such an assertion is a sure sign of the latter days. Christ could think about His mother with tenderness, when the work of His soul on the cross was done. But the Holy Spirit comes in as a power foreign to this life, and takes up man to make him go through it according to that power; so that, the more man is a stranger to it himself, the more he is able to shew, and does indeed shew, sympathy to

those who are there according to God. Anything else is only monkish. If we are truly free within, we can sympathise with that which is outside; if we are not so, we shall become monks, with the vain hope of obtaining this freedom.

The Nazarite vow fulfilled

Lastly, when the Nazarite vow was fulfilled, all the sacrifices were offered, and the hair of the head of his separation was burnt in the fire which consumed the sacrifice of the peace-offerings: a type of the full communion which is the result of the sacrifice of Christ. When, in the time fixed by God, the sacrifice of Christ shall have obtained, in its effects, its full and entire efficacy, the energising power of separation will merge in the communion which will be the happy consequence of this sacrifice. We are thankful to know that the power of the Holy Spirit, now spent, in a great measure in checking the lusts of the flesh, will then be wholly a power of joy in God, and of communion with all that will surround us.

The ways of God when the Nazarite vow is ended

Let us now speak of the ways of God when the Nazarite vow is ended. Then the result of the work of Christ will be produced; all the varied efficacy of His sacrifice will be acknowledged; His people will enter into the communion of His joy; wine will be taken with joy. Jesus Himself awaits that time. I believe this specially applies to His people here below, to the Jewish remnant in the latter days. Their partaking of the Holy Ghost will be joy and delight. Something similar, however, awaits us, but in a still better way. So we have this joy by anticipation up to a certain point; for the Holy Spirit produces these two things, the joy of communion, and separation in loneliness for the service of God. It is a little what the apostle means in these words to the Corinthians, "Death works in us, but life in you." However, it can always be said of all Christians, "I would to God ye did reign, that we also might reign with you."

God ends by putting His blessing and His Name on the people

After having placed the people around Himself — having counted them by name, having arranged the service, cleansed the camp (which is distinct from the cleansing of defiled individuals, a subject which belongs to Leviticus), and shewn the true position of the devoted servant, a position which Israel might have taken, and which Christ, true servant, set apart for God, has taken — God ends by putting His blessing and His name on the people. The blessing places them under the keeping, the grace, and in the peace of Jehovah; and effectively Jehovah first blessed them in a general way; then, in making His face to shine upon them, He caused them to enjoy His grace; lastly, in lifting up His countenance upon them, He gave them the assurance of peace.

Chapter 7

United free-will offerings follow purity of the camp, Nazarite consecration and God's blessing

Here ends this part of the book. The camp, arranged according to God's order, is placed under His blessing.* Thereupon the princes of the people offer a free-will-offering to Jehovah, for the service of the sanctuary and the dedication of the altar according to the number of the tribes. This was done with a common understanding, each offering the same, and as to the wagons; jointly not the service of the sanctuary, but the united devotedness and free-will-offerings of the people for the service and consecration of the altar when the people came to God. It was done in tribes; they were Israel's gifts in the finitely perfect unity of the twelve — none wanting in the orderly unity, and as a whole as that completeness stood before God in that day. Then we have the form of the communications of Jehovah to Moses to instruct him in the way. We see that it is in the tabernacle from between the cherubim. It is not now a law to the people from Sinai, a covenant, but the regulation of a people in connection with God. {* Note, chapters 5, 6 give the cleansing of the camp in every way from impurity and wrong, and the consecration of the Nazarite to God, and the blessing. Then comes the free-will-offering. Purity of the camp and personal separation to God — holiness in its twofold character, negative cleansing, and positive consecration to God. Then the freewill-offering. The putting of the name follows the cleansing and consecration.}

Chapters 8 and 9

The pure golden candlestick and its light

Chapter 8 speaks of the candlestick.* The lamps were to make the light shine from it, and cause that light to be diffused around and before it. This is the case when that which is the vessel of the Holy Spirit shines with the light of God. Whether it be Israel or the church, it throws light before it. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." It is because the profession of the Christian is clear and unequivocal that men, seeing his good works, know to whom to attribute them. The candlestick was of pure gold only, beaten work; it was properly divine, and that only, God's light in the sanctuary. The twelve loaves, connected with what was divine, were the government of God in man; the table was of wood, though overlaid with gold; the number we have seen as marking divine government, but in man, specially true of Israel, but the testimony of God in light is purely divine. {* The introduction of this type at this place shews how much the order of the types, and their introduction in such or such a place, refers to the things typified and to their moral order.}

The purification of the Levites and their consecration to Jehovah's service

We have next the purification of the Levites and their consecration to the service of Jehovah. This prefigures the consecration of the members of the church to God for service. The Levites were sprinkled,* then shorn like the lepers, and their clothes washed, all their manifested life purified according to the purification of the sanctuary, their ways suited to the service of God. After that the

whole people laid their hands upon them, and they laid theirs upon the sacrifices. In the offerings which accompanied their consecration there was no peace-offering, because it was a question of service and not of communion; but the sacrifices which represented the efficacy of the atonement, and the devotedness unto death of the Lord Jesus, were offered, and characterised the ground and nature of their service. They are the double character of the death of Christ. The meat-offering was there also with the burnt-offering; all that constituted Christ as an offering to God, glorifying God in death as regards sin, bearing sins, and also in living perfection and devotedness fully tried in the fire, were found. In the application the sin-offering comes first. {* The leper was washed, not merely sprinkled. He was outside the camp, wholly unclean before God. It was cleansing, not consecration; he had been, before the washing, brought under the blood-sprinkling — the full abiding efficacy of Christ's work in itself. Then he was washed with water, cleansed personally in the power of the Spirit and word, according to that water that came out of Christ's side. His clothes or outward demeanour were even cleansed too, and all that could harbour defilement removed. Here it was the consecration of those who, in an ordinary sense were clean and within. The sprinkling was a sign calling to remembrance consecration according to Christ's death, what was fit for the sanctuary, bringing them into that conscious separation to God's service; and so their clothes, their outward demeanour, were washed. It was all of the same nature — the water — but with the leper it was the body of sin destroyed, cleansing from it so as not to serve it. Here it was consecration too.}

The people's identification with the Levites

The children of Levi belonged to Jehovah as His redeemed, having been saved, when He judged sin, and themselves offered as an offering to Jehovah. The laying on of hands identified with the victim the person who did so. If it were an offering for sin, the offering was identified with the sinner in his sin; if it were a burnt-offering, the offerer was identified with the value of the consecration to God's glory of the victim in respect of sin. Romans 15:16 is an allusion to this consecration of the Levites, and considers the church as thus offered to God from among the Gentiles. The Israelites having also laid their hands upon the Levites, the whole people were, so to speak, identified in this consecration with them, as an offering made by them to Jehovah, so that the Levites represented them before Him.

We find here again, what we have already seen, that the Levites were given to Aaron and his sons, as the church is given to Christ, the true Priest and Son over the house of God, to be used in the service of the house. They were first offered by Israel to Jehovah for His service by Aaron the priest (ver. 11); it was a wave-offering (tenupha); that is, they were presented before the Lord as consecrated to Him. Then (ver. 13) they were set before Aaron and his sons, and so under their hand given to the Lord, wholly given to Him instead of the firstborn (vers. 16-19). How solemn and perfect is the offering up of the servant of the Lord to Him, according to the purification of the sanctuary and all the value and true character of Christ's offering of Himself to God, and the divine judgment of sin.* {* They served from 25 to 50, the first five years a kind of noviciate, as after 50 they ministered, but were not charged with the service.}

Israel under the difrect Fatherly government of God in the wilderness

The passover, the memorial of redemption, and in consequence the symbol of the unity* of the people of God, as an assembly redeemed by Him, is obligatory during the journey through the wilderness.** Only God makes a provision, in grace and forbearance, for those who were not able to keep it according to His will, to whom it had reference. {* In Israel this unity was simply that of a people redeemed together to the enjoyment of a common portion, not a body as the church. ** Yet those who had only wilderness character were not in a condition to keep it. None born there were circumcised till they came to Gilgal across the Jordan.}

But these provisions of forbearance and grace kept continually present the idea of a redeemed people and one under the direct fatherly government of God. Besides this we have the precious declaration that God Himself conducted His people by His presence. At His commandment they pitched; at His commandment they journeyed. They kept the charge of Jehovah, according to the commandment of Jehovah. God grant that we, who have His Spirit, may thus be led in all things, to stay or to go entirely under His immediate direction! If we are near God in His communion, we shall be guided by His eye; if not, we shall be guided by His eternal providence, as horses, and mules, with bits and bridles, that we may not stumble.

Chapter 10

The silver trumpets

Chapter 10 speaks of the silver trumpets which served for calling the assembly of the people, and for the journeying of the camps, but which serve also for other purposes. It was the testimony of God, rendered publicly, with two chief ends in view; to gather the people, and to make them journey. It is so indeed, practically; the testimony of God gathers His people around Him, and makes them go forward. The testimony of God was the sign of His intervention, whilst, at the same time, its result was to produce it. The priests who, in communion with their head, were to be in the intimacy of the thoughts of God, sounded the trumpets when needed.

All was thus done according to communion with God in His sanctuary. After the people were brought into the land, if war arose, they sounded an alarm: they proclaimed the testimony of God, without being afraid, and God remembered His people and interfered. So with us, we need never fear the attack of the enemy; instead of being frightened, let us give a faithful testimony, in answer to which God has pledged Himself to come in in power. Let us not fear: in nothing terrified by our adversaries.

The trumpets were also used in the solemn feasts; for the testimony and the memorial of God constitute the joy of His gathered people. Thus the whole people in national unity and order, were assembled as the camp where God was, and were to march in like order. All was complete for the order of the people, and the service of Jehovah.

The order of the march: precedence of the ark

At length the people are called to take the first stage of their journey. The order followed in the march differs from that which had been prescribed, in this, that the tabernacle, with its curtains, went after the first three tribes, that it might be set up to receive the ark, which followed the second division. Still this was merely a detail in the arrangements, to have all ready when the ark arrived. But God appears in a remarkable manner in grace, outside the whole order He had prescribed; for it is the ark itself which precedes the whole camp. Moses had asked a child of the wilderness to be to them instead of eyes; but what man does not care to do, God takes upon Himself. He comes out of the place which He had taken in the midst of the tribes, to be taken care of, so to speak, and honoured there, and makes Himself, in some sort, their servant, seeking a place where they might rest in the trackless desert.

A place of rest in the wilderness

It was not in Canaan, but a place in the wilderness, where the Lord went a three days' journey to seek a rest for them. A beautiful picture of the tender and precious grace of Him who, if He makes us pass through the wilderness for our good, does not fail to be there with us, and who takes care, in putting out His sheep, to go before them, and to solace them with His love. Mighty leader of His people by the way, He is their joy and their glory when He comes to rest in their midst!

This closes the divinely instituted order of the camp and the grace that led them through the wilderness. Compare Psalm 132:8, where God at the close of Israel's history (anticipating David) arises into His rest. Psalm 68 is God's intervention to establish the rest.

Chapter 11

The murmuring of the people and God's answer

We are now brought to turn our thoughts in another direction — to see the conduct of the people in the wilderness, and alas! what is it except a history of unfaithfulness and rebellion? Let us add, however, that it is also that of the forbearance and the grace of God. It is an extremely humbling and instructive picture. We shall briefly review the different forms of unbelief which are here presented to us.

The first thing we find, after the sweet manifestation of the love of God, is the murmuring of the people. They complain of fatigue, where God is seeking a resting-place for them. God chastens them. Humbled, they cry unto Moses, and upon his intercession the chastening is removed; but their heart remains alienated from the Lord, and, seduced by the mixed multitude who accompanied them, and to whom Canaan was not a land of promise, they get wearied with the manna. How often does Christ, the bread of life, not suffice a heart not in communion with God! The heart seeks elsewhere for its nourishment; it wants something else; it remembers what the flesh used to enjoy in the world, whilst it forgets the bondage in which it was held. It knows no more the power of the word — "he that comes to me shall never hunger."

God grants the people the object of their desires: instead of being ashamed when they see that God is equally able to satisfy them in the wilderness, they greedily gather the quails, and the wrath of God falls

upon this wicked people.

Moses' complaint and God's answer

Moses, wearied of them as of a heavy burden, complains, in his turn, of his glorious position. God relieves him of the weight of his charge, but not without upbraiding him; and He adjoins seventy persons to him to help him in bearing it. The Spirit of God acts in two of them, though they do not present themselves to receive it where Moses was: they prophesy in the camp. Joshua, jealous of the glory of his master, wishes them to be silenced. But if Moses,* unable to bear the weight of his glory, has been obliged to share it with others, and, up to a certain point, lose part of it, he shews at least, in this circumstance, the depth of the grace that was in him. He does not envy those who prophesy in the camp. "Would God," he says, "that all were prophets!" {* Remark here the difference even in the blessed apostle's faith, comparing chapter 11:12 here and Galatians 4:19: see also 2 Corinthians 11:28. It is possible that this failure of Moses under the pressure of the weight of the people, giving occasion to the prophesying in the camp, was the occasion also of the rising up of Miriam and Aaron against him. At any rate God maintained the authority of His servant, who, as to himself, held his ground by unfeigned meekness, and leaving all that concerned himself to God.}

There is something very beautiful in the spirit which animated this servant of God. Finally, whatever may be God's arrangements, He is sovereign in the dispensations of His Spirit.

Chapter 12

Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses

After that (for what form will not rebellion assume?) Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses. It is the prophetess and the priest (one who has the word from God and access to God, the twofold character of the people of God), who rise up against him who is king in Jeshurun, with whom God speaks as unto His friend. In this Moses is in all respects a type of Christ, who stands personally outside the rights which grace has conferred upon the people. Faithful in all the house of God, he enjoys close intercourse with Him. Miriam and Aaron ought to have been afraid. The excuse of the two rebels was, that Moses had taken an Ethiopian woman — a blessed sign for us of the sovereignty of grace which has introduced into the blessing of Christ those who had no right or title to it. The people of God, whatever their privileges, ought to have recognised this sovereignty. Israel would not, and was smitten with leprosy. It is, however, in their character of witness or prophet that they suffer this chastening.

Aaron as intercessor, and the position of Moses

Aaron resumes his place of intercessor, and speaks humbly to Moses (a figure, I think, of the humiliation of Israel, grounded on the value of the intercession of Christ, identifying Himself with the position of the people). God's answer is, that Miriam should be humbled and chastened, shut out, for a time, from intercourse with Him, then restored to favour again. The people wait for her restoration. Let

us remember that the Lord here recalls this fact, that the most glorious position for Moses was that when he was separated from the people — when he pitched his tent without the camp, and called it the tabernacle of the congregation or meeting. The people had but too much forgotten this. When the members of the church also, in the thought of making themselves spiritual, take advantage of their glory and position as prophets and priests (characters which do indeed belong to them), to disown the rights of Christ, as king in Jeshurun, having authority over the house of God, there is room for considering whether they are not guilty of the rebellion here spoken of. For my part, I believe they are.

Chapters 13 and 14

Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses

Next, the pleasant land is despised. I shall here call the attention of the reader to some points mentioned on this subject in other parts of the Bible. See Deuteronomy 1:20-23.

Jehovah has brought the people to the borders of the land; Moses tells them to go up. The people propose sending spies; Moses consents. It seems that they had God's sanction, for they went according to the word of the Lord. But this request was prompted by the weakness and unbelief of the people. There are many things commanded of God, and which we are bound to do as soon as they are the object of a command from Him, in the result of which His ways are displayed, which, however, are only owing to our lack of faith. The consequence of it is, that the result abundantly confirms the faith of the faithful, of the remnant; but unbelief reaps what it has sown. So it is in this case. First, the report brought to Moses is in a right spirit; but the difficulties immediately present themselves, and unbelief measures them with man, instead of with God. Then the witnesses draw their words from the people's feelings, and express a judgment founded on their unbelief.

Having thus entirely departed in heart from the Lord, and fallen into the current of the unbelief of the people, through their own, they belie the convictions they had formed when enjoying the sight of the goodness of Jehovah, and come to declare that the land even is bad, and end with justifying themselves by complaining of God. For now it is no longer Moses who has brought them here, it is God Himself; they accuse Him of it. Moreover, they cannot contain their rage against those whose faithful testimony condemns their unbelief.

The consequences of the unbelief of the mass

How often is this the case, that the difficulties which draw out the unbelief of the heart lead to speak evil of the position to which we have been divinely called, and of which once we had tasted the blessedness! All flowed from forgetfulness of God: Was He a grasshopper, in comparison with the sons of Anak? What matter if walls were high, if they fell down at the blowing of a ram's horn? But now God Himself interferes. They will be dealt with according to their faith; they shall perish in the wilderness, according to their wish. The faithful ones and the children will alone be brought into the land; but not without undergoing, in their march, the consequences of the unbelief of the mass. However, other hopes and other consolations will be their portion.

Moses' intercession and its effect

The effect of the intercession of Moses is to obtain from God that the people should be spared; but this is His declaration — He will be glorified in judgment over a rebellious people who despise the promises, and the earth shall thus be filled with His glory. Moses here appeals to the revelation of the name of Jehovah, on which footing He governs the people, and not to the promises made to the fathers; and the answer he receives is in keeping with that name. Caleb prefigures the faithful remnant; Joshua is not named (ver. 24), for he represents Christ introducing the people into the land of promise.

Unbelief gives no escape from difficulties

At the end of the forty years Caleb was obliged to subdue, name for name, the same persons who had filled the souls of the spies with terror. Unbelief, when in spite of it we are to enjoy the effects of the promise, does not make us escape the difficulties. In fine, when we have judged the folly of unbelief, and we see the consequences of it, it is of no avail, because of these last, to undertake a work. God is not with us; and, if we persist in going up, we shall find the enemy such as our unbelief has pictured him to us.

Chapter 15

Jehovah's rest in His fore-ordained counsels in spite of Israel's unbelief

After all this unbelief of the people, when God had declared that the earth should be filled with His glory, by the cutting off of the rebellious congregation, and when one might have supposed they had forfeited the land for ever, it is perfectly beautiful, in chapter 15, to see the Lord returning into the perfect rest of His fore-ordained counsels, and of His immutable being, and giving instructions relative to the time when the people shall have entered the land He has given them. It speaks of the offerings of righteousness they are invited to bring to Him of their free-will, and of the wine of joy which was to accompany these offerings; and as this is grace, the love of God reaches out beyond Israel, and, bringing the stranger near to His people, He makes one law for both. The firstfruits belong to Him. The sins of ignorance are forgiven by means of the sacrifice required by the perfectness of the ways of God. The sin committed presumptuously alone brings destruction. God orders them to put upon the fringe of the borders of their garments a riband of blue, that they may remember His commandments, and be kept from that which would render them profane. The heavenly principle must enter into the minutest details of life, even into those that are nearest to the earth, if we wish to escape the serious evils which bring down the judgment of God. The introduction of the stranger in this chapter is of the highest interest, as a testimony to grace. But we have not, as yet, seen the final apostasy which brings down the judgment at the very moment when it is accomplished.

Chapter 16

The open rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram

Numbers 16 contains the open rebellion against Moses of Dathan and Abiram, but especially the pretension of the ministry in Israel to arrogate priesthood to itself. Some of the chiefs of the people were indeed parties in this rebellion, and for a moment all the people, but too well prepared, were led away by the ambition of a man who discharged the functions of the ministry. The New Testament calls it "the gainsaying of Core"; he is the first addressed by Moses; and the main point of the sin, as Moses insists on it, was this taking too much upon them by the sons of Levi. He drew others in by flattering them, but to the assumption of official priesthood. Dathan and Abiram's was a side question of Moses's authority, of the word of God by him, and the judgment was a thing apart. But this claim of priesthood by the ministry is identified with open rebellion against God in the authority of His word as borne by Moses. It is not, however, the corruption of ministry in teaching error itself, as the distinction made by Jude shews us.

"The gainsaying of Core;" revolt against the authority of Christ

In Cain we see natural wickedness; in Balaam, who taught error for a reward, religious corruption in teaching; in Core, the gainsaying which brings destruction. Let us remember that Jude treats of the results, and the end reserved to the corruption and the corrupters of Christianity. The gainsaying of Core is a revolt against the authority of Christ, and the distinctive character* of His priesthood: a revolt excited by a man, who, occupying the position of a minister, pretends that he is a priest, and sets aside in doing so the only true heavenly priesthood of Christ. {* It is ecclesiastical evil; but as regards the rebellion, the evil went farther. It was the pretension of ministry to be priesthood. That is the evil pointed out by Moses, though Core brought others near also (vers. 8-10).}

Reuben was the eldest son of Israel, and Core was of the most favoured family among the Levites. The tribe of Reuben and the family of Core were near each other in the camp; but nothing of this is apparent in the motives which led them to act.

The judgment of God

In a word, it was open rebellion and audacity presenting itself before God Himself. God soon put an end to their pretensions, for "Who has hardened himself against him and has prospered?" Moses appeals to Him. Dathan and Abiram take advantage of the effect of the unbelief of the assembly, who might have been in Canaan already, to throw the blame of it upon Moses. As to Core, Moses announces that God will shew who is holy and whom He has chosen. Core and the two hundred and fifty princes of the assembly are consumed; Dathan, Abiram, and theirs swallowed up. But the spirit of rebellion had laid hold of the whole assembly. On the morrow they murmur against Moses and Aaron, saying: "Ye have killed the people of the Lord" — a convenient name to aggrandise themselves. Now, the priesthood and the intercession of Aaron are made evident. Aaron, with a censer, stands between the dead and the living, and the plague is stayed.

The priesthood and intercession of Aaron made evident

We shall see the importance of this last remark in what follows, and what is the principle on which alone, considering sins and the flesh, God can bring His people through the wilderness. There that priesthood is needed which Core had despised; but it is by priesthood alone that man can get through the wilderness with God.* Moses, in replying to Core, declares that God will shew whom He had chosen for this end; and this He soon does in fact. Moses, vexed at the contempt and the injustice of Dathan and Abiram, appeals to the justice and the judgment of God. God intervenes by a judgment of pure destruction. But the glory and the house of God are at stake, when the question is, By whom is He to be approached? Now, authority is insufficient to conduct such as we are through the wilderness. The flesh is rebellious, and the last resource of authority is destruction. But this does not lead a people to a good end for the glory of God, though He is therein glorified in righteousness. {* There is no question here of union with Christ (it was yet the hidden mystery), nor even of being sons; it is the passage of pilgrims through the wilderness. In this character we are viewed as apart from Christ, as in Hebrews. I add here that we get a difference between priesthood and advocacy (Heb. and John). In Hebrews it is priesthood for mercy, and grace to help in time of need; advocacy is to restore communion when we have sinned.}

Moses, then, in that character of authority which strikes in righteousness, is powerless as regards bringing the people into Canaan. It is priesthood, which the rebellion had so despised, which is invested with authority over His rebellious people. It is Christ the priest, in His grace and goodness, who leads us through the wilderness. This is the conclusion we come to at the end of the narrative we have of the journeying of the people of God.

Chapters 17 and 18

Aaron's rod

From Numbers 17 to 20 this subject is set forth with the circumstances relative to it. First, the authority of Aaron is established by signs shewn by the power of God, in his rod, put with the others near God — the source of all authority. The power of life and blessing displays itself with a rapidity which makes manifest the presence of God. The buds, the flowers, and the fruit grow on dry wood. Priesthood, living and victorious over death, through divine efficacy,* must lead the people; God's authority is entrusted to it. {* That is grace; righteous judgment could destroy, but not bring through; grace alone can.}

The carnal people, always astray, bold just before in the presence of the majesty of God, are afraid of His presence now that His grace manifests itself, and say that they cannot draw near Him. This opens the way for still deeper views on the place that priesthood holds in general.

The place of the priests and Levites clearly defined

In Numbers 18 the place of priesthood is clearly defined, as well as that of the Levites. The priests alone draw near to the holy place; they alone are allowed this intimacy with God. But, in consequence

of their position, there are sins, iniquities which they are called to bear, as an effect of this proximity, which would not be remarked among those who are outside. That which is unbecoming the presence and the sanctuary of God does not become His priests. They bear the iniquity of the holy place. If the people disobeyed the law, doubtless they were punished; but that which defiled the sanctuary fell upon Aaron and his sons. What, then, is the measure of holiness given to the children of God — alone true priests? It is the purification of the sanctuary itself, not what is fit for man, but what is fit for God. The service of the Levites, and the Levites themselves were given as a gift to the priests. Priesthood also was a pure gift to Aaron and his sons. Because of the anointing, the most holy things were given them to eat, which was a special privilege of the priests. The same thing is true with regard to us.

The food of the priests

Whatever is precious in the offering of Christ, in every point of view — in His life and in His death; in that bread come down from heaven, contemplated in His life of devotedness and grace here below; and in His death for us — all is the food and nourishment of our souls, in that communion with God in which we ourselves are kept in our priesthood. The priests alone ate the holy things, and they ate them in a holy place. It is only in the sense of the presence of God, and under the efficacy of that oil which is not poured on flesh, that we can truly realise what is precious in the work of Christ.

The holy things eaten in the most holy place; the priests accounted as being there in spirit

Verse 10 presents something very remarkable; for what is here said, and nowhere else, is that they were to eat them in the most holy place, the holy of holies. There is no difficulty in the terms. I have sometimes thought that it might mean, from among the most holy things; but if it be not that, the meaning is then in the holy of holies, and only relates to the antitype. That is, it is only in the presence and before the throne of the sovereign God Himself that we can really feed on that precious food. Historically the priests were not there; being in the sanctuary of God, they were accounted as being there.

Distinction in the joys of the household of God

There were things which, though truly belonging to the priestly family, were not properly eaten in the priestly character, such as the heave-offerings, the wave-offerings; the daughters ate of them as well as the sons: all that were clean in the house could partake of them. Thus, in the joys of the children of God, there are some that belong to them as a family. We enjoy our blessings and all that is offered by man to God. It is a joy for the soul.

All that the Spirit of Christ works to the glory of God, even in His members, and still more what He has done in Christ Himself, is the food of the soul of the household of God, and strengthens them. Do not our souls enjoy those firstfruits, the best of the new wine and the wheat — the firstfruits of that noble harvest of God, the produce of His seed on the soil of His election? Yes, we enjoy them in thinking of

them. But the sin-offering, the trespass-offerings, the meat-offerings, all that in which we share in spirit in the deep work of Christ, is only eaten in the character and the spirit of a priest.

We must, according to the efficacy of this work of Christ, enter into the spirit in which He presents Himself after His sacrifice, moved by His perfect love, in the presence of the Most High — enter into the sentiments of love, of devotedness in the consciousness of the holiness of God; in a word, into the feelings with which He presents Himself as a priest before Him, in order to connect, by love and the efficacy of His offering, the holiness of God, with the blessing of him who has sinned — to realise that which is precious in Christ in that work, to share in it (for so it is) in grace. And, effectively, that only takes place in the most holy place, in the presence of God, where He appears for us.

In fine, whether the joys of the family of God's house, or this holy participation in spirit in the work of Christ, all we have just been speaking about belongs to the priesthood. Even the Levites were to recognise in all that God gave them as strangers in the land of promise, the rights and the authority of the priests.

Priestly joy and Levitical service

Now, if we make the distinction between the two, all believers are priests; ministers, in their capacity of ministers, are only Levites. Their service (besides that which is towards the world, a character which the dispensation did not bear, and which, therefore, is not the subject here) is to minister to the priestly joy and service of the saints with God. Our service will meet with reward in heaven, our priestly place will be nearness to God and joy in Him.

It is evident that partaking in spirit (to partake in it in reality is of course impossible) in the sacrifice of Christ for sin, in eating of it as a priest, is a very holy thing, a privilege enjoyed in a very holy place; everything is specially holiness here.

Chapter 19

The Red Heifer: the reason this sacrifice is placed here

But if, on the one hand, priesthood must lead the people through the wilderness, and if Moses's rod of authority cannot do this, if it can only smite; on the other, there must be a provision connected with it for removing the defilements taking place during the journey, that the communion of the people with God may not be interrupted. That is the reason why the sacrifice of the heifer is placed here, apart from all the others, because it was prescribed in order to meet the defilements of the wilderness.

But if the consideration of Christ (even though it be Christ offered for sin, and the participation in His priestly work, in connection with that sacrifice) was a most holy thing realised in the communion of the most holy place; being occupied with that sin, even in a brother, and that to purify him, defiled even those who were not guilty of it.

God's provision for the defilements of the wilderness

These are the subjects of Numbers 19. What follows is the ordinance given on this occasion. To touch a dead body was indeed being defiled with sin; for sin is here considered under the point of view of defilement which precluded the entrance into the court of the tabernacle. Christ is presented in the red heifer as unspotted by sin, and as never having borne the yoke of it either; but He is led forth without the camp, as being wholly a sacrifice for sin. The priest who brought the heifer did not kill it; but it was killed in his presence. He was there to take knowledge of the deed.

The death of Christ is never the act of priesthood. The heifer was completely burned without the camp, even its blood, except that which was sprinkled directly before the tabernacle of the congregation, that is, where the people were to meet God. There the blood was sprinkled seven times (because it was there that God met with His people), a perfect testimony in the eyes of God to the atonement made for sin. They had access there according to the value of this blood.

The priest threw into the fire cedar-wood, hyssop, and scarlet (that is, all that was of man, and his human glory in the world). "From the cedar down to the hyssop," is the expression of nature from her highest elevation to her lowest depth. Scarlet is external glory (the world, if you please). The whole was burned in the fire which consumed Christ, the sacrifice for sin.

Then, if anybody contracted defilement, though it were merely through neglect, in whatever way it might be, God took account of the defilement. And this is a solemn and important fact: God provides for cleansing, but in no case can tolerate anything in His presence unsuited to it. It might seem hard in an inevitable case, as one dying suddenly in the tent. But it was to shew that for His presence God judges of what is suited to His presence. The man was defiled and he could not go into God's tabernacle.

The means of cleansing linked with the sacrifice

To cleanse the defiled person, they took some running water, into which they put the ashes of the heifer, and the man was sprinkled on the third and on the seventh days; then he was clean: signifying that the Spirit of God, without applying anew the blood to the soul (that in the type had been sprinkled once for all when the people met God), takes the sufferings of Christ (the proof that sin and all that is of the natural man and of the world have been consumed for us in His expiatory death), and applies them to it.

It is the proof, the intimate conviction, that nothing is nor can be imputed. It was in this respect wholly done away in the sacrifice, whose ashes (the witness that it was consumed) are now applied. But it produces upon the heart the deeply painful conviction that it has got defiled, notwithstanding redemption, and by the sins for which Christ has suffered in accomplishing it. We have found our will and pleasure, if only for a moment, in what was the cause of His pain; and this in the face of His sufferings for sin, but, alas! in forgetfulness of them — even for that sin the motions of which we yield to so lightly now: a feeling much deeper than that of having sins imputed. For it is in reality the new man, in his best feelings, who judges by the Spirit and according to God, and who takes knowledge of

the sufferings of Christ and of sin, as seen in Him on the cross.

The sprinkling with water repeated

The first feeling is bitterness, although without the thought of imputation — bitterness, precisely because there is no imputation, and that we have sinned against love as well as against holiness, and that we must submit to that conviction. But lastly (and it seems to me it is the reason why there was the second sprinkling), it is the consciousness of that love, and of the deep grace of Jesus, and the joy of being perfectly clean, through the work of that love. The first part of the cleansing was the sense of the horror of sinning against grace; the second, the mind quite cleared from it by the abounding of grace over the sin.

Practical resotration of the soul

We may remark that, as it is merely the needed purifying for the way, nothing else is noticed; no sacrifices, as in the case of the leper. There it was drawing nigh to God, according to the value of Christ's work, when cleansed from sin. Here it is the practical restoration of the soul inwardly. There is no sprinkling with blood: the purifying is by water, Christ's death being fully brought in in its power by the Holy Ghost. The details shew the exactness of God, as to these defilements though He cleanses us from them. They shew also that any one who has to do with the sin of another, though it be in the way of duty to cleanse it, is defiled; not as the guilty person, it is true, but we cannot touch sin without being defiled. The value of grace and of priesthood is also made evident.

Chapter 20

Miriam's death, and the gathering of the people against Moses and Aaron

Miriam the prophetess dies; this character of testimony is closed. Israel grows old, so to speak, in the wilderness; and the voice which sang songs of triumph in coming up from the depths of the Red Sea is silent in the tomb. Also they lacked water. The journey was still prolonged. The resources were far from increasing; on the contrary, what there had been of joy and testimony was vanishing. They gather themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. God directs them to the provision He had made against murmurings. If we have just witnessed His holiness, we see now His resources and His blessing.

God's resources and His grace

"Take the rod," says God — He knows of no other now — "and speak unto the rock, and it shall give forth its water." There is nothing to be done but to shew the sign of grace (of priesthood intervening on the part of God in the grace with which He has clothed His authority), and to speak the word, and the wants of the people shall be immediately supplied. It was not precisely, that grace which had followed the people from the Red Sea to Sinai; nor was it, either, authority punishing sin; but it was grace taking

priestly knowledge of sin and wants; restoring from the defilements of the one, and obtaining all that met the others.

Moses' trespass against God

But Moses, whilst taking the rod according to the commandment of God, soured by the rebellion of the people, thinks of his authority and their rebellion; he does not apprehend the counsels of grace, and speaks unadvisedly: "Must we fetch you water out of this rock?" Before, it was "What are we that ye murmur against us?" The rebellion of the people and the contempt of his authority have got a firmer hold on his mind than the intelligence of the grace of God; "he smites the rock with his rod." The first time this must needs have been done. Christ needs to have been smitten, that water might come out, in the behalf of His people; but there can be no repetition of this smiting.

God's sanctification of Himself in grace

Now under the priesthood we have only to speak according to the living power of this priesthood, which God has established, and there is an answer in grace to all our wants. The fruit and the blossom would be spoiled, if I may so speak, by smiting with it. It is not the thought presented in it. Moses did not sanctify God; he did not sufficiently value the character which God had assumed; he did not respect God in the position He had deigned to take; but God sanctified Himself the more, by acting in grace and quenching the thirst of the people in spite of this. Moses glorified himself, and before God he was abased. He did not know how to abandon the position he had been placed in, to have sympathy with the thoughts of the abounding, sovereign, and good grace of his God, which surpassed in compassion the justice and authority under which He had placed His people. God, however, does not forsake His poor servant. How insignificant we are in comparison with His grace! The grace of priesthood can alone bring such a people as we are through the wilderness.* {* This is the character of the Epistle to the Hebrews: perfectness through Christ's offering as to conscience; but going through the wilderness, and so constant dependence but infallible faithfulness in Him on whom we depend. The mediatorial character of this is priesthood, consequent upon our sins being put away.}

Israel's entrance into the land hindered by enemies near of kin; the death of Aaron

But the wandering of Israel is drawing towards its close; and we now come to the enemies who oppose its ending, and the entering of the people into the desired land, that land of promise, so long sought after. Edom, full of jealousy, will not let the way be shortened; Israel turns away from him. There are people who oppose us, and from whom it is right to turn away, on account of some external relation existing between them and ourselves, though they are animated with an implacable hatred: we must know how to discern them. God will judge them in His own time; our hand must not be upon them. As to the enemies of God, they must be our enemies; where the power of the enemy is evident, it is God's war. But we meet in the way with those who are descended from the sources of promise, although after the flesh, and who are characterised by the flesh; we leave them to God: it is His prerogative to judge of

them. The occasion for war is not apparent; it would not be legitimate for the people. Now Aaron also departs. Service in the end takes another character.* {* With his death the wilderness history closes. Provision for defilement on the way had been given. Moses clings to law, and does not avail himself of Aaron's rod (priesthood grace), and on this footing cannot take the people into the land. We have this order in this transition period: provision for defilement on the way (Num. 19); the priesthood given up, and so no entrance into the land; then the perpetual hatred of the elder brother, the outward fleshly descendant of the risen man in relentless opposition to the called people. Aaron dies, and wilderness grace closes; the power of Satan overcome, and through weariness (their own fault and want of faith) the deadliness of sin comes in, and the great remedy; Arad's power being resisted is destroyed. But from Numbers 21:4, it is the state of the soul, the heart gone back to Egypt; Christ (the manna) is despised. The power of the enemy when they were faithful was nothing. Unfaithfulness, murmuring against God, brings them into the sting of death. If they despise the bread of life, they get the fatal sting of death in judgment. There was healing by the look of faith on Christ lifted up for us. This is not priesthood for the journey, but an absolute remedy for death by sin. It is in general what God is for the people outside wilderness care. Then the refreshings of the Spirit and word — the digged well. We have, further, victorious power over all their enemies, though outside Jordan and uncircumcised. It is God for His people in spite of their imperfect state; closing with their full justification, character, and blessing as in God's mind.}

Chapter 21

Enemies and difficulties to be met; the brazen serpant lifted up

The question is not here to conduct the people with patience through the wilderness, where the flesh manifested itself; but there are enemies and difficulties to be met; for there are difficulties distinct from the conduct and the patience of life. The Israelites fight with the Canaanites in the south, though they have not got into the land. But the king of the Canaanites has been informed of their coming by the presence of the spies. This was another fruit of the want of boldness of faith which had caused them to be sent. How little we gain by the prudence of unbelief! It gives occasion to the power and attacks of the enemy.

However, though these enemies seem to prevail at first when Israel allow themselves to be attacked, when the Israelites are ready utterly to destroy them God delivers them up to them. Take notice of this. But the people, wearied, murmur again, for the way was long. They were fighting with the Canaanites without yet possessing the land; the question was only about destroying their power and yet possessing nothing. It was the power of evil and that only, and resisted and put down as such. It was for God's sake and His glory only. On their murmurs God interferes and makes them feel all the power of the enemy, the old serpent. Christ made sin for us is the only perfectly efficacious remedy. The mere sight of that wonder procures healing, for the efficacy is in the thing itself before God. Faith sees Christ made sin for us.

The question is not here about leading the people, but of answering the judgment of God, either final or in the way of chastening, and the power of the enemy against us in the face of that judgment, and even

as the effect of that judgment. In such a case the question is between our souls and God; it is a question of death, or simply of the death of Jesus. We must submit to that, as being in an irremediable condition, and, submitting to God's righteousness, look to His ordinance — that is, to Christ lifted up for us.

The springing well in the wilderness

Next, Israel goes forward, but they are not yet in the land. God relieves and refreshes them of His own free grace, without their murmuring. He gathers the people. Israel celebrates anew, close by the land, the wells which are found in the wilderness. They can now say themselves, "Spring up, O well"; no more rock to smite, no more murmurings near the land. Life at the end of their course is no longer the question: it is salvation from the deadly wound of the serpent. They are healed; they walk and drink with joy and songs of praise. They dug — for their activity displayed itself in the presence of the grace of God — and the water sprang up in the wilderness.

THe beginning of the realization of the promises

We meet with people with whom we do not wish to have war, but they will not let us pass peaceably. Our warfare is with the possessors of our inheritance beyond Jordan. If we are attacked, we must defend ourselves; but we are not to be aggressors. Israel wishes to pass quietly through the land of the Amorites; but these will not allow it, and they suffer the consequences of the war they had sought against the people of God. Israel takes their cities, and begins already on this side Jordan to realise, as if beforehand, the possession of the promise.

Chapters 22 to 25

In the plains of Moab: Balak and Balaam as Satan's servants

Moab also opposes in vain. Now they are in the plains of Moab, having only Jordan between them and the land of their rest. But had they a right to enter there? If the enemy cannot oppose by force, he will try another way, by putting under the curse the people who well deserved it.

Balak sends for Balaam. The grand question in this touching scene is this, "Can Satan succeed in cursing the people of God, so as to prevent their entrance into the land of promise?"* It is not merely a question of redemption and of the joy of redemption at the beginning of their course, but in the end, when all their unfaithfulness has been manifested — their unfaithfulness even after the Lord has brought them to Himself. Can Satan succeed then? No. {* It is of the highest interest to see the special character of this prophecy. It is God who, of His own will, interferes to take the part of His people against the enemy, and that even without their knowing it, or asking for it. It is not, as almost all prophecies are, an appeal to the conscience of the people, accompanied by promises calculated to sustain the faith of the remnant in the midst of the gainsayers. The people know nothing about it; they are perhaps still murmuring in their tents (so beautiful in the eyes of him who had the vision of the Almighty) against the ways of God with them. It is God declaring His own thoughts and confounding

the malice of Satan, the enemy He has to do with. That is the reason why this prophecy is so complete; presenting to us, in spirit, our whole portion (literally it is that of Israel, as in the fourth prophecy is evident), separation, justification, beauty in the eyes of God (all that corresponds with the presence of the Spirit of God), and the crown of glory in the coming of the Star of Jacob, of Christ Himself, in glory.}

Balaam the involuntary witness of the truth

When Moses, in those same plains, has to say, with regard to their conduct towards God, "Ye have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you," (and indeed, they had been excessively froward, a most stiff-necked people; do we not know this well?), God says by the mouth of Balaam, the involuntary witness of the truth, "He has not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither has he seen perverseness in Israel." What a testimony! What wonderful grace! What perfection in the ways of God! God sees aright; He makes no mistakes. He speaks the truth according to the perfectness of His infinite intelligence; and it is because it is infinite, that He can see no iniquity in the redeemed people. How could He see any in those who are washed in the blood of the Lamb? Nor is it His mind to see it.

God acts and judges according to His own thoughts

In His own dealings with the people He will see everything, take knowledge of everything; but with the accuser it is a question of righteousness. God only sees this, that, according to the counsels of His grace, He has given a ransom; the sins of His people have been atoned for. He could not in justice see those sins. The mouth of the accuser is therefore obliged to confess that there are none, and that there is no power of the enemy against Jacob. And the ground is clearly taught: according to this time it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, what has God wrought? Not said of God, but of Israel; and not what has Israel wrought, but what has God wrought? Israel had the place, but the work was God's work. This is very perfect.

What is peculiarly blessed and comforting in this is, that God acts and judges from His own thoughts. From beginning to end He has had thoughts about us; He has done what was needed to reconcile all His ways, in the accomplishment of them, with eternal righteousness; but He has these thoughts, and acts towards us according to them. It is these faith apprehends, accepts, and builds on. Hence joy and peace; while the presence of God in the midst of an accepted people to whom a new nature has been given, and His judging all there secures practically the holiness which He cannot dispense with, or judges departure from it, so as to vindicate His name. But here it is God acting, judging, in spite of all, according to His own thoughts.

Ballam's iniquity characterized

Balaam was a sad character. Forced to see from afar off the blessing of God upon His people, when he is near, and actuated by his own heart and will, he sees nothing but the way of error, into which he wishes to drag them that they might forfeit that blessing (if this were possible), reasoning upon this ground, that the righteous God could not bless a sinful people. One cannot think of any iniquity worse

than that.

Balaam used of God whilst condemned for his crooked ways

We shall say a few words as to his typical character. Let us pursue the history. Balak seeks him. Balaam wishes to inquire of Jehovah either from instinctive fear, or to attach, in the sight of others, the importance of the name of Jehovah to what he does. Effectively God does interfere, and even goes first to Balaam. He takes the matter in hand, and has power over the unjust mind of Balaam against his will; for Balaam has no understanding of the mind of God. God said, "Thou shalt not go: they are blessed." What is his answer? "Jehovah refuseth to give me leave to go." He would gladly have gone; his heart was set upon the reward of Balak; but he fears before God. The blessing of the people does not come into his mind; he is a complete stranger to the generosity of grace — insensible to the thought of their being blessed of God, of delight in His blessing on His people.

Consequently, when there is a renewal of the temptation, he says that he cannot transgress the commandment of Jehovah his God: he puts on piety, and, in reality, he was not entirely without sincerity, for God held him close, and, indeed, allowed all this. But, at the same time, Balaam induces the messengers of Balak to tarry and see what God would say further. What did he want to know more about an invitation to curse that people, who, God had told him, were blessed? He had no sympathy whatever with the thoughts of the heart of God, none with Himself; he was governed by the fear of consequences. Otherwise, he would have been so happy in the blessing of the people, that he would have shuddered at the idea of cursing what God had blessed. God, however, will use him, to give a glorious testimony on behalf of His people, whilst, at the same time, condemning the crooked ways of the prophet, for they were indeed crooked. He shews him his perverseness, his folly, to be more stupid than the ass he was riding; but, at the same time, He makes him go on his way.

This meeting in the way does serve to force him, through fear, to utter faithfully what God should put into his mouth. Balaam goes to meet — he does not say what. It is plain (Num. 24:1) that he had mixed enchantments with the profession of the name of Jehovah, and that he had thus been the enemy's instrument, with the credit of Jehovah's name — a deeply solemn case. He was thus going to meet the mysterious power which came there, and Elohim came to meet him. God restrains and hinders on the behalf of His people all power of the enemy, and causes Balaam to say what He wishes to be said. Balaam looks upon Israel from above, and utters his prophecy.

Balaam's fourfold prophecy: (1) Separation of the people unto God

This prophecy is divided into four parts. It has Israel for its object; but, as to the principle of it, it applies also to the assembly.

The first prophecy announces the separation of the people from the world. "The people shall dwell alone," separated unto God, a people not reckoned among the nations.

(2) God having blessed does not repent: the people are justified

The second prophecy declares that God does not repent. God has blessed them; shall He not confirm what He has just said? The people are justified, and without sin in the eyes of God. God it was who had brought them out of Egypt. This people had "the strength of the unicorn," and the enemy, whom he had sought (in his enchantments), had no power against them.

(3) The people seen by God in beauty, freshness and power

Balaam, seeing at last that God was bent upon blessing, yields to the power of God, goes no longer to the meeting of enchantments, and the Spirit of God comes upon him. The justification of the people being now declared, the Spirit of God can bear testimony to them, instead of confining His testimony to the thoughts and intentions of God. Balaam sees them from above; seeing the vision of the Almighty, he sees the people according to the thoughts of the Spirit of God, as seen in the mind of God from above. The eyes of the prophet are open. And remark, here, that it is neither the anticipation of Canaan, nor Israel in their permanent habitations: Balaam turns his face towards the wilderness and sees Israel abiding in their tents. There the Spirit sees them, and declares the beauty and the order of the people in the eyes of God. The water of the refreshing of God was also always with them there; they were as trees that Jehovah had planted, therefore will they be great amongst the nations, a source of power and joy. They drink from the sources of God, and pour out from them abundantly for others. God had brought them out of Egypt, they were the work of God? and the power of God was to go with them against their enemies.

We get here, thirdly, then, beauty, a freshness the sources of which do not dry up, and power (what the Spirit does for the assembly).

(4) The coming of Christ

Then, in the fourth place is the coming of Christ, the Star of Jacob, who crowns the glory of the people. Only, as it comes in the midst of Israel, it is in judgment. With regard to us, it will be to take us hence, in order to make us participate in the joy of His presence, to the marriage of the Lamb.

In a word, we see: the separation of the people from the world; their justification; their order, their beauty, as planted by God near the everlasting sources of the river of God; and then the coming of Christ. The prophecy is perfectly beautiful. Remark, too, the prophecies, in the renewed effort to bring a curse on them, are not repetitions. Each such effort brings out something more of what God had in His mind for His people! for blessing. It is not without interest to see how Balak uses all human and superstitious means to bring the curse on them. He had no idea of God, and it was with God he had to do.

God's thoughts of the Church, seen from above

It is very important for us to see sometimes the church from above, in the wilderness, but in the beauty of the thoughts of God, a pearl without price. In the midst of the camp below, in the desert, what murmurings, complainings; how much indifference, what carnal motives, would have been witnessed

and heard! From above, for him who has the vision of God, who has his eyes open, everything is beautiful. "I stand in doubt of you," says the apostle; and immediately after, "I have confidence in you, through the Lord." We must get up to Him, and we shall have His thoughts of grace, who sees the beauty of His people, of His assembly, through everything else, for it is beautiful. But for this, one would be either entirely discouraged or satisfied with evil. This vision of God removes these two thoughts at once.

The terrible judgment of God at the end of the age

We see the final judgment of the ships of Chittim (that is, of the west, north of the Mediterranean), and that of their chief, after he has afflicted Asshur and Eber also. It will be the terrible judgment of God at the end of this age.

Balaam's endeavour to frustrate blessing; Phinehas and his reward

A few words more on the position of Balaam.

At the end of a dispensation based on any knowledge whatever of God, when faith is lost and profession retained, this last obtains a renown of which men glory (as now, of the name of Christianity). Satan uses it: power is sought from him. They go to meet enchantments; because, whilst glorying in the revealed name of God, they seek to satisfy their own lusts; and the importance of the name of God is tacked on to the work of the devil. However, God is acknowledged up to a certain point. They fear Him, and He may interfere; but the system is diabolical, under the name of the Lord, with a partial fear of the Lord, and a dread which recognises Him as an object of fear. The people of God are preserved; but it is a very solemn thought, and it is truly the history of the christian system.

At last, the unhappy Balaam, whose heart was in the bond of iniquity, seeing that he cannot curse by the power of Satan, seeks to frustrate the blessing of God by leading the people into sin and idolatry. As regards the people, he is but too successful. God sends chastisement; and, while the people are humbling themselves, the enormity of the evil excites the indignation of Phinehas, who, acting with an energy suitable to the circumstances, stops the plague and acquires a perpetual priesthood in his family.

Chapters 26 to 29

Israel numbered afresh at the end of their journey

The journey being now ended, God numbers afresh His people, and counts them by name, as heirs ready to take possession of the inheritance. He has kept them through everything, and brought them as far as Canaan; their raiment even did not wax old. He settles the details of the inheritance, and appoints a leader in the room of Moses to introduce them into the land of promise. Numbers 26 presents us with the numbering.

Details of the order of inheritance; Moses' view and Joshua's appointment

In the beginning of Numbers 27 are details upon the order according to which they were to inherit. Moses is favoured with a view of the land, and the people are placed under the conduct of Joshua to enter therein. Moses and Aaron had led them through the wilderness; but here it is a new scene, and Joshua (as to the assembly, Christ in the power of His Spirit) is appointed to conquer the land. But he is dependent on the priesthood in his progress onward; as effectively the presence and the operations of the Holy Spirit are dependent on the presence of Christ in the holy place.

Worship rendered to God on earth, in the sacrifices as the meat of God

In Numbers 28 and 29 we have the worship of the people, the sacrifices which are the meat of God. We shall dwell a little on these chapters. They are not the ways of God, and the gathering together the people to Himself, as in Leviticus 23, but the offerings themselves as offered to God and especially those of sweet savour, made by fire, except that which was purely accessory.

First, there are lambs for the regular daily service; that is, for that of the morning and evening, and, for that of the sabbath, two lambs; then, bullocks and goats also for the extraordinary feasts. The lamb has the most simple meaning; it is the constant presentation of the value of Christ and so of believers in Him, the true Lamb of God — the sweet savour of His sacrifice ascending continually, by day and by night; and when the true sabbath is come, its efficacy will only ascend more abundantly, as a matter of intelligence and application. This can be said as regards God Himself, as to the increased display of the fruit of the travail of the Saviour's soul.

The bullocks seem to me to represent rather the energy of the devotedness of persons in their estimate of that sacrifice. It was the largest thing that could be offered: still having regard to the sacrifice of Christ and the price set upon it.

The ram was always a victim of consecration, or of amends for some violation of the rights of consecration.

As to the number of these two last kinds, there were in general two bullocks, a ram, and seven lambs; an additional bullock and ram the first day of the seventh month; one bullock, one ram, seven lambs the tenth of that month; and the decreasing number of the feast of tabernacles.

It appears to me that all this gives the testimony of the worship rendered to God upon the earth.

Man's answer to God's power and sin acknowledged

Thus, when the testimony is renewed, when God revives the light which produces it, the first feast noticed here, the answer on the part of man is simple and perfect — the two bullocks (as there were two lambs on the sabbath day), the full and complete testimony to the devotedness of man, for two gave a valid testimony. The ram of consecration is the estimate of the sacrifice of Christ fully developed. Man being still down here, and sin not out of question, the goat was added as an offering for sin.

If the worship of the people was in connection with the resurrection of Christ (Num. 28:17), it was the same thing; so in the case of the work of the Spirit in gathering together (ver. 26). It was the exercise of power on the part of God which made an opportunity for worship; the answer on the part of the people was the same.

The recall of Israel prefigured as a special but partial work

The first day of the seventh month had reference to the recall of Israel, which was a speciality, the renewal, according to the value of Christ's work, of God's connection with the earth, and especially with Israel. Hence besides the regular recognition of grace on the first of the month, an additional bullock, ram, and seven lambs were offered. The general testimony or answer to Christ's work was offered, but a special and partial one besides, for the earthly restoration of Israel. So on the day of atonement, when Israel, seeing the Lord, will be fully restored in grace. The general and complete testimony, when the resurrection of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, which allowed the Gentiles also to come in and thus extended to the, perfect testimony of the relations between God and man, produced, as thus witnessed in the offerings, an answer from below which fully recognised the good which God had done, and the relations established thereupon, in being to Him according to the sweet savour of Christ, either in consecration or in the intelligent estimate of the offering of Christ. The unction of the Spirit and joy accompanied it. And the offering took place all the seven days of the feast, a testimony to its completeness.

In the former case, then, that is at the feast of the first day of the seventh month, there was one bullock added as witness of a special and peculiar (but at the same time partial) work, but the general testimony to the value of Christ's sacrifice on which it depended was maintained.

The application of Christ's atonement to Israel on earth

It is evident that the same principle applies to the tenth day of the seventh month. It is the application of the atonement of Christ to Israel on earth. But it was the simple apprehension of the worth of Christ's sacrifice; its proper value before God. The principle of consecration and the intrinsic value of the sacrifice remained the same.

The coming dispensation: the joy of the Millennium on earth

The feast of tabernacles introduced another order of ideas, at least a new development of those ideas; it is the coming dispensation. There is no perfection in that which is offered joyfully of one's own free will to God; but that is nearly realised — thirteen bullocks are offered. The millennium will bring upon earth a joy of worship and thanksgiving, which (Satan being bound, and the blessing of the reign of Christ being spread everywhere) will be, externally at least, almost perfect.

The two rams manifest the testimony of abundant consecration, and perhaps outwardly the introduction of Jews and Gentiles (not consecrated in one body, but) adequate witnesses upon earth in a distinct manner of this consecration to God.

Then the testimony of the perfectness of the work of Christ being full, upon earth, either for Israel or for the blessing of the Gentiles, its complete efficacy was manifested upon earth; and the question here is only about this manifestation upon earth (understood by faith, however). There were fourteen lambs.

There is, however, declension in this devotedness of joy and testimony towards God; it does not cease from being complete, it is true; but its abundance gradually ceases to manifest itself as it did at the beginning. The thing, as established of God, remains in its perfection (ver. 32). This was found in the seventh day, which completed the part purely earthly.

The eighth day: ouside earthly perfection, the heavenly people apart

On the eighth day, we have only one bullock, one ram, and seven lambs. It was the counterpart of what was special to the day of atonement, and the first day of the seventh month: for, if this last designated Israel alone brought back to God, the eighth day, on the other hand, designates that which was outside earthly perfection, and the heavenly people apart. This, it seems to me, is the general idea of what the Spirit of God gives us in this passage.

Chapter 30

The vows of women

Numbers 30 is the case of the vows of women, which has reference also to the fate of Israel, who have indeed taken these vows upon themselves, in the hearing of God, and He has not disannulled them in His government here below; and Israel have continued responsible to the vow wherewith they have bound themselves, and of which, on the other hand, the precious Saviour has been obliged to take the burden upon Himself.

Chapter 31

War in the wilderness and failure resulting from idolatry

War is found in the wilderness (though it is not characteristic of it) whenever we fall into the snares the enemy there lays for us. There are always conflicts in the heavenly places in order to the enjoyment of the things promised there. But in the wilderness it is patience which is in exercise.

But if there be failure, if we fall into idolatry, if we commit fornication with the world by yielding to its baits, if in any way whatever we contract friendship with the world in the desert, we make wars for ourselves, without having even the advantage of acquiring, in this kind of warfare, any spiritual ground. God is obliged to make our relations with the world undergo a total change. If we had not formed intimacies with them, we should not have had that trouble; but, since as our friends they deceive us, we must become enemies. Having no relations whatever with them is our proper and peaceful position.

The way of God-given victory

How often we must act the part of enemies with the world, because we have sought to have to do with them as friends, and they were a snare to our souls! However, God gives a complete victory as soon as we treat them as foes: only, all that seduced must be utterly destroyed. There must be nothing spared, no concession.

God honours all who serve Him according to His sovereign will

The Lord orders also concerning the joy resulting from the wars of His people with their enemies. He chooses whom He will for the war, and honours them; but He will also honour, in their place, those who have been left behind according to His sovereign will, and who have faithfully discharged the perhaps less arduous task allotted to them; but who have, however, done it according to His will. God Himself is also recognised there in the Levites and the priests.

Chapters 32 and 33

Blessing on this side of Jordan: the request of Reuben and Gad

There is another thing connected with this: if we have occasioned wars out of Canaan, it is also through the indispensable wars of the people of God against those who opposed their march through the wilderness, that they have acquired a good land, and, up to a certain point, rest, on this side Jordan, that river of death which serves as a boundary to the true land of promise.

Having possessions down here to which the heart clings, the heart clings also to the blessings which are on this side Jordan, to that measure of rest which the people of God have acquired out of Canaan. "Bring us not," they say, "over Jordan." Moses felt the bearing of this wish. If he could not enter the land, according to the government of God, his heart was there nevertheless. He recalls the contempt of the pleasant land at Kadesh-barnea, and severely rebukes Reuben and Gad.

Patient waiting for the blessings of God over Jordan

However, the tribes engaging to go equally forward until the land were conquered, he grants their request and settles them in the land, with the half-tribe of Manasseh. Nevertheless, the history of the holy book shews us that these tribes were the first to suffer, and to fall into the hands of the Gentiles. "Know ye not," says Ahab, "that Ramoth in Gilead is ours, and the Syrians possess it?" Happy they who patiently wait for the blessings of God, till they have gone over Jordan, and who, in the meanwhile, take patience for their portion, rather than the blessings which are on this side! Though they are the gifts of the providence of God, they are less secure; and even spiritual blessings, if the assembly take this world as the seat of them, though real, yet deceive the hopes of the saints. There are no frontiers like Jordan, appointed by God as such in His counsels of grace.

God's government and His faithfulness during the wilderness journey

If God numbers His people name by name, He shews, at the same time, His government and His faithfulness; for, though He had kept them, as a people, yet there were none of the first numbering left, save Caleb and Joshua. He remembers, also, all their long journey through the wilderness; each stage is before His eyes and in His memory; and now He lays down, in principle, the possession of the land by the people, and the total destruction of the inhabitants, who were to be entirely driven away and not to abide in the midst of Israel: else those who were left would be a torment for the people, and God also would do unto Israel, as He had done to those nations.

It is a dangerous charity, then, that which spares the enemies of God, or rather which spares itself, through unbelief, in its conflicts with them, and which is soon led to form with them connections that bring the judgment which those enemies have inherited, and themselves also deserved.

Chapters 34 to 36

God's care over His people

Finally, God takes care of His people in all respects; He marks the limits of the country they were to enjoy. He settles the taking possession, the portion of His servants, the Levites, who were not to have any inheritance.

The six cities of refuge, and Israel's present and future

Six of their cities were to be refuges for those who had unintentionally committed murder; a precious type of God's dealings with Israel, who, in their ignorance, killed the Christ. In this sense, God judges them to be innocent. They are guilty of blood which they could not bear, but guilty in their ignorance, like Saul himself, who is a striking figure, as one born out of due time (ektroma, 1 Cor. 15:8), of this same position. Such a murderer, however, remains out of his possession until the death of the priest living in those days.

And so it will be with regard to Israel. As long as Christ retains His actual priesthood above, Israel will remain out of their possession, but under the safe keeping of God. The servants of God at least, who have no inheritance, serve as a refuge to them, and understand their position, and recognise them as being under the keeping of God. When this priesthood above, such as it now is, ends, Israel will return into their possession. If they did before, it would be to pass over the blood of Christ, as if the shedding of it were no matter, and the land would be defiled thereby. Now, the actual position of Christ is always a testimony to this rejection, and of His death in the midst of the people.

God maintains the inheritance, however, as He has appointed it (Num. 36).

The relationship between the desert journey and the possession of the promises and rest

This last part, then, of the book presents, not the passage itself through the desert, but the relationship between that position, and the possession of the promises and of the rest which follows. It is in the plains of Moab that Moses bore testimony, and a true testimony, to the perverseness of the people; but where God justified them, shewing His counsels of grace, in taking their side against the enemy, without even their knowledge, and pursued all the designs of His grace and of His determinate purpose for the complete establishment of His people in the land He had promised them. Blessed be His name! Happy are we in being allowed to study His ways!