

How to Study the Bible

Aids to Bible Study

David Gooding

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



MYRTLEFIELD
HOUSE
www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

Contents

1	A. Introduction	3
	B. The Book of Numbers	3
2	Preparations for the Journey	16
3.	A. Explaining and Illustrating Technical Terms	28
	B. Rebellions	33
	Study Notes	40
	About the Author	41

David Gooding has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

Copyright © The Myrtlefield Trust, 2020

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. May not copy or download more than 500 consecutive verses of the ESV Bible or more than one half of any book of the ESV Bible. Quotations marked KJV are from The Authorized (King James) Version. Rights in the Authorized Version in the United Kingdom are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press. Other quotations are Dr Gooding's own translations or paraphrases.

This text has been edited from a transcript of three talks given by David Gooding in Charlotte (USA) in 2003.

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce this document in its entirety, or in unaltered excerpts, for personal and church use only as long as you do not charge a fee. You must not reproduce it on any Internet site. Permission must be obtained if you wish to reproduce it in any other context, translate it, or publish it in any format.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust
PO Box 2216
Belfast, N Ireland
BT1 9YR

w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com
e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

Myrtlefield catalogue no: bst.002/bh

A. Introduction

My name is David Gooding and this particular seminar is about ways to study the Bible. If anyone was expecting some other seminar, now is the time to leave! I take your continued presence to be consent to the topic we are to discuss.

We proceed, of course, in dependence upon the Lord. I want to explain that, by entitling this seminar 'How to Study the Bible', or, 'Aids to Bible Study', I am not suggesting that the way I shall approach the book we are studying is the only way that Scripture can be studied profitably. I propose simply to share with you ways of approach to Bible study that I personally have found helpful and fruitful, and I have decided to study the Old Testament book of Numbers.

The general title of our conference is 'Rise Up and Walk' and it seemed appropriate to me that we should study the book in the Old Testament that describes a walk of some forty years' duration. Numbers is the record of Israel's experience in their journey from Sinai, through the desert, until they encamped in the plains of Moab, east of Jordan. There they were prepared by God through Moses at last to enter the promised land. It's a book, therefore, recording Israel's walk through the desert.

Then, for our encouragement, we might remember what God subsequently told King David. In 2 Samuel 7:6, it is recorded how God himself says that for all those years that Israel were walking through the wilderness—and in the further long centuries in which he walked with them in the land, dwelling in a tent called the tabernacle, until the time of David and beyond—he had walked every step of the way with them. However difficult we find this book at first sight, that should be a stimulus to our study of this part of God's word. If God walked every step of the way with Israel through the wilderness and beyond, God most certainly will walk every step of the way with every one of his redeemed people. Nor will he leave us until we enter the glory of the promised inheritance 'that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading' (1 Pet 1:4).

B. The book of Numbers

By common consent the book of Numbers is found to be a difficult book. Yes, it has chapters of narrative that are comparatively easy to follow; though even there we shall find a considerable amount of warfare that will make us scratch our heads and say, 'Well, yes, that's what happened, but so what? What has it got to do with us Christians?' But, in addition to narrative, it is everywhere interspersed by other material. Statistics, for instance, of the number of the tribes and then of the Levites, and also long lists of the detailed sacrifices that the Israelites were required to offer, and many other such things.

That at once raises questions for us. What are we to make of the book as a whole? Is it a coherent whole with one or more dominant messages, or is it a collection of stories? Are they there just because they happened, and we are left to make of it what we will? Of course, a perfectly legitimate way to use Scripture is to take a portion out of it and let it speak to our hearts, and use it ourselves to help others. I suspect that there are many people who will be in glory at last because somebody preached John 3:16 to them, even though that somebody may scarcely have known what John 3:15 said, and hadn't bothered to expound John 3:17 either. John 3:16 is the revealed word of God and it means what it says. Believe it and you will be saved and enter glory. As we shall see in a moment, our blessed Lord took an incident in this book of Numbers and applied it in his conversation with Nicodemus.

I warn you now that this morning's seminar will contain a lot of difficult things, and you may find it a little bit tiresome that I make you work so hard. You will remember, however, the words of the Lord Jesus, that we are to labour not so much for the food that perishes, but we are to work, and work hard, for the food that endures to eternal life (John 6:27).

If we genuinely believe that this Old Testament portion of God's word was given by inspiration of God and is profitable (see 2 Tim 3:16), then we shall spare no pains. We shall not shy away from hard work. Wouldn't it be a curious sense of values that prescribes that the young ought to work hard at their engineering and their physics, because these things are profitable, and then expect God's holy word and revelation to be always easy? It would be odd to think that we don't have to work hard to understand it. If we are prepared to work hard now, we shall enjoy our lunch all the more, and tomorrow perhaps the following sessions will be a little easier.

General analogy

To take an easy path into the book of Numbers, we may use what one might call *general analogy*. Please notice that I do not use the word *typology*. I'm using the words strictly—'general analogy'. By this I mean that Numbers is, as I said, the record of Israel's walk from Sinai towards the land that God had promised Abraham and his descendants. Having been redeemed from Egypt, Israel were now on their journey towards the promised land.

That will provide us with a general analogy, such as Peter uses in his first Epistle. He tells us that we Christians have been redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, but, not content to tell us that, Peter adds a simile, 'as of a lamb without blemish' (see 1 Pet 1:18–19 KJV). Why the need for the simile? Why can't he be content just to say, 'redeemed with the precious blood of Christ'? Why add, 'as of a lamb ...'? Peter is drawing an analogy between Israel's redemption from Egypt and our redemption from the power of sin and, indeed, of the devil. Israel had an inheritance to go to, flowing with milk and honey. Peter reminds them that we have been 'born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading' (vv. 3–4).

The analogy is between Israel's experience and ours. When Israel ate the original Passover as they had to, they were not allowed to eat it in just any fashion. 'In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand' (Exod 12:11). To partake of that sacrifice of Passover implied that they were prepared to start

walking. And if they weren't prepared to start walking, then they were not allowed to eat the Passover. The Passover redemption was inextricably bound with the purpose of redemption that was to bring Israel to their promised inheritance.

Metaphor

Peter now uses it as a *metaphor*—notice that I don't say *type*—drawn from the Passover ceremony. They literally girded up their literal loins (KJV), put literal staffs in their hands and literal shoes on their feet, and began literal walking. And we are to 'gird up the loins of [our] mind' (v. 13 KJV). That is, to prepare our minds to do some tough, logical and spiritual thinking, and set our hearts firmly on the hope that is set before us (see Heb 6:18). We are to think not only that we have a hope, but use diligent thinking, hard thinking, systematic thinking, to work out the implications of that hope, so that we might live in such a practical way as to show we have the hope, and aim our lives to the goal that the hope holds out before us. So there is a general analogy that helps us to begin to see the profitability of studying the book of Numbers.

The nature of Israel's journey

It was a geographical journey

If we have the time, I'd like to include what happened in the earlier account of their journeys from Egypt to Sinai. Numbers is the journey from Sinai to the plains of Moab, but if we read it in detail we shall discover the nature of Israel's journey. Of course, it was a physical journey, and if we had all the details we could place it geographically on a map. If you want to get from Egypt to Canaan, you point your nose, sort of, northeast in general, start walking and keep on walking until you get there. It is a physical, geographical journey.

It was a journey into the discovery of God

But then, as we read the story, we shall discover that their journey was more than that. It was in fact a journey into the discovery of God. When they came out of Egypt and stood on the far bank of the Red Sea, having experienced deliverance from Egypt and then God's destruction of the enemy that had tried to pull them back, Moses and the Israelites sang, and Miriam led the choirs of the women. They thought God was magnificent because of what he had done. What a superb God he was. 'The Lord has triumphed gloriously; he has brought us out,' and they actually said, 'he's going to bring us in' (see Exod 15:17). I think they felt God was so wonderful and they were so spiritual that, if they'd jumped a few feet up in the air, their heads would poke through into heaven.

That's what they thought about God as they began the journey. But the story of Numbers is that, as they journeyed, God didn't turn out to be quite what they thought he was going to be. They got disappointed with God, they complained about him, and in the end many of them voted that they should abandon the whole scheme and go back to Egypt.

They learnt other lessons about God, but we should notice that we're not talking here about typology, but about literal experience of God. It's possible that we start out the Christian life thinking God is wonderful, and we shall think that for all eternity. But in the meantime

the experience of thousands of God's people is that, as they journey through life, sometimes God doesn't come up to what they thought he was going to be, and puzzles arise. Why has the Lord allowed this?; why doesn't God make life easier?; and so forth.

It was a journey into the discovery of themselves

Then Israel's journey was not only a journey into the discovery of God; it was a journey into the discovery of themselves. I suppose that in the first flush of their joy at being liberated and redeemed from Egypt, and seeing the great hand of God in their salvation, they felt they were very special people indeed. They were the people of the Lord, sons of Abraham and a nation upon whom God looked with special favour. 'What wonderful people we are.'

If you'd listened to their prayers, I suspect you would very often have heard them talking about their privileges. But a few miles walking across the desert, and practically for the whole of the journey, they discovered that they weren't quite the nice people they thought they were. Of course, that was no accident. How else would God make anybody holy, unless he could first show them what they are really like, and allow them to discover their weaknesses and their possible offensiveness, so that they may learn to repent of it and seek God's grace to overcome?

So it is with us, surely? We shall not read Numbers with any superior feeling in our hearts that we are necessarily better than they. But God will allow life's journey home to glory to be a discovery into what God is like, not only through his word but through the circumstances of life. He will use his word and our experience of life and life's journey to show us what we are really like.

When you come to ninety-nine years old, or even earlier—and you'd better believe me here—you will discover in older age that things you earlier thought were signs of good spirituality were but religious versions of *the old self* needing to be repented of. This is what the Puritans used to call a vale of tears, a vale of soul-making; on our homeward way to glory God leads us through the wilderness of our lives by developing us in holiness. It is through the discovery of our own wrongness, and then, when we repent, of the grace of God in his forgiveness, that gradually he begins to form within us a likeness to his Son.

Simile

Let me now concentrate on a well-known use of Numbers as a simile, and our Lord's quotation in John 3 of the incident of the serpent raised on a pole by Moses (Num 21). In his conversation with Nicodemus our Lord had been talking of the necessity of being born from above, and Nicodemus asked how these things could be.

As an illustration of the human position before God and our need to receive a new life, our Lord used the incident in Numbers as a simile, not as a type. He said, 'And *as* Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, *so* must the Son of Man be lifted up' (v. 14). Where one thing is compared to another, the technical name for that is a *simile*.

And *as* Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, *so* must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (vv. 14–15)

Looking at that you will see a very interesting thing. The first part of a simile is the 'as such and such and such'; and the second part is the 'so and so and so'. On the 'so and so and so' side, our Lord expounded it in detail—'so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.' But you'll notice in the first bit of the simile, all our Lord quoted from Numbers was the sheer fact that Moses lifted up a serpent in the wilderness—'as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness'—and no more. He didn't go into detailed explanation to Nicodemus why Moses lifted up the serpent and what was wrong with Israel, nor what they were to do when the serpent was lifted up. All our Lord quoted from Numbers was the fact that Moses lifted up a serpent.

Would you suppose that we are to content ourselves to say that the simile simply concentrates on the sheer fact that Moses lifted up a serpent on a pole and Christ was lifted up on a cross, *full stop*, and there's nothing more to the Numbers story than that? Well, I couldn't convince you of that if I tried, and I don't intend to. Christ was talking to a learned biblical scholar, who could have repeated Numbers in his dreams, I suppose. Our Lord only had to cite the instance of the lifting up of the serpent, and Nicodemus would see all the surrounding story.

Thought model

We need to read it, and when we see the simile—and this is the point of my present discussion—we find that the historical incident becomes a thought model to help us to think about the significance of our Lord's crucifixion and the way we come into its benefit.

When physicists are trying to understand the inside of the atom, and the quarks and all the funny things concerned with it, they have to get out models of what they imagine the atom looks like inside. As they study the model, they can then draw all sorts of questions from it, and then go back to the actual reality and try and split it, or coax it, or talk to it, or whatever it is that physicists do with atoms.

So our Lord uses the story from Numbers as a thought model.

And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (Num 21:8-9)

Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness because the people had been poisoned and were dying. The command was that whoever should look to the serpent would live; that is, be healed, recover.

Now we notice, when we come to the other side, that our Lord says, 'so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever . . .'; but he doesn't say 'looks', he says 'believes'. What does it mean to believe? Go back to the thought model. Whoever was dying was told to look; to look away from themselves, to look to this as their only hope and pin all their faith on it. Whoever looks shall live.

So the gospel uses the incident to tell us that, as the Israelites were saved from perishing physically, whoever believes in him (the Son of Man) should not perish spiritually, but have

eternal life. That we know very well. So far it's very simple; but don't start to congratulate yourselves yet!

Explicit allusion

From the book of Numbers, we have talked about *general analogy* and the use of *metaphor*, *simile* and *thought model*. Now let's look in our New Testament to an *explicit allusion* to the book of Numbers in the letter by Jude, where he is describing the false teachers that have come into the church.

Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion. (v. 11)

In order to describe the false teachers of his day, Jude points to certain characters from Old Testament history and he's saying that the false teachers are behaving like Cain, Balaam and Korah. Cain comes from Genesis, but Balaam and Korah come from the book of Numbers. If we liked, we could just take Jude's warning to be no more than, in those days there were false religious teachers, and nowadays there are false religious teachers in the church. Cain, Balaam and Korah were just 'bad eggs', and that's all they have in common.

Certainly, they were false teachers; but when you find a series of similar things in holy Scripture, then you have to pause and think. In their history, all these men are seen in connection with religion. Cain did his foul deed in the context of the sacrifices that he and his brother were offering to God. Balaam was a false prophet in connection with religion, and Korah was a Levite. But when you've said that, even Jude describes them in three different ways.

The mark of Cain was the way he went, and if you have not noticed what that way was, read again Genesis 4, where Cain went out from the Lord (v. 16). Balaam was different from Cain. His particular activity and sin was the use of religion to make money (see Num 22–24; 2 Pet 2:15). But Korah was the worst of the lot (Num 16). Cain was an ordinary citizen and Balaam was a religious prophet. Korah was a Levite, a minor cleric in Israel's religion: the true, God-given religion.

From Jude we gather that these three false men show different features of perversion. How can we find out a little bit more about them?

I've given you a page of notes. The upper half is headed 'Preparation', the lower half is headed 'Journey'. The 'Journey' has two parts marked in each column, an A and a B. And what I have done here is to pick out—you may conclude somewhat arbitrarily, forgive me for the moment—a repeated and *dominant theme* from the book of Numbers chapter 11.

The Journey: A. Rebellion

From the headings in heavy type at the beginning of each column, you'll see that that particular dominant theme is 'Rebellion', 'Rebellion', 'Rebellion', 'Rebellion'; and then finally,

‘Rebellion?’ — a thing that Moses thought was a rebellion, but mercifully it turned out not to be one. You need to be an expert in rebellions to recognize a true rebellion from a false one!

You say, ‘This is a melancholy topic to bring to us. We didn’t come this long way here to learn about rebellions.’

Perhaps indeed, but we could look within our own hearts, for basically we were enemies of God, weren’t we? In the course of our wilderness walk, sometimes the old distrust and enmity can assert itself and we start complaining at God and accusing him of not being fair.

So, here are these rebellions. Please notice, I am not offering you this *analysis* as the structure of the book of Numbers. *Structure* is a very different thing. All I’m suggesting is this. We’ve been given a hint from the New Testament that Korah was a false teacher and prophet in Israel, and the particular thing that marked him was his *gainsaying*, as the King James Version translates it (Jude v. 11). If you want the Latin, it’s *contra dictus*, contradiction, and it means *rebellion*. Whereas Cain went his way, and Balaam did what he did for profit, Korah was marked by his rebellion against what Moses and Aaron had taught them. Having noticed that, it is a little jump to ask if this theme recurs in Numbers, so let’s have a look.

Repeated themes

In doing some biblical research, one of the difficulties is getting started and to know what to look for. If you find a theme beginning to repeat itself, it is very useful to ask, ‘Where does the writer deal with that same thing again?’ And if you should find that he describes it time and time and time again, then you’re on to something and you can conclude that he has a special interest in this theme, and you can bring to bear upon the study of holy Scripture what the medics call *differential diagnosis*. All that means is distinguishing between things that look the same, but aren’t.

Take an example of differential diagnosis at the medical level. Here are three men who turn up to their doctor, all complaining of a sore throat. The doctor asks the first man to open his mouth and peers down it, and says, ‘Have you been at a football match recently and shouting your head off? What you want to do is to go home and shut up for a while, and don’t speak again until the inflammation has gone.’ The second man opens his mouth and the doctor peers within. ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘you’ve got laryngitis. Here are some antibiotics.’ He looks down the throat of the third man and his brow furrows and he looks serious. He says, ‘We must take a specimen.’ He fears this time it is incipient cancer. Three cases that looked alike, had inflammation in common, but they had to be diagnosed as being completely different from each other.

Here we have a whole array of rebellions and it’s worth studying them to answer the questions, ‘Is the rebellion over the same thing every time, or over different things?’ And then, ‘Why should I as an innocent Christian be interested in reading about rebellions of Israel?’ Then you should observe that the New Testament cites almost all these rebellions — I’m not going to tell you where; that’s easy homework for you to do. The point of the New Testament citation is that these things were written for our learning, so that we don’t fall into the same type of rebellion as Israel did. We shall think about those rebellions and what they stood for, perhaps, in our third seminar.

Narrative

Now we come to the difficulty I mentioned at the start of our study. These rebellions are all part of narrative: stories of things that happened. As we study them, we shall find that they are interspersed with long lists: names of priests and Levites, statistics of census-taking of Israelites, geographical places where Israel marched through. To be frank, many diligent readers find them a little tiresome and boring, and hope they'll never be called upon to read out the lists in public, because the names are virtually unpronounceable.

What are they there for? Have they anything to say to us? So what we need to do is to look at some of these lists and then ask a second question, 'What have they got to do with the major themes in the book?'

The Journey: B. Sacrifices

Another dominant theme that runs through the book of Numbers, even in the first division, but certainly in the second; is the theme of 'Sacrifices', as in columns 1–4. In column 5 there is no explicit mention of a sacrifice but the prohibition of any ransom money being paid for a homicide; and then there is the story of the cities of refuge. Many have taken it as a symbol, a type, a prototype of our Lord as the great refuge for people who have sinned in ignorance. That is the dominant theme, and once more we have to ask, are these just repetitions of technical details, or have these themes of sacrifice got something to do with their surrounding context?

So let's do a little bit of searching, and look at chapter 15 of the book of Numbers.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, *When you come into the land* you are to inhabit, which I am giving you, and you offer to the LORD from the herd or from the flock a food offering or a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfil a vow or as a freewill offering or at your appointed feasts, to make a pleasing aroma to the LORD, then he who brings his offering shall offer to the LORD a grain offering of a tenth of an ephah of fine flour, mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil; . . .' (vv. 1–4)

Thought flow

Our question is now about *thought flow* in the study of Scripture. It refers to the flow of thought from one verse to another, from one paragraph to another, from one chapter to another.

The people's refusal to enter the land/God's promise

The earlier parts of chapter 15 are full of details of sacrifices. We have to ask whether it carries on the thought of the previous chapter, or has the previous chapter come to the end of its particular section and chapter 15 is about something quite different?

So let's look at the end of chapter 14, where we have a sorry story. The Israelites had refused to enter Canaan, and as a result God had pronounced his sentence. The present generation would not enter Canaan. They had refused to go in and God gave them their own

wish (vv. 20–35). ‘All right,’ said God, ‘don’t go in. In fact, you won’t go in until this present generation has died out. Then the next generations will go in.’

But when they heard that, these rebellious people changed their minds and decided that they would go in (vv. 39–40). So, in their attempt to enter the land, they armed themselves and went up to attack the king of Arad and such like places, but the ark didn’t go with them (v. 44). God’s presence wasn’t with them, and as they went in their own folly and foolish strength their enemies came out and chased them. Try to imagine the final picture at the end of chapter 14, as multitudes of Israelites ran from Canaan for all they were worth, to get back to the wilderness.

What a terrible disaster it seems to be. The whole purpose of coming out of Egypt and journeying through the wilderness was to enter the promised land, and now the whole purpose of the journey was ruined. Here they were, trying to get in, but running away as fast as their legs would take them. Then we have chapter 15:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, *When you come into the land* you are to inhabit, which I am giving you, and you offer to the LORD . . .’. (vv. 1–3)

Do you see any possible connection of thought? I think I do! Oh, what a mercy it is. The nation was stunned; *the senior generation would never get into Canaan*. Was all hope lost for the younger people, under twenty? ‘No,’ says God. One day they would be in the land. ‘Tell them right now, Moses, “*When you come into the land* you shall offer these offerings and in particular, a grain offering”.’

They couldn’t sow corn in the wilderness, but one day they would be in an inheritance where they could sow grain in their fields and watch the lovely sight of the grain coming up. The blade, then the ear and the ripe corn, and hear the rustling of the ears of corn as the breeze passed gently over them. And, who knows, men like Caleb and Joshua went to sleep that night with the word of God ringing in their ears—‘But when you come into the land, as come you shall . . .’—and they dreamt of cornfields and wheat and barley and flowing water, and their dreams fortified their faith that God’s promise would come true, in spite of the present apostasy of the nation.

Peter’s denial/the Lord’s promise

I’ve chosen an easy one to do; you’ll find a similar sequence of verses in the New Testament. Remember that the chapter divisions were not in the original manuscripts. At the end of John 13 our Lord is talking to his apostles. Then he says to Peter, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the cock will not crow till you have denied me three times’ (v. 38). These are the last words of chapter 13. Do you remember the first words of chapter 14? ‘Let not your hearts be troubled.’

You say, ‘Did our Lord say that in the same breath as he spoke to Peter?’

We can’t tell what interval, if anything, passed between what he said to Peter and what he said in verse 1 of chapter 14. As we read it now, what a *collocation* of thought flow.

‘*You are to deny me, Peter.*’ The Lord had prayed for him that his faith should not fail and Peter would come through. This didn’t minimize his fall, but it put it in the wider context of

God's purpose. *'Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms . . .'* And every true believer will be there at last.

For homework, study all the other sacrifices and then ask, 'What, if anything, have they got to do with their context?' For instance, those sacrifices in column two, 'The rights of Aaron and sons as priests and of the Levites'—has that got anything to do with the story of Korah's rebellion? What was Korah's rebellion about anyway? It was a rebellion against the priest, Aaron, and the prophet, Moses (see 16:1–11). Might there be a glimmer of a possibility, do you think, that, after the rebellion was put down, the establishment of what were the rights of Aaron and his sons, the priests, might be an appropriate topic to discuss in that situation?

And so with the other sacrifices, because practice at asking that kind of question is a very helpful thing to develop when it comes to Bible study. I sum it up in a little refrain I borrowed from Paul's famous phrase in 1 Corinthians 13:13, and I hope he'll forgive me. When it comes to Bible study, 'So now thought flow, pattern, and structure abide, these three; but the greatest of these is thought flow.' That is a very important thing. It is basic to what we're trying to do in reading holy Scripture. Here the thoughts of God are expressed and our job is to follow the thought flow. Of course, that thought flow is often arranged in chapters, paragraphs or verses, and so on and so forth.

That is nothing strange, is it? Take a marvellous musical composition. There's the overture, then there's the fast movement, and then there's the slow movement. The themes are played at one level, then they are inverted and put at another level, and then you have the finale. It is important that you see the place where it changes from the fast movement to the slow movement, because if you should carry on playing the fast movement into half of the slow movement, it would sound very comical if you played it all at the same speed. So it's useful to study a musical script, and say, 'Now, where does this movement start and where does this movement finish? Is this next thing part of that movement, or is it the start of another movement?' What you are doing is tracing the composer's thought flow.

We do it in our hymns, don't we? We have them in verses generally. And so it is in Scripture. It is a very useful, practical thing, therefore, to study carefully the thought flow to see what goes with what. We shall do something of that this afternoon.

The Preparation

Having looked at the second half of the book, we turn in our last moments to the first ten chapters. I have laid it out in five columns, and perhaps you will say to me, 'That's the trouble with you structuralists; you're always trying to impose your structure on holy Scripture. It's put there by you and it's not Scripture itself.' The old ditty is aimed at people like me, 'Wonderful things in the Bible I see. Most of them put there by you, if not me!'

I shall try this afternoon to argue the case for thinking that there are five sections in the first ten chapters. Five major movements of thought, or music, so to speak. For the moment I ask you to accept it from my arbitrary say-so, with all your justified reservations, and to think of the dominant themes in each of those sections, and some of the leading terminology.

Column 1. *Numbering for the Journey*

- A. *The tribes*: 1. For war; 2. For camping and marching.
- B. *The Levites*: 1. How their group originated; 2. What their duties were with the transportation of the tabernacle.

Column 2. *Keeping the Camp Clean*

- A. 1. Physical uncleanness. I shall not need to spend much time proving to you that this was of great practical importance, because with thousands of people living in tents, cheek by jowl, the danger of infection and plague would be horrific. God therefore, through Moses, had to lay down the most stringent hygiene rules. To neglect the hygiene in that situation was to be guilty of manslaughter, so rules were laid down for keeping the camp physically clean and commercially clean.
- 2. Moral uncleanness. But then there is another long paragraph dealing with business trespass, and then marriage and what happens if a man becomes jealous and thinks his wife has been unfaithful. How shall that be dealt with? God institutes a procedure that would clear that woman's name and character, if she were in fact innocent; but if she had been unfaithful and been defiled, how she might be suitably dealt with. It is called the trial of jealousy—what happens when a man should suspect his wife of being unfaithful and became jealous.
- B. Nazirite's vow. Why is the Nazirite's vow recorded here in this section? Because Nazirites needed to be told what would happen if suddenly their Naziriteship was defiled, and the hair of their head defiled; how it ruined their Naziriteship, and how it all had to start over again.

Column 3. *The Aaronic Blessing*

This stands by itself. The thought flow doesn't connect it particularly with what has gone before or what follows. Let us leave it standing by itself.

Column 4. *Dedications*

- A. Offerings of the princes at the dedication of the altar.
- B. The lampstand and the offering of the Levites as a living sacrifice.

Column 5. *Regulations for Journey*¹

- A. 1. Passover; 2. Guidance by cloud; 3. Guidance by trumpets.
- B. 1. Order of march; 2. Hobab as eyes; 3. Movement of ark.

¹ This section was not covered in the seminars.

I'm going to suggest that one of the simplest ways of looking at these five sections is to see them as God's preparation and provision for the people on their journey. When they took heed to the preparation, their journey went well, but when they neglected God's provision and preparation it came to difficulty, if not disaster.

Inverse symmetry

So now, finally, if you care to look at the notes you might notice the beginnings of an appearing of a pattern that we call an *inverse symmetry*. What do I mean by that?

—Let's look at column five of the Preparation

As they were setting out, God insisted that they kept the Passover and then added that, wherever they were, whether they were on a journey, or this or that and the other, one imperative they must observe above all others was to keep the Passover.

You say, 'What has that got to do with the journey that followed?'

Well, what was the Passover about? It was the memorial of Israel coming out of Egypt. If they forgot why they came out of Egypt—what it cost God to get them out, for what purpose they came out, and what life had actually been like when they were in Egypt—*the danger would be that in the course of their journey they'd get the notion that they would like to go back*. They might even come to consider that life in Egypt was better than it would be in this promised land ahead. Therefore, it was an imperative preparation for this journey that they kept this memorial Feast of Passover every year.

Look at the first column of the Journey

What was the first rebellion? The people refused to go into Canaan; *they proposed to make a captain for themselves and go back to Egypt*. They said, 'We ate the onions and the beautiful, luscious fruits in Egypt, and we got them for nothing.' Really, did they? That's stretching things a little bit. I thought I read somewhere how they had to work impossibly hard. I didn't know that the Egyptians gave them a free bonus. Memory plays funny tricks, doesn't it? Now, as they look back, Egypt seemed wonderful, and this pilgrimage to the promised land seemed as dry as dust and boring and unsatisfying. So they refused to go on and proposed to go back to Egypt.

Can you see the connection between that provision in the last column of the Preparation and the story that follows in the first column of the Journey?

—Let's look back to the fourth column of the Preparation

It's about the dedication of the altar and the offering of *the Levites* as a living sacrifice to God.

Look at the second column of the journey

This was a rebellion. Do you remember who led the rebellion? It was Korah; and what was Korah? A Levite, of course. The day was when Korah, with all the other Levites, was led to the altar and lifted up, so to speak, in the presence of the nation as a living sacrifice to God; *yet it was Korah the Levite who led the rebellion*.

—Let's look at the second column of the Preparation

One of its provisions for keeping the camp morally clean was the *trial of jealousy*. When a man grew jealous of his wife, if it was irrational and unreasonable, God took steps to clear the wife and stop the jealousy, but, of course, it was serious if the jealousy was well founded.

Look at the fourth column in the Journey

There came another rebellion. What was it this time? Beguiled by the King of Moab, at the instruction of Balaam, Israel went over to the worship of Baal Peor and his sexually immoral religious rites. Israel was joined to Baal Peor and, says the text, *God was jealous*.

If I had been preaching just at this juncture, I would have said that this is one of the things that the New Testament quotes to us Christians: 'You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. *Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?*' (1 Cor 10:21–22). Says Paul, 'For I feel a *divine jealousy* for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ' (2 Cor 11:2–3).

You could at least think it may be possible that the first half of Numbers is God's preparation for the journey, and the second part will show us what the people did with that preparation: how they fared, how they neglected it so often and rebelled, what God did when they came under his discipline, and how, for the time being, it ended up.

Let us close our session in prayer.

Our Father, we do believe by thy grace that all these Old Testament Scriptures were given by thine inspiration, and therefore they are profitable. Help us to summon up the zeal that we might take thy word seriously and study it well. Only illuminate our minds and our hearts by thy Spirit, we pray, that we may find the profit therein and learn of the preparation thou hast made for us to take us through our earthly journey, fixing our eyes on the glories of Christ with us now, and in eternity to be with Christ in glory hereafter. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Preparations for the Journey

This is the second of three seminars on the topic of how to study the Bible. It is encouraging to see that some of you have persevered from the first session to the second, and I will do my best to make the second easier than the first, though I have no guarantee to offer you.

We begin as usual with the awareness of our dependence upon the illumination of the Holy Spirit, but now let us retrace our steps a little bit and look again at the upper half of the sheet, entitled **Preparation**.

We have there the first ten chapters divided into five major parts, and just let me repeat on what basis those divisions have been suggested. They have been made by an attempt to follow the thought flow of the writer and how he has grouped his material.

Column 1: The first four chapters have a common theme, **Numbering for the Journey**, the census of the people in readiness for the journey. First of all, the numbering of the *tribes*, which occupies two chapters. Secondly, the numbering of the *Levites*. The tribes had very different duties from the Levites, of course, but at this part of the narrative they have this in common: that they are being numbered, listed, and thus organized for their particular services.

Column 2: Similarly, the elements in the second column are both concerned with **Keeping the Camp Clean**. To avoid *physical uncleanness*, it requires no imagination to see the importance of this particular regulation and provision. Get some thousands of people living in tents in close proximity in a wilderness that was very dry and water was scarce, and it would demand punctilious care on the part of everybody to keep themselves and the camp clean, otherwise serious infection and contagion would break out.

However, as we survey the material in the second column, we notice it is not merely a question of physical uncleanness, which was very important; but then, to avoid *moral uncleanness*, there comes the question of keeping the camp free from other kinds of damage—*business trespass*, and damage done to people in connection with the things of God.

In those days, business would be by exchange, I suppose, rather than coinage, but don't forget that they had to do some business. The wilderness was not like the Sahara is today; it was criss-crossed by the caravans of merchantmen, and some of the supplies would have to be gotten from those merchantmen, and so forth and so on. But if among themselves the Israelites started cheating each other in their business, you can see what disturbance in relationships that would make, and seriously impair the unity of the nation and their readiness to stand and fight together when they were opposed by some common enemy.

It is a sorry fact that the spiritual health of some assemblies has been seriously disturbed by questionable business practices among members of the assembly.

Then there were faults in the things concerning the Lord. These too had to be guarded against, and when offence occurred, to make proper restitution. But the largest space is then spent on what we considered this morning, *the trial of jealousy*, and we noticed that it too is concerned with moral defilement. And then a section on the *Nazirite's vow*; and though at first sight it seems to be a very different topic, yet it too is concerned with the maintenance of cleanliness. Things could happen to a man who had a Nazirite vow that were not his fault, such as if suddenly someone died by his side. According to Old Testament ritual, he would then be defiled and his vow thus be broken, and he would have to shave off his hair and start again, if he so wished. His devotion, in that technical sense, could be defiled.

Column 3: This is concerned with the so-called **Aaronic blessing**. It is a matter of a few verses, 6:22–27. Of course, we could think of all kinds of connections between this and what goes before and what goes after. Rather than risk any artificial forcing of connections of thought, I have listed the Aaronic blessing as a thing in itself. Though short, it is of fundamental importance in the question of Israel's provision for crossing the desert.

Column 4: Similarly, in the fourth column, **Dedications**, I have tried to use thought flow that points to the similarity of topic between what I have listed as A and B.

A. The question of the *offerings of the princes at the dedication of the altar*. Other details of course are mentioned in chapter 7, which is a very long chapter; but the main theme is the offerings of the princes at the dedication of the altar.

Now we notice an interesting thing. That altar had been made, and presumably dedicated, long before they set out from Sinai, and yet the offerings of the princes at the dedication of the altar were not put early on in the book of Numbers, nor yet in the book of Exodus that describes the making of the altar and the tabernacle. From which we perceive that the material in this first half of the book is not being listed necessarily in chronological order and, therefore, it is being emphasized to us that the deliberate order of the material is not simply on the ground of chronology, but on the ground of subject matter and significance.

B. The dedication of the altar is followed in the next chapter by the *offering of the Levites as a living sacrifice*. At the time of their installation into office they were offered as a living sacrifice to God on the part of the whole nation. It is not the only topic, but it is the main topic in chapter 8.

Column 5: In chapter 9 we have what I conceive to be **Regulations for the Journey**. And now you should notice that the journey itself begins in chapter 10.

In the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, the cloud lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony, and the people of Israel set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai. And the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran. (v. 11)

So, if you were doing this simply on the ground of the journeys, you would make a break in the structure of the book at 10:10. It would be a very instructive thing to notice the times when Israel were resting in one place for some days or months, and then the times when they were journeying, because throughout this book those two themes alternate. Sometimes Israel is at rest in one place, though busy about the details of daily life. On other occasions they are constantly on the move.

Forty years' delay

So here they begin to journey and they are journeying until they come to the borders of the promised land. At that point they refuse to go in, and the text seems to suggest that for forty years they would be here 'in *this* wilderness', as though they stayed in and around the wilderness of Paran, maybe in Kadesh or in other places in that extensive wilderness.

As I live, declares the LORD, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you: your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upwards, who have grumbled against me. (14:28-29)

They were not in that sense making any progress. If that is true, it was nearly forty years before they started journeying again. Presumably the younger generation had grown up to years of responsibility, and they make their way to the plains of Moab. They have to fight their way through, and the record is given in detail of some of the battles they had to fight against various nations.

But then Numbers will record how eventually they came to the plains on the east side of the Jordan, and there they encamped. According to Deuteronomy, it was there that Moses gave his farewell addresses to the nation. They were lengthy addresses indeed, because at that point the nation had reached a critical juncture in their experience.

The first time they were given the chance to enter the promised inheritance, they refused it. Now, after virtually forty years, they were brought to another chance of entering the promised land; this time from the east of Jordan. The question would be, would they or wouldn't they take this opportunity and go in? To his heartbroken disappointment, Moses himself was not allowed to go in, nor to lead them into the land (see Deut 31:1-2). Yet of course he pleads with the people to make up their minds before God, to learn the lessons that God had taught them in the wilderness, and this time to go in and possess their inheritance.

It was a very dramatic situation. I am mentioning that because one very valid way to analyse the book of Numbers is to follow the *geographical* method and notice when they were at rest and when they were marching, two themes that alternate in the course of the book.

Have you noticed that sometimes life itself is a bit like that? Sometimes we appear to be making great and significant progress; at other times we are becalmed with no wind in our sails, and seem to be getting nowhere fast. Numbers will talk to us about that phenomenon. It doesn't mean that God is teaching us nothing when we are becalmed somewhat. Sometimes it is our own fault. But I'm not here to sermonize, I'm supposed to be conducting a seminar; but it is mighty difficult not to!

Numbering for the journey 1:1–4:49

A. The tribes

1. For war

So let's come back to the first column and notice a few things about it. When it was a question of the numbering and organization of the tribes, they were told from the very first that they were to put into the census the people from such an age upwards, all those able to go to war (1:1–3). It was made clear from the start that, if they wanted to cross the wilderness to their promised inheritance, it would very likely involve fighting from time to time.

The crossing of the wilderness of Sinai, the wilderness of Paran, or other such wildernesses, was not the kind of little stroll you would take on a Sunday afternoon with your wife through the local park. It is still a dangerous business crossing that wilderness; so much so that you will probably have to get permission from the authorities. You'll not be allowed to do it unless you have a four-wheel drive, you must take plenty of water, and the authorities must be informed, in case you get lost or delayed through some accident and the vultures get to you before the AA!

It is not a secret either that our walk from earth to glory is not necessarily a Sunday afternoon picnic or a little stroll. There are times when it can be wonderfully enjoyable. Not all Christian life is a contest and a fight, of course not. There were oases from time to time, even in the wilderness, but it wasn't hidden from them that they must be organized from the start, and ready to fight. We need to retain that concept, don't we? We must not represent our current salvation as merely a long struggle; it is full of the abundant mercies of God. When I hear the old hymn, 'This world is a wilderness wide', I sort of know what the author meant, and in a fundamental sense it is true. But then, I have to remember that it's God's world.

I was brought up by gentlemen—God be praised for them and their influence, but I got the impression from them that to be interested in things like physics, unless you had to be to earn your bread and butter, was a little bit worldly. But, do you know, I found Isaiah saying a little bit to the contrary. It was God actually, through Isaiah, who told people to go out of doors and consider the stars. I have found it marvellously helpful in my Christian pathway to look at the stars. Not in astrology, but what a sense of the wonder of God it gives one. I like the other hymn that says, 'We're travelling through Immanuel's land'. It belongs to him anyway, and we are not to be so heavenly minded that we fail to see the glories of the creation around us. It's God's world, and nature shall be restored one day and redeemed from its bondage to corruption. But here I go, preaching again; I must get back to business.

2. For camping and marching

They had to be prepared to fight, and therefore in chapter 2 we find out the arrangement of the tribes, both in camp and on the march. *In camp*, they had to be arranged so that the armed troops formed a square around their most valuable possession in life, the tabernacle and the presence of God (v. 2). And then, when they were *on the march*, the ark and the tabernacle and all its concerns were normally in the middle of the line of troops to protect it from attacks from all sides.

I know you will probably quote me the end of chapter 10 that says that, when they first set out, the ark went three days' journey in front to seek out a resting place (v. 33). Precisely what that means is a matter of some dispute; whether it kept three days ahead all the time or not. But normally they were organized as an armed force to protect what was life's most sacred, most valuable, most significant thing for them. The presence of God among them, and all the wealth that his presence brought, was symbolized in the tabernacle and its service. They had to be prepared to fight for it.

You say, 'Mr Lecturer, you've got things upside down and on their head. As we go through the wilderness, it's not we that fight for God, it's God that fights for us, surely?'

Well that was true of Israel, the Lord fought for them. But that doesn't mean they just sat there; they too had to fight. I sense, likewise, that for us believers in the hurly-burly of daily life, we shall have to learn to fight to maintain a sense of life's true values. God is with us, and the most supreme value in life is our enjoyment of the presence of God and the glorious provision he makes for us. Have you never found it a matter of fight, to find half an hour a day to spend with God? In spite of your good intentions, have you never found it a fight to take God's word seriously?

I thank God for the way he has made life easy for me. We in universities are supposed to live in ivory towers, and that's another story. But the pressures of modern life, often with husband and wife both working, and children parked out on other people, and laptops and mobile phones meaning that they can never get away from work and the boss – these things have introduced pressures into life that can have some far reaching and impoverishing effects. Life goes by and we don't actually have much space for the development of fellowship with God and enjoying the riches of God's word. We shall have to fight for it.

Young man, young woman, learn it early on. We have to earn our bread and butter, but in the pressures of all that you have to endure in carving out a career, you'll have to fight. In daily life you'll have to discipline yourself to carve out a time for the enjoyment of the reality of the presence of God, the service of God, communion with God and the learning of his word. Start now, before life's pressures mount so high that you have almost no time for communion with God in his word. 'Fight the good fight of the faith,' says Paul to Timothy (1 Tim 6:12).

B. The Levites

1. Levites for firstborn

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the LORD.' (3:11–13)

The Levites were taken in the place of the firstborn. God's claim upon the firstborn was this: when the destroying angel passed through the land to smite the firstborn, and the Egyptian firstborn were slain, the firstborn in Israel were saved by the blood of the lamb sprinkled on the doorposts of the house in which they were.

In other words, apart from that sacrifice, the firstborn in Israel would have perished too; and, since they owed their preservation and their life to the redeeming mercy of God and the blood of the Passover lamb, God claimed them as his personal property. But in the end he agreed to substitute the Levites for the firstborn.

2. Duties to transport the tabernacle

And then there came the Levites, and among their duties was this: when the tabernacle was at rest and the people at rest, they had to guard the tabernacle from any unauthorized intrusion or damage. When the cloud moved, it was the responsibility of the Levites to dismantle the tabernacle. The furniture was covered by the priests, but then it had to be carried on the shoulders of the Levites, and the lists are given as to which tribe of Levites did what in that particular (vv. 14–39). They had some carts for carrying the heavy stuff, like the frames and the solid metal sockets, but the furniture was carried on their shoulders.

When they first did it, I suspect they were very excited. ‘Oh, we’re carrying the table of showbread; we’re carefully undoing the frames and the sockets. Wow, somebody’s carrying the ark.’ But I fancy, when you’ve taken the tabernacle down 2,563 times and you’ve built it up 2,564 times, it loses some of its novelty. It could become a kind of *secular* chore, and sometimes you might even forget something.

I don’t think the high priest would have allowed it; but just imagine getting to the site in the early afternoon and the tabernacle has to be put up. Here come the troops, and they are so organized that they come at the right moment. I mean, you can’t put the vessels into the tabernacle unless somebody has first put it up, can you? They’re putting the thing all together and then somebody looks round and says, ‘Who’s got the laver? Is it you?’

‘No, not me. That was him, I think.’

‘No,’ he says, ‘it wasn’t me, that’s not my duty today, it’s yours.’

‘Oh, sorry, I forgot.’

‘You forgot the laver?’

‘Yes, we had a game of football and it lasted a bit long. We were a bit late and I forgot.’

Yes, these are practical things, aren’t they?

You say, ‘They’re only symbols, so what does it really matter?’

Half a minute, do you celebrate the Lord’s Supper? What happens if the person responsible to put the bread and the wine on the table has forgotten it? Have you ever been at a meeting where at the beginning it was found that nobody had thought to get the bread and the wine, and the shops were all shut? Difficult, isn’t it? They’re only symbols, but aren’t they sacred?

But it’s not merely that, is it? Let’s draw the parallel between those tabernacle pieces of furniture and the symbols of what we regard in Christianity as absolutely fundamental truth. The doctrine of the atonement and the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ; the doctrines of the deity of Christ and the deity of the Holy Spirit; the doctrine of the new covenant as distinct from the old; the washing of water of regeneration; the fellowship with God at his table, and the function of the lampstand—these are truths, aren’t they?

Who, may I ask, carries them in your assembly?

You say, ‘The Bible carries them, of course.’

But in spite of that, the truth of justification by faith being in the Bible was generally lost for centuries. People just didn't know it, or had forgotten it. In our day aren't we responsible before God to carry the truth of his word? Suppose you were the only one left in your assembly; would you be able to explain to someone the doctrine of justification by faith, or the difference between justification by faith and justification by works? For their preservation amongst the people of God, these fundamental and illimitably valuable things depend on each individual learning them, knowing them and carrying them in their own personal experience. That is true of the new birth, isn't it? It's very difficult to explain the new birth if you've not experienced it yourself; but, similarly, if we have experienced it, should we not be able to explain it to somebody else, and why it is necessary?

Alas for Christendom, when many in the average congregation couldn't tell you about the fundamental doctrines of the faith. The virgin birth of Christ, the incarnation of the Son of God, his bodily resurrection: doctrines fundamental to the faith are being lost. It is our responsibility, therefore, by our personal experience and knowledge of these things, to maintain them. Of course it is the chief burden of teachers and not all are teachers, but because these things are kept and perpetuated by people experiencing them, it is also the part of all the people of God.

Keeping the camp clean 5:1-6:21

A. Physical and moral uncleanness

We talked this morning about 1. *Physical uncleanness*; 2. *Business trespass*. I needn't say more about that now, except to notice one particular feature of that trial of jealousy.

3. Trial of jealousy

The woman suspected of unfaithfulness was brought before the priest. Now this wasn't some pagan ceremony, such as the ordeal by fire that you would have found in early Europe, where a person was charged with an offence and, to find out whether he was truly guilty or not, they heated a bar red hot and told him to get hold of it. If it didn't damage him he was innocent, and if it did damage him he was guilty. There was very little doubt about the verdict.

This wasn't like that. The woman was to stand before the Lord and the priest took holy water in an earthenware vessel and mixed it with some dust from the floor of the tabernacle, and the woman drank it. If she was innocent there was nothing there that would have injured her. She was standing before the Lord and thus appealing to God. If she was innocent, God would protect her. If she was guilty, she was inviting God to show it. Thus the suspicions of her husband, reasonable or unreasonable, could be laid to rest (5:11-29).

How is it with us, as the people of God? Are we not trusting one another; whether it is partners in Christian marriage, or the members of a church? The church is not a sort of *Gestapo*, or secret police. It isn't surveilling everybody's actions, how could it be? On what basis can we eventually trust one another?

Forget the book of Numbers for two minutes, and those organizers who say we mustn't preach. What do you suppose is happening when we gather to remember the Lord Jesus and to celebrate his covenant? We are told to do it seriously. We must discern ourselves, and where

we perceive wrong attitudes or wrong deeds we must confess them before the Lord. But if I come to the Lord's Supper and take the cup of the covenant irresponsibly, with sin allowed in my life, what will the Lord do? He will judge me, he will chasten me; but he will not abandon his covenant, because his covenant says, 'I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds' (Heb 10:16). Our Lord pledges to do this by the covenant of which the cup is the symbol. If I will not cooperate with God and judge myself, and come to that supper unrepentant, without any regard for the ongoing writing of God's laws on my heart, I am inviting the Lord's judgment on me.

You don't know where I get to during the week, do you? Do you trust me to take the celebration of the covenant about the writing of his laws on my heart seriously, and invite the Lord, if need be, to chasten me? If we all did it seriously, we could all trust each other the more implicitly, couldn't we? But that's by the way, and I come back to other things.

B. Nazirite's vow and rules about defilement

The Nazirite is included here because of the question of possible defilement, but the Nazirite's vow in itself is very interesting, because it was completely voluntary. You didn't have to take a Nazirite's vow if you didn't want to. It was a voluntary exercise of someone, man or woman, who decided that for a certain time they would be specially devoted to the Lord. It needn't be forever. It could be for a limited time and then they could go back to what you might call 'ordinary' devotion to the Lord.

Is there such a thing as *voluntary devotion* for Christians? I thought all Christians, by definition, were obliged to give themselves one hundred percent to the Lord, and in that sense we're like the Levites, who were taken in the place of the firstborn and God claimed them as his personal property. The same principle applies to us. 'You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body' (1 Cor 6:19-20). 'He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised' (2 Cor 5:15).

Shall we not say, therefore, that we are all under obligation to live one hundred percent for the Lord, as William McDonald was exhorting us to do last night? Well, of course we are; but it seems to me that, within that total devotion of 'whatever we do, we do to the Lord', even Christians are allowed in some places what could be called 'voluntary devotion'.

The instance I cite is to be found in 1 Corinthians 7, where the question is raised about marriage.

Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgement as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. (1 Cor 7:25-28)

In cases like this, it seems to me quite clear that our Lord leaves the decision to each individual believer. If you get married in this condition and this circumstance, you have not sinned. If you don't get married, you haven't sinned. 'I'll give you my advice,' says Paul, 'but it's not a

command from the Lord; it is for each one to decide before the Lord what he or she shall do.' As our Lord Jesus indicated in the Gospel of Matthew, some may decide for the kingdom of God's sake to remain single. If they married, it wouldn't be a sin; it is a voluntary thing that each one has to decide (19:10–12).

It is not only a question of marriage. In all sorts of other things God leaves the choice to us to decide to go without something for a certain period in life. Not that it is forbidden, but we want to set ourselves free for a period of special devotion to the Lord and his work.

But lest we think that Naziriteship is a very odd institution, let us remember what God said through the prophet Amos:

'And I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and some of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?' declares the LORD. 'But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, "You shall not prophesy".' (2:11–12)

God is ambitious for his people, you know. No parent, thinking of a career for their son or daughter, could possibly be so ambitious as God. Listen to God talking to Israel about his ambition for *some* of their sons. 'I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and some of your young men for Nazirites.' Not every one, but some. He had in mind those great heroes of faith; men like Samuel who were Nazirites from their birth to their death. They were of outstanding effect for God because they were free, so to speak, and thus devoted to God. In this particular sense, they were Nazirites. What men they were. How pleased Hannah was that her child followed that career.

'I raised up some of your sons for Nazirites,' says God. What a career they could have had. 'But you,' says God to the people of Israel, 'you pooh-poohed that idea—you said that it was extremism and you gave the Nazirites wine to drink.'

That's a sad thing, isn't it? I don't know how it would have been possible for God to get Israel through the wilderness and maintain them all the years of the Judges and on into the monarchy, without there being sometimes, somewhere, men like Samuel who were prepared for this extreme form of devotion to God.

The Aaronic blessing 6:22–27

Now we come to the third column, which is concerned with the Aaronic blessing. I have left it by itself because I'm not arguing for a structure of the book, so let us concentrate for a moment on this Aaronic blessing and what's it doing here. Why isn't it given in the book of Exodus or Leviticus, where the priests are inducted? What is this doing here in this part of the book of Numbers, if we are right in thinking that here are the preparations and the provisions for Israel's journey? God is not in a hurry; he wants all provisions in place, because he knows the strains and difficulties of the wilderness ahead. So why is this important here, along with ropes and bullocks for the carts, and grease for the wheels, and lots of big vessels to put water in, and all such practical things?

You'll forgive me, won't you, because of my idiosyncrasies? Sometimes I hear my superiors exhorting me as a preacher, 'Now, look, be practical,' and I do my best to see what on earth they mean. Are they implying, for instance, that if you gave too much time to

studying Numbers it wouldn't be practical? Are they suggesting that some parts of God's word aren't practical, and we would be well advised to keep away from them? That's a funny view of inspiration, isn't it? What do you mean by *practical* anyway?

Here were people about to embark on this dangerous journey across a wilderness. If God can do it, they must be protected by a *very* practical thing. What is that? Well, let me put it this way. One of the difficulties of the wilderness journey—perhaps its supreme danger and difficulty—would be if circumstances should arise that would lead the people to doubt and question the love of God. I want to say that this is the most practical theme of all in life. If circumstances should come that cause serious doubt in our hearts about the goodness and faithfulness and love of God, then, however successful we may be in other areas, Satan has achieved an enormous victory.

God foresaw it, of course, and made provision for his people that they should be filled as full as possible with a sense of the reality of the blessing and the love of God. So Aaron is told that from time to time he must gather the people together and pronounce upon them the blessing of God.

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. (6:24–26)

They were not mere words, were they? Oh, how I wish that I could speak those words in such a way to your hearts that by God's Spirit you would sense the overwhelming love and grace of God towards you, in whatever circumstance you might at the moment find yourself. As a bachelor with few responsibilities, it's easy for me to talk. It's difficult for some folks in their circumstances just to quote tritely, 'all things work together for good'.

I remember I was studying the book of Numbers with a few friends at one stage, and present was a relative of a family that had three sons. The youngest son came home one day and said, 'Mummy, I can't see.' They took him to the doctor, who diagnosed an inoperable abscess on the brain. Their son died. About a year later, the eldest son got his first Saturday job. He earned some money, came back very proud with things he'd bought from his first wages, and went upstairs saying he was a bit tired. They heard him go into the toilet, but he didn't come out. When they went to find him he was dead on the floor. News came through as we were studying Numbers. What do you say to parents who have lost two of their sons within, say, a year? Is that not where we need the supernatural grace of God?

If I may speak to my fellow preachers and elders, please see to it that in your ministry you are not forever simply exhorting people, but you are also seeking by God's grace to convey to them something of the wonder of the faithfulness and love of God.

The Lord bless you and keep you

Facing a wilderness, security would be a number one need, and the question would be, could God keep them secure?

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you

What a lovely metaphor that is. Watch a little girl come home; it's Mother's birthday and she's bought her a present. It might not be in good taste and a very cheap affair, bought with the money that Mum gave her to start with. But you watch her face as she comes to present her gift to Mum, and watch Mum's face as she sees it. And watch the husband's face, as he presents his carat gold present to his wife, beaming at his own generosity. When did you last look into the face of God and see his face shining at you for the sheer grace and the marvellous wealth of his salvation? That's what we're supposed to convey to the people of God, if we're priests at all—the wealth of the grace of God.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace

In the ancient world, as in some modern European states, gestures are very important. You have to understand them. In some countries they can sometimes appear to be quite contrary. If in Yugoslavia you say something and the man moves his head sideways, it means that he's agreeing with you, which is the very opposite of what that would convey to an Englishman. In the ancient east, if you went to somebody to ask a request, they would either put their head down and not look at you, or turn their head upward and not look at you. So much so that in Greece, if you went to somebody for a request, you got hold of his beard so he couldn't turn his face from you. He had to look at you.

'The Lord lift up his countenance upon you', and when you come with your prayers give you a sense that he is actually taking notice of what you pray and listening to you. You have the peace of heart that God knows and has heard, and he will answer your prayer in the way that he, not necessarily you, sees best. This thing, which stands central to the preparation, is of vast importance.

Allow me to exhort my fellow preachers, Sunday school teachers, and everything else. See to it if you can that you don't just exhort God's people, but that you are used of God to strengthen their faith in the goodness and reliability of God and the wealth of salvation, and that a God who cannot pass over and forget them, knows their need, hears their prayers and will answer in his time.

Dedications 7:1-8:26

A. Offerings of the princes at the dedication of the altar

Finally, let us look at the fourth column. It is a very long chapter and each offering is described in the very same terms, but they are repeated because of the importance of the topic. The nobles came with their costly offerings of silver and so forth, and laid them at the foot of the altar to express their sense of the value of that altar in spiritual terms to the people of God.

The people with their wives and children assembled around the altar when it was to be dedicated. As each lordly prince stepped forward and put his most costly silver offering at the base of that altar, I can imagine a little lad nudging his father and saying, 'What's he doing that for, Dad? Why are those expensive things given up?' And Dad saying, 'It's because of what that altar means to us in our relationship with God,' and the lad would begin to learn

the values implied by that altar. It is followed by the dedication and the offering of the Levites, and the connection of thought is easy to see.

B. The lampstand and the offering of the Levites as a living sacrifice

The Levites were required now to come and be assembled (8:6). As the nation put their hands upon them, they were to be offered to God as a living sacrifice, wholly acceptable to him for his service. Where should the Levites get the motivation from to carry out their duties? Their willingness to be offered at the altar would depend on their sense of the value of what that altar stood for.

Is there anything comparable with us? I'm not saying this is a *type*, I'm just drawing analogies, but am I not required by the mercies of God to yield my body as 'a living sacrifice' (Rom 12:1)?

'Really?' you say. 'Are you going to tell me that that is what I've got to do? Why should I offer my body as a living sacrifice? How would you help me to do it?'

Well, one place would be at the Lord's Supper maybe. It's a place where 'princes' among the people of God step forward and, on behalf of the gathered people, express to God how they value the sacrifice and death of our Lord upon the cross. We can sit by and note the sincerity, and perhaps the emotion and deep-seated appreciation that's in their hearts, and see that it is genuine. If that man, with life's experience behind him, values that sacrifice, the cross, and the offering of Christ, then I can begin to see, if Christ has so loved me, that I ought in return to offer my body as a living sacrifice for him.

You princes, do resist the modern temptation to so organize the Lord's Supper as if it is a ten-minute interval in the course of an entertainment organized for other purposes. It is central to our own motivation to yield our body as a living sacrifice, acceptable to the Lord through him.

Shall we pray.

Lord, look upon our humble efforts, faltering as they are, to understand thy word. Bury it deep in our hearts, we pray, and by the ongoing ministry of thy Holy Spirit, cause us to perceive its inexpressible wealth and glory and grace, so that, thus fortified, we may face our Christian journey, and walk worthily and manfully in view of the calling wherewith thou hast called us, to share the eternal glories of eternity with thee and thy dear Son. For his name's sake. Amen.

A. Explaining and Illustrating Technical Terms

This is the third and the last seminar in this particular series entitled 'How to study the Bible'. It has been suggested to me that it would be helpful if I clarified a few of the semi-technical terms that I have used in the course of this study. People have been mystified a little bit by what the difference could possibly be between structure, analysis, pattern and thought flow, so let me attempt to explain as clearly and briefly as I can the meanings that I put upon these terms.

Thought flow

When I talk of thought flow it is no wonderful or exotic thing. It simply means the connection of thought between one word and another; between one sentence and another; between one paragraph and another; and between one whole incident and another, and so forth and onwards: the thought flow from one end of a book to the other. That is what we are doing at any time when we are studying Scripture: seeing what the connection of thought is between one thing and another.

We may simply want to concentrate on one sentence or one phrase and neglect the surrounding context, and since it is the word of God it can speak to our very hearts and souls. But when it comes to the serious study of Scripture that tries to discover what Scripture itself is saying, then of course the preeminent thing is that we should read it and read it and read it, because our brains are like human computers. You can't get answers out of computers unless you first feed in the basic information. I do not limit the illumination of the Holy Spirit, of course, but unless we on our side are prepared to feed the information that the Holy Spirit gives us in Scripture into the 'computers' of our minds, it is difficult for us to get anything out, so to speak. If we do our part of feeding the information into our minds, the Holy Spirit can then show us the significance of the information. Helpful to that end, therefore, is constantly the question of thought flow. 'How do you get from this sentence to that sentence? What is the connection of thought? Where is the narrative going?' and so forth.

Structure and pattern

I have also used the term *structure* in a sense differing from *pattern*. If I may use a humble example, if you came to my house in Belfast you would open the front door and find yourself standing in what we call the hall. That's a place where people stand before they go somewhere else. In my house, the hall has doors that separate it structurally from a dining room, a sitting room and from a kitchen. These three rooms are set apart structurally from each other. But if

you came in and noticed the pattern on the carpet on the floor of the hall, you would see that that pattern not only covers the floor of the hallway, but goes up the stairs, right along the landings to the top of the house, and of course the stairs and the landings are different structurally from the hallway.

If you stood in the hall and opened the door into the dining room, you're passing from one structural element to another structural element. You can shut the door and they are completely self-contained compartments. When you look at the carpet in the dining room, you would see it is of a different pattern from the carpet in the hall, but then you would notice a funny thing—it's my house and a house has to resemble the owner and occupant; you would find that there is a series of pictures called 'The Cries of London'. There are two of those pictures in the hall, and when you open the doorway into the dining room you'll find the series of pictures continues all the way round the dining room as well. So these pictures form a pattern, and the pattern is shared by two of the structures.

It's getting complicated, and the only way you'll solve that is to come and look at it. A lot of houses are like that. When you look at those pictures, two of them are in the hall and the rest of them, about a half a dozen or more, are in the dining room. The pattern of the pictures is not distributed proportionately to the structure.

When you look at the pattern in the hallway, as I've said, you'll notice that the pattern on the carpet goes up the stairs and right up the landings, all the way; though the landings are separate structurally from the hall.

You say, 'What about the pattern of those pictures?'

Ah, now there's a difference. The pattern on the floor of the entrance hall goes up the stairs, but the pattern of the pictures doesn't. Pattern, you see, is a very different thing from structures. The men will find this difficult to follow; the ladies will understand it completely, with their expertise at colour and all this kind of thing.

Structure: illustrated by the four journeys in the Gospel of John

If you wanted to pursue the structure of the Gospel of John, you would find that, after the long introduction—not just the prologue, but the long introduction that goes into chapter 2 and verse 12—the rest of the Gospel of John is devoted to four journeys that our Lord Jesus made from Galilee to Jerusalem on the occasion of the Jewish feasts, and then back north again towards Galilee. There is nothing else in John but those four journeys to Jerusalem and back. That is the structure of the Gospel.

The first structure opens, 'The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem' (2:13). Chapter 2 proceeds to tell you what happened in Jerusalem, including the cleansing of the temple (vv. 13–22). In chapter 3, we read of the discussion with Nicodemus, the resident theologian in Jerusalem; and then how our Lord went from the capital city to the surrounding country, down to where John was baptizing. In chapter 4 we are told that he decided to go back north and went through Samaria, and eventually how he arrived back in the north at Cana of Galilee, where he had done the first miracle before he went to Jerusalem. A nobleman came to Cana when he heard that Jesus had come back out of Jerusalem to Galilee, and Jesus healed his son.

John stresses the fact, because he thinks we might have forgotten by the time we've got to chapter 4. Being a kindly writer, he keeps on telling us that our Lord has been to Jerusalem and he's come back again to Galilee (v. 54).

Then chapter 5 opens, 'After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem' (v. 1), and it tells you what he did in Jerusalem. Chapter 6 then tells you that he was back in Galilee, and it records some miracles he did and some sermons he preached. Chapter 7 tells us that Jesus eventually went up to Jerusalem for the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles, or Booths (v. 10). You have to try hard to miss it! That journey is described in great detail to the end of chapter 10, and it includes our Lord's presence in Jerusalem, not only at the Feast of Tabernacles, but also at the Feast of Dedication. At the end of chapter 10, what happens then? '[Jesus] went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first' (v. 40); not where he baptized later on. Our Lord went back considerably north, and so we come to the end of chapter 10.

What do you suppose chapter 11 is going to be about? Now have a guess, even if you've never read it before! Well, it doesn't say that there was a feast of the Jews and Jesus went up to Jerusalem; it waits to the end of chapter 11 to tell you that. Chapter 11 begins with the story of our Lord coming to Bethany, raising Lazarus from the dead, and withdrawing while the pilgrims going to the feast at Jerusalem came through Bethany (v. 55). He did it deliberately in order to maximize the publicity of his final journey to Jerusalem.

On the third journey, he had gone up secretly, incognito; on the fourth he arranged the maximum publicity, because on this fourth visit it was to be his official visit as Zion's king coming to Jerusalem. In chapter 12 he deliberately fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah, that Jerusalem's king would come riding on a donkey (Zech 9:9). That fourth journey takes up the whole of the rest of John and ends with chapter 21, which records how our Lord was back in Galilee after the resurrection and what he did for his disciples with the miraculous draught of fishes.

Structure is part of the message

That is a simple *structure*; four visits to Jerusalem and back. But, of course, it is part of the message, for we're told *why* he went to Jerusalem. We shall immediately perceive that he went to Jerusalem on the occasion of these great festivals, and there he examined and commented upon the worship of the nation and their service of God.

It is a very dramatic structure. If we are attending to it, John will nudge us in the ribs and say, 'Do you see that figure going up there with the pilgrims to Jerusalem? That's Jesus of Nazareth.'

'Yes, but who is he?'

'Well, that's God incarnate, actually. Watch him arrive in the temple. That is his Father's house. This is God the Son, God incarnate, whom they're supposed to be worshipping.'

He makes his comments on their worship; he listens to their singing and whether they mean it; he's points out the practices in the temple that are quite inconsistent with the worship of God. John tells us that in the end they grew tired of his comments and hustled him out to Calvary and executed him, and went back to their temple to worship. You see the irony of it, don't you?

So structure isn't there simply so that we can play crossword puzzles with the word of God; structure is part of the message. If I may have a word in the ears of preachers and teachers, you don't always need to keep parading words like 'structure', unless you're talking to a highly intelligent audience like the present one. You don't have to say, 'This is the structure'. You simply say, 'In the message tonight, you'll notice that we're going with the Lord Jesus on a journey to Jerusalem. What for? Well it's a festival.' Then you proceed with the story. And when you come back the next time, you say, 'Do you remember last time we went with our Lord on one of his journeys of inspection to Jerusalem? Well now we're going on another one,' and you can get away without even using the word 'structure'!

Pattern: illustrated by six stories concerning women in the Gospel of John

Then there are patterns. I've used the word *pattern* in this study of Numbers, but perhaps, in illustrating these technical terms, it's easier to use a book that is better known. There are a number of patterns in the Gospel of John; for instance, six stories in which women are prominent that are not mentioned by any other Gospel writer.

In chapter 2, the first story is the wedding at Cana in Galilee, and we're told that the mother of Jesus was there. Curiously, nothing is said about the bride, but never mind. No one else tells us that story.

In chapter 4 there's the story of a Samaritan woman and no one else tells us that.

In chapter 8 it's another woman and no one else tells us about her. I'm old fashioned enough to believe that the story of the woman taken in adultery was put there originally by John from whatever source he may have taken it.

In chapters 11 and 12 there is the long story about Martha and Mary. No other Gospel writers tell us about the feast that was made in their house, and only John gives us the long story of the sickness and death of Lazarus their brother, and how our Lord came and raised Lazarus from the dead.

In chapter 19 there is the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the death of her son, and the famous words that he said to Mary, not recorded elsewhere. Pointing to John, he said: 'Woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother' (see vv. 26-27).

And finally, in chapter 20 there is the extended story about Mary Magdalene in the garden, when our Lord addressed her and said, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (v. 17).

Relationship is the common theme

Six stories then, in which women are prominent. They all have a common *theme*. That theme is relationship.

For instance, the woman in chapter 4 was living with a man who wasn't her husband. The relationship was unsatisfactory. The woman in chapter 8 had been unfaithful to her relationship. *These two stories form a pair.*

In chapter 11 we have Martha and Mary at the death of their brother.

In chapter 19, Mary at the death of her son.

In chapter 20, the story of Mary Magdalene, you have the question of relationship explicitly expounded: 'I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'

In chapter 2, to come back to the first story, the wedding at which the mother of Jesus was present. What are weddings, if they're not the public formalizing of a new relationship?

They are not structure

So there's a pattern and the stories are interrelated. But if you study them you will notice that they are not distributed equally throughout the structural sections of the book, because they're not structure. They're like the pattern on my carpet in the hallway. There's a lot of it in the hallway and some of it goes up the stairs; but it's not equally distributed through the house, because it's not a structural feature. It's simply a pattern.

One could go on more, but I mustn't. I'm supposed to be talking about Numbers! But again, if you preachers are talking to a general congregation, you don't even have to use the word 'pattern' if you don't want to. You can discuss the story of the wedding in Cana of Galilee and the new relationship, and all those wonderful things that come out of that story. The next time you preach, you could say, 'Last time, we had a story about a wedding. Now we're going to come across another story in which a woman is prominent, and her wedding hasn't been so successful. She's had five husbands,' and so you carry on. You may eventually point out how those stories are related one to another, and how they're putting different sides of a common theme, but you don't even have to use the word 'pattern' if you don't want to.

Dominant themes

What did I mean when I said that, in talking about the rebellions in the second half of the book of Numbers, I'm not giving you a structure? People have said to me, 'But it looks very much to us as if it is a structure.' I don't really mind what you call it, but I was actually shielding my own flank. When it comes to the structure of the whole book of Numbers, opinions differ on what is the basis of the structure, and therefore I didn't want to get myself into discussing it at length and putting all sorts of different views. I exhorted you to do the reading and certified to you that there are different opinions on the structure.

So I took the easy way out, and under the four headings 'Rebellion' I pointed to a dominant theme (see page 8). I used the phrase deliberately. So whether you think it's technically part of the structure—it could be; or whether you don't think it's technically part of structure, never mind. It is a dominant theme, and we shall be talking about its significance a bit more this morning.

And, similarly, 'Sacrifices' is a dominant theme. Call them *structure* if you want to; I would be more inclined to call them a repeated *pattern*. These are devices that one would use in ordinary literature. By background I am a teacher of the Greek and Roman classical literature and I have learnt a lot of things from old Aristotle. Therefore, for investigating the literary parts of Scripture—narrative and so forth, it is helpful to notice such things as structure and pattern. But I repeat what I said before; when it comes to Bible study, there is thought flow, pattern, and structure, but the greatest of these is thought flow because it is thought flow that determines all the rest.

But with that we come back to the second half of the book of Numbers, and in the time available to me I aim to say one or two more things, first about the rebellions and then about some of the sacrifices.

B. The rebellions

As we have discovered, there is a series of rebellions. In interpreting what was the distinguishing nature of each rebellion and deciding its implications, we have to tread very carefully. That is a matter of study, but there is also a pastoral concern. The New Testament calls them *examples* to be brought to our attention as Christians, so that we do not make the same mistakes as ancient Israel made. In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul has an explicit word to say about these rebellions. We need exceedingly great care, first of all to discover what Scripture itself is saying the rebellion was about, and then how we apply it to ourselves and our fellow believers. It's easy to be a little clumsy here and to apply warnings about cases of apostates to dear, genuine believers who have fallen into some difficulty. It's easy to misjudge people, is it not?

I call your attention to the last rebellion (32:1–36:13): the rebellion, or the supposed rebellion, of the two and a half tribes. We are told that they came to Moses one bright day and said, 'Sir, might we make a request of you? When the nation has conquered the Canaanite population, could you give us territory east of Jordan, because we've noticed there's a lot of grass there and we have a lot of cattle?' (see 32:1–5).

At which point Moses 'flew off the handle', if I may use that expression of such an exalted figure. He said to them:

The LORD'S anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the LORD was gone. And behold, you have risen in your fathers' place, a brood of sinful men, to increase still more the fierce anger of the LORD against Israel! For if you turn away from following him, he will again abandon them in the wilderness, and you will destroy all this people. (vv. 13–15)

'Didn't we have enough trouble with your fathers at Kadesh-barnea, when they could have gone into the promised land and they refused? Have you forgotten the judgment of God that descended upon us because of their refusal? And here you are, wanting to stay on the other side of Jordan. Do you want to bring upon us the further judgment of God?'

So they waited, and calmly said, 'But, sir, we weren't proposing any such thing. Yes, we made the request that we should be given land east of Jordan, but have you forgotten that the Lord gave us victory over that land and gave the nation that territory? We're not proposing to stay east of Jordan. We'll make barricades for our women and children, but we will go fully armed right in the front of the battle lines, and we will not come back until the whole land has been conquered (see v. 18). We are not apostates; we're not proposing to discourage our brethren, but only asking that, when the whole land is conquered and the tribes are dismissed and dispersed, we are allowed to inherit the territory that God himself has given the nation east of Jordan.'

'Well, if that's what you meant, it shall be your possession,' said Moses. 'I'm just warning you, you'd better do what you've promised' (see vv. 22–23).

We can understand Moses, can't we? The question of Israel's refusal to enter the land at Kadesh-barnea with all the subsequent trouble so overwhelmed him that on one occasion he lost his temper with the people, and God said that he would never lead them into the

promised land. You can understand him being a bit touchy, and sniffing rebellions where they didn't exist. If Moses needed to be careful and could be mistaken, how much more should we be careful in diagnosing what these rebellions are about, and in our application of their lessons, lest we misapply them?

The first rebellion 11:1–15:41

The refusal to go into the promised land

Mercifully, we are not left to ourselves to decide what the rebellion was about, because in the Psalms there is half of a psalm given over to applying the lesson to subsequent generations of Israelites.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, 'They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.' Therefore I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.' (Ps 95:7–11)

This obviously was a very serious rebellion; such that God eventually took an oath to say that the men who refused to go in would never go in. That psalm is quoted at great length in the letter to the Hebrews chapters 3 and 4. Its individual words and phrases are expounded in the way of a good preacher sticking to his text, and as we read what the writer says, we become aware, likewise, that the rebellion was very serious.

Who were these people that refused to go in? The writer to the Hebrews says that they had 'an evil, unbelieving heart, leading [them] to fall away from the living God' (3:12). That was the seriousness of it. They weren't believers who had temporarily lost their nerve, and when we read the text of Numbers chapter 11, and in particular chapter 14, we shall hear God giving his verdict, 'How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?' (14:11).

At the end of chapter 3 of Hebrews we see that they couldn't enter in. Why not? Because of disobedience, says the writer, and then adds, 'because of unbelief' (vv. 18–19). The temptation at that point is to ask if genuine believers cannot disobey the Lord from time to time. Of course they can. Can genuine believers not be small in faith and not really believe certain of the promises God has made? Oh, certainly they can, but we must be careful with our technical terms. The word that the writer to the Hebrews uses about this particular *disobedience* and refusal to believe is a word that occurs throughout the New Testament. It is never once used of true believers. When it comes to true believers it's an altogether different word that is used about obedience. The kind of people it's talking about here are deliberate *defiers* of God.

Paul talks to Titus about the ungodly: 'They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, *disobedient*, unfit for any good work' (Titus 1:16). In the Acts of the Apostles, when the gospel is preached, some believe and some don't yet believe. But there were others, the Jews, who 'disobeyed'. They were the people that took up stones and

tried to stone the apostles and drove them out and tried to get the Gentiles not to believe them. Those Jews were not true believers who happened to hit a bad day when they were out of kilter. It is the word that is used in the Gospel of John, 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever *does not obey* the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him' (3:36). 'Does not obey'; in what sense? It is someone who has been illumined by the Holy Spirit and deliberately refuses to obey the gospel or to believe it.

That is what happened at Kadesh-barnea. It was a solemn occasion and God would have destroyed the whole nation, had it not been for the intercessions of Moses, who pleaded the character of God and God's own reputation, 'What will the Egyptians say?' said Moses to God.

Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, 'It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give them that he has killed them in the wilderness.' (Num 14:15-16)

If I had been God, I would have said, 'Moses, do you suppose I care what the Egyptians say?'

Apparently God did care what the Egyptians said, for he listened to Moses. Moses was marvellously faithful, wasn't he? God had offered to take Moses, destroy all the others, and make a nation of him (v. 12). If he had done that, God would still have fulfilled all his promises to Abraham, because Moses was a descendant of Abraham. But when God proposed it to Moses, Moses said, 'Thank you, Lord, but no. If you're going to destroy them, you destroy me' (see Exod 32).

So God said, 'I will bring my judgment upon the men who refuse to go into the land.' God's judgment was just, wasn't it? He had pleaded with them. Ten times he had pleaded with them, but they had finally refused (see Num 14:20-23). They talked of stoning the good spies and going back to Egypt. God's judgment was this, 'If you don't want to go in, don't go in.'

In that sense, my brothers, my sisters, God will never compel anybody to go to heaven. If people are illumined by God's Holy Spirit and know it is God himself speaking to them, and they deliberately refuse and reject God's heaven, there comes a point when God will say, 'Have your choice; don't go to heaven.' That's very solemn, isn't it?

That rebellion therefore was over some very fundamental things, as the writer makes clear in Hebrews 3 and 4. I do not wish to say more about that now. In one of those books that our friend from Canada was trying to sell you, the matter is discussed at some length, and you could check up on my spoken interpretation with what is written there.²

We should notice in passing what we said yesterday. When God said they wouldn't go into the land, the Israelites in their folly attempted to go and fight the enemy in their own strength and power. The ark didn't go with them (v. 44). God didn't read it as repentance, and the King of Arad came out and chased them away. There they are at the end of Numbers 14, running away from the promised land as hard as their legs would take them. In the way that

² David Gooding, *An Unshakeable Kingdom*.

the book of Numbers is put together, we now have that marvellous collocation of ideas that we mentioned yesterday.

So chapter 15 opens, 'Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, *When* you come into the land . . . he who brings his offering shall offer to the LORD a grain offering . . .' (vv. 1, 4). The younger generation had pricked up their ears when they heard that they would be forty years in the wilderness (14:33). 'But,' says someone, 'do you see what's implied in that command? Why is God telling us that now? We can't plant crops in the desert, and we can't reap the corn.' And the penny dropped. The very command, '*When* you come into the land, you shall offer a meal offering of the flour on the altar to the Lord,' was not only a command, it was an implied assurance that one day they would get in. That's marvellous, isn't it? I do wish I had the time to talk to you about that meal offering, and what it talks of at the highest level. I must resist that temptation, or I shall be in trouble with the clock.

The second rebellion 16:1-19:22

Korah the Levite and others

To emphasize the need to be careful in our interpretation and diagnosis of this rebellion, I want to come to the second one, the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. What was that about?

We noticed yesterday that the rebellion of Korah is mentioned in the Epistle by Jude. It was in fact a rebellion against Moses and Aaron.

'You take too much upon yourselves. We are of the tribe of Levi, just like you are; and there you are, Moses, pretending you're the great voice of God to us people. We're just as good as you. And as for you, Aaron, calling yourself the high priest and walking around in those robes, telling us that you're the only one who may go into the holiest of all to make atonement for the people, we have the same right as you. All the people are holy and you're taking too much upon yourself, Aaron.'

What kind of a rebellion was that? It was so bad and so fundamental that Moses told Korah and all his company to burn incense in their censers and in the morning come to the entrance of the tabernacle and God would make his choice. The glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation and the very earth beneath their feet opened and swallowed them up and they went down alive into Sheol (see 16:1-33). I trust I've said enough to show that they weren't true believers.

Who was Moses? He was the apostle of their confession, the one who had stood on Mount Sinai and seen God and heard his voice; God's authoritative mouthpiece to the people, who wrote it down by inspiration of God in the Old Testament. To contest Moses' claim was to contest his inspiration by God; his unique authority as the voice of God for that generation. The modern equivalent would be to refuse to believe that the Old Testament is the inspired word of God.

Moses was the apostle of their confession and Aaron was the high priest of their confession. Sure, there were many other priests and Levites, but Aaron was the high priest. He alone was authorized to represent the nation, and on the Day of Atonement to enter the

holiest of all to make atonement for sin. Korah was only a Levite, not a priest. They rebelled against the apostle and high priest of their confession. When it was over and the fire of God had burnt the censers of those would-be priests, Korah, Dathan and Abiram, God told Moses that they were to collect the censers of those rebels, hammer them out and attach them to the altar. It was a sign for future generations; when people came to the altar to offer their sin offerings or their burnt offerings, they would see the evidence of that rebellion against Moses and Aaron.

The application of it is clear, for the New Testament talks of this matter and it characterizes Korah's rebellion by the Greek word *antilogia*, which means to speak against; but to speak against in a hostile sense of rebellion. In other places in the New Testament that same Greek word is translated in the King James Version as 'contradiction'. That's the Latin for the Greek idea, *contra*, against, and *dictio*, saying: to say against. One notable passage is to be found in Hebrews 12. Talking to his fellow believers who were enduring persecution from their fellow nationals, the Jews, the writer says, 'Jesus . . . endured the cross, despising the shame . . . consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself' (Heb 12:2-3 KJV). Here is the word characteristic of Korah's rebellion then, in the New Testament.

See what it means when it is interpreted in Hebrews 12. It is not talking about some slip that the Apostle Thomas may have made in one of his more melancholy moments; nor even about the failure of nerve that beset Peter when suddenly his courage fled and he denied the Lord. This is talking about the Jewish authorities who, with their eyes open and knowing that Christ was innocent, concocted their charges against him. Oh, how they argued, how they contradicted his claim, and in the end their rebellion against him took the form that they crucified their own Messiah. He endured the contradiction of sinners against himself.

Every time we come to Calvary and remember it, we meet two wonderful things. Calvary is the expression of this world's, and sometimes the religious world's, satanic hatred of God's dear Son—showing that man is a rebel to the depths of his being. At the same time, it shows the magnificent mercy of God: 'but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8).

It is a long section and it would be absurd for me to try to fill in the details, vastly important though they are. These are just introductory seminars but I can't resist, however, calling your attention to the third rebellion.

The third rebellion 20:1-24:25

Moses and Aaron

To our astonishment—but in the end it increases our faith in the reliability of Scripture and the honesty of God—we're told in that section that Moses and Aaron rebelled. What was it over? Well, we're told that at a certain part of the journey things were very tough for the Israelites. They were being attacked by the powers in Southern Palestine. Nations like Edom and Moab were highly unreasonable, and water was failing. Can you imagine the cattle moaning their heads off because they lacked water, and mothers distressed with the babies and their tongues beginning to swell?

Yes, the people *murmured* against God and Moses. You can translate the word as 'quarrelled' (as ESV, 20:3). Of course, it is a sin to murmur against God. First Corinthians 10 reminds us of this, 'Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured' (v. 10 KJV). But when they murmured, Moses went before God and told God the situation. If we would interpret the situation rightly, we should notice exactly what God didn't say and what he did say. In God's reply to Moses there was no criticism of the people. Do notice that when you read it. It was simply God's instruction to Moses that Aaron should take his rod—the famous rod that budded, emblem of his high priestly ministry, to convey the heart and character of a holy God to his people.

Why no criticism from God? Well, read the story again. The people were at the end of their tether. They'd been through so much in the wilderness and this on top of it, that they'd got to a position of saying, 'Moses, we'd rather die. We can't stick it any longer' (see 20:3). At the end of their tether they quarrelled with Moses; they quarrelled with God actually. Will you blame them? Will you stand over them as a severe critic and belabour them with your stick of office, or will you feel sympathy?

Do you remember a case in your own life when things were so tough that in your heart you questioned God's goodness and felt that death would be preferable? If you've never been there, some of God's people have; and when people are at the end of their tether they can sometimes come out with criticisms of God. 'Why does God do this to me?'

What would God do to people in such distress? He told Moses to bring Aaron and his high priestly staff of office, and speak to the rock. That's all he had to do, speak; and the rock would gush out its waters to relieve the distress of God's people. He would have sanctified God in the eyes of the people and helped them to see that, in allowing all this hard journey, God was a God who felt with their sufferings. 'In all their affliction he was afflicted' (Isa 63:9). Knowing their need, God would not allow them to be tested above what they were able.

Moses and Aaron were supposed to speak to the rock and it would bring forth the waters of divine soothing, thirst-quenching and peace. Instead of which—for Moses was just about at the end of his tether too—they took the rod of the high priest that was meant to convey the character of God, and they smote the rock. Said Moses to the people, 'Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?' (v. 10). That was no way really to talk to people who emotionally were at the end of their tether.

God took offence with Moses and Aaron. 'You've misrepresented me,' he says. 'Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them' (v. 12). Yes, it's a solemn thing to stand before people in the name of God. Solemn to stand before people who are under suffering, or have been persecuted. They are at the end of their tether and wonder if God still loves them, or whether they can still believe. It is so important then, to represent God correctly to them. It is required of a priestly ministry to convey the holiness, yes, but also the mercy and the love of God.

Then we think back to what we saw yesterday. In the centre of the preparations there was the Aaronic blessing. Yes, from time to time Aaron was supposed to stand and bless the people, and make them feel in their very hearts, the kindness, the mercy, and the love of God. Aaron had failed miserably, and so had Moses.

You say, 'That put an end to all the blessing.'

No, it didn't. If Aaron wouldn't say it and Moses didn't say it, God had it said. The next chapters are all about that wicked Balaam, who stood to earn a lot of money by cursing Israel. To his endless frustration, he wasn't allowed to. God met him and said, 'Balaam, you'll say what I want said and you won't say any of your nonsense. You shall bless the people' (see 22:12). Poor old Balaam, he lost all his fee for his religious services, but he had to stand there and say, 'God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it? Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it' (23:19–20).

Marvellous that, isn't it? When Israel's high priest failed, God still had the blessing, for God's character hadn't changed and God's people shall be blessed. You're allowed, even in a seminar, to say in your hearts, 'Hallelujah,' while I apologize for not getting to the end of Numbers. But then my job has been simply to open a little door into the book, to point out one or two things that are to be seen inside, and leave it for your further investigation.

Shall we pray.

Lord, thou who has given thy word by thy divine inspiration, we bless thee for it. We bless thee for its sheer interest; but more so now, as we perceive these things go down to the very root of our experience of God, we ask thy grace and perseverance in the study and thinking about thy word and, above all, thine illumination. But first, that we might understand rightly what thou art saying, and secondly, that we might properly convey thy word and thy character to the people around us of whatever kind, and this we ask through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

STUDY NOTES

Preparation

1:1-4:49	5:1-6:21	6:22-27	7:1-8:26	9:1-10:36
Numbering for the Journey	Keeping the Camp Clean	The Aaronic Blessing	Dedications	Regulations for the Journey
A. The tribes <ol style="list-style-type: none">For warFor camping and marching	A. Physical and moral uncleanness <ol style="list-style-type: none">Physical uncleannessBusiness trespassTrial of jealousy	The Lord: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Bless youKeep youMake his face to shine upon you and be gracious to youLift up his countenance upon you and give you peace My name on them I will bless them	A. Offerings of the princes at the dedication of the altar B. The lampstand and the offering of the Levites as a living sacrifice	A. <ol style="list-style-type: none">PassoverGuidance by cloudGuidance by trumpets B. <ol style="list-style-type: none">Order of marchHobab as eyesMovement of ark

Journey

11:1-15:41	16:1-19:22	20:1-24:25	25:1-31:54	32:1-36:13
A. Rebellion <ol style="list-style-type: none">MurmuringLustingCriticism of Moses Refusal to enter the land	A. Rebellion Of Korah the Levite and others Censers of rebels nailed to the altar	A. Rebellion Of Moses and Aaron: <ol style="list-style-type: none">Moses smites rockOpposition of the kingsSerpent on poleWars of LordThe well	A. Rebellion Israel joins himself to Baal-Peor God is jealous	A. Rebellion? Refusal to journey further? Settlement of inheritance for the tribes
B. Sacrifices When you have entered the land. . .	B. Sacrifices The rights of Aaron and sons as priests and of the Levites	B. Sacrifices By Balaam God has blessed	B. Sacrifices For each day of feasts of the Lord Vows	B. No Ransom For murderers or homicides Settlement of Levites and the cities of refuge

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) was Professor of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.