

Numbers - Commentaries by G.S. Byford

The Ark and Its Contents, Ark and Its Contents: The Mercy Seat, The

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“The ark of the covenant overlaid round about with gold, wherein was a golden pot that had the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; and above it cherubim of glory, overshadowing the mercy-seat” (Heb. 9:4, 5). “And when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with him [God], then he heard the voice speaking unto him from above the mercy-seat that was upon the ark of the testimony” (Num. 7:89).

The first of these scriptures presents in a figurative way God dwelling in the midst of His redeemed people, at a time when they were pilgrims in the wilderness, on their way to the promised rest. The second points to the readiness with which He hastened to avail Himself—when all had been finished according to His own word—of the opportunity thus afforded of getting access to His people, and of communicating to them, in the manner here described, the intimations of His will for their comfort and blessing, as also for their light and guidance. The way into the holiest was not yet made manifest; so the people could not come near to Him, but He would draw nigh in grace to them and occupy Himself with all the details of the wilderness journey.

The many references to the sanctuary and worship of God in Israel, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, are all to the wilderness period, and not once to the more imposing ritual and choral service of Solomon's temple; so that the analogy between the Book of Numbers and this Epistle is very close, although with this great difference, that whereas, amongst Israel, Moses alone was privileged to speak with God face to face (Num. 12:8), and Aaron alone to represent the people officially (Lev. 16), the Epistle exhorts even the weakest believer to draw nigh both for worship and to obtain all that he stands in need of. There cannot be the smallest doubt that the ark in a very special way typifies Christ in all the rich resources of His grace: whether as the witness for God, represented by the tables of the covenant within, or as the One who was fully able to meet all the needs of the people, typified by the golden pot that had the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded. Again, the blood sprinkled mercy-seat pointed onward to His death, in virtue of which alone—righteousness being established before God in heaven—God Himself, now glorified by that death of which the blood was witness, could meet man, and have to do with him, without at all raising the question of sin, as this had been met and forever settled according to the character of the divine glory, at the brazen altar, by the sacrifice.

The mercy-seat then, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, is not there presented as the meeting place for God and the sinner, but as the meeting place for God and the saint, or the accepted worshipper. It is well to observe this, simple and obvious as it is, Those addressed in the Epistle were such as had received and bowed to the divine testimony as to forgiveness of sins and justification, because of God's having raised up from the place of death, and glorified at His right hand, the One who had undertaken and accomplished the work of atonement and redemption for God's glory and man's blessing. The starting point then, is Christ set down on High, Whose work of purification of sins has been accepted by God, and Whom the believing Hebrews are directed to consider as the Apostle and High Priest of their, and our, confession. Believers in Him (we as well as they) are holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, not seen as yet in heaven, but on their way thither. Meanwhile God was speaking to them by His Son, instructing them as to all these great and precious truths, and encouraging them to make full use of their privileges as purged and accepted worshippers. The doctrine of the new birth is not here developed (although we who know it may find it assumed or emplaced in certain passages as chap. 2:10, 13:6, etc.), yet before their conversion to Christianity they had stood in a privileged place of nearness to God (different to other nations), but there is the setting aside of every other man that “this Man” may stand forth as the expression of all that is perfect and excellent, and perfectly suitable to represent us before God, while meeting us in all our weakness and need. His perfect work necessitates the passing away of all that is imperfect and faulty. There shall even be a “new covenant” yet to be established with an earthly people. Those who believe in Christ are sanctified by the blood of the new covenant are qualified to draw near to God in the holiest of all for worship, and to find grace, etc.

The privileges of such as are represented by the High Priest who has passed through the heavens, are of a more exalted character than will be the portion of God's ancient people. However blessed and glorious they may be in their own land in the millennial days, yet will it be a worldly, and not a heavenly, sanctuary. The throne of grace (Heb. 4:16) is now for a heavenly people who enjoy the favor and right of access to God within the veil, exactly that which it was intended the mercy-seat in Israel should have been for an earthly people to whom the way into the holiest was not yet made manifest. They were, indeed, represented by the high priest, but in consequence of the grave failure of the two sons of Aaron, this was limited to the tenth day of the seventh month.

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The Ark and Its Contents, Ark and Its Contents: Manna, The

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The manna was the provision of God's grace for a wilderness people, just as the paschal lamb had been his provision for a guilty people, providing a shelter from wrath to which otherwise they must have been exposed. Both pointed to Christ as the Sent One of God, meeting the need of the earthly people as God knew it, and not according to their sense of it. Israel did not ask for either one or the other; the blood of the lamb provided a safe shelter that they might in peaceful enjoyment feed upon the lamb itself. God's glory was secured by Christ's obedience

unto death, and faith appropriates such a Savior who becomes the life of the soul. "He that eateth me, even he shall live because of me." The sinner saved feeds upon the grace which brought Him to the place of death for his deliverance—bows to the divine testimony (that of the Judge Himself) "When I see the blood I will pass over you"; and the immense relief and satisfaction obtained thereby sustain the heart and shut out for a time all idea of any other necessity.

It was a full month before the Israelites realized that although they had escaped the judgment, they had lost all Egypt's resources and its pleasures. The world becomes a barren desert to the believer in Christ, the wilderness is before him and he has yet to learn, with the Psalmist, that all his springs are in God: this discovery is painful and humiliating, He humbled thee and proved thee (Deut. 8:2, 3). God in infinite love provided for the need of His people by giving them bread from heaven, but in doing so He put them to the proof; they were on their way to the promised rest, but the rest itself must be ever kept before them; hence the manna must not be looked upon as a thing permanent and lasting, but as a temporary provision for exceptional circumstances and closely connected from its very beginning with the sabbath which was to be a permanent institution and an outward sign, a witness to the whole world that they belonged to God and were to be obedient to Jehovah Who had redeemed them.

This test of obedience was not, as in the passover, to be satisfied by one act of faith once for all ("through faith he kept the passover and the sprinkling of blood" (Heb. 11:28) with results immediately made good in the soul, so that the questions of deliverance and acceptance need never again be opened up) but was also a protracted and continuous one as long as they were passing through the wilderness.

From the first, Israel failed to appreciate angels' food; their tastes, desires and inclinations were gross and impure; the yearning of their hearts was for the fleshpots of Egypt, and, in the last year of their pilgrimage they made the awful admission without shame, "our soul loatheth this light bread" (Num. 21:5).

It is just the same now with the children of God on their journey to the rest that remaineth for the people of God.

God has found His delight in His beloved Son, and will look to no other; the voice from the excellent glory bore witness to this, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him." We are put to the proof by this just as Israel was by the manna. Israel was set to learn the lesson "that man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of Jehovah doth man live." This, the nation as a whole never learned, though there were bright exceptions, such as Moses, Joshua, and Caleb, etc., To have knowledge, understanding, and enjoyment of the most advanced truth touching Christ's present position, and our relationship to Him as members of His body, the coming rapture of the saints and such like subjects, precious as these are, will not compensate for the want of appetite for the Manna. Perhaps the lessons of the wilderness are never fully learned until the close of the journey. God might have supplied the needs of His people in other ways, but the way He chose, certainly called for the daily exercise of faith, obedience, diligence, and constant dependence upon Himself. If we read carefully Ex. 16 we shall not only be instructed in God's gracious way of nourishing His earthly people, but also as to the way in which our spiritual wants are anticipated in His word, the regular and diligent study of which will supply us with that divine food, Christ Himself, which our souls so much need. But the manna was after all a temporary provision. Intended only to continue for a year or so, Israel's unbelief and refusal to go into the promised land, had the effect of adding to their pilgrimage eight and thirty years, and God graciously continued this wonderful provision for their daily need. His care over them was shown out in the minutest details, so that their raiment waxed not old, nor did their feet swell; circumstances which may have passed unnoticed by many at the time. One remarkable thing remains to be noticed; whether much or little was gathered, everyone was satisfied, and the need of each soul was met, "and when they did mete it with an omer, he that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack; they gathered every man according to his eating" (Ex. 16:18). No doubt there are degrees of spiritual appetite amongst the Lord's people and different capacities for the reception, and understanding, of the truth of God, but that is not the precise point here, but rather that in coming to Christ every one finds his need fully met and nothing superfluous. Whatever may be our heart's need, we find it all met by Christ, and as we make progress in the divine life and discover new glories and fresh graces and excellencies in our Lord Jesus Christ under the teaching of the Spirit, we can say that we need them all, we cannot do without one of them.

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The Ark and Its Contents, Ark and Its Contents: A Symbol of Jehovah's Presence, The

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The reality of Jehovah's presence in the midst of His people was borne witness to in many distinct ways. He was graciously pleased not only to dwell amongst them but to accompany them in all their journeyings as their Leader and Protector. The tabernacle of witness and the ark of His covenant provided a sufficient guarantee against disorder in their ranks, or danger from outside. The people had the knowledge of this for their own comfort. It was outwardly attested by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. The strength and happiness of the people depended upon their spiritual discernment of the great truth that Jehovah was with them. The Gentiles even had to own this obvious fact although it excited their envy and hatred. Num. 9 sets before us in great detail how Jehovah was guiding them in their journeyings by the cloud, with its "appearance of fire by night"; as the next chapter shows that He was not only their Leader, but Protector—the silver trumpets proclaiming His authority and instructions to the utmost parts of the camp. The tribes had their respective positions allotted to them in the camp (Num. 2); as also, in this chapter, the order of its setting forward when called to march, that thus there should be no uncertainty or confusion in the minds of any of them.

Now in all the perfect arrangement for the blessing and safety of Israel, there was an undercurrent of grace which would admit and welcome the stranger to a share in the blessing of Jehovah's people. "And Moses said unto Hobab... We are journeying unto the place of which Jehovah said, I will give it you. Come thou with us, and we will do thee good; for Jehovah hath spoken good concerning Israel.... And it shall be, if thou

go with us, yea, it shall be, that what goodness Jehovah shall do unto us, the same will we do unto thee" (Num. 10:29-32).

And why not? Israel's separation from the nations in nearness to Jehovah had been secured: their supremacy was acknowledged and their God worshipped by the stranger (Ex. 18:7-12). Such a gracious invitation was quite in keeping with the ways of God towards His people, and shall surely be made good in millennial days. "And they departed from the mount of Jehovah three days' journey: and the ark of the covenant of Jehovah went before them in the three days' journey, to search out a resting place for them. And the cloud of Jehovah [was] upon them by day, when they went out of the camp. And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, "Rise up, O Jehovah, and let thine enemies be scattered, and let them that hate thee flee before thee. And when it rested, he said, Return, O Jehovah, unto the many thousands of Israel" (Num. 10:32-36).

It is of importance to notice here that the ark with its contents was fully owned as the symbol of Jehovah's presence, containing in itself every memorial of past deliverance and pledge of victory and blessing for Israel in the future: so that to such an one as Moses, when the ark set forward, it was Jehovah going before them; and when it rested, Jehovah was welcomed back to the many thousands of Israel. That the ark was, in a very special way, a type of Christ, the Leader of His people, appears evident in the early days of Israel when about to enter upon the possession of the land of their inheritance which God gave them. For Josh. 3 and 4 read in the light of Col. 2 and 3, show that the passing over of the ark of the covenant before the children of Israel into, and its coming out of, Jordan, was a prefiguring of the death and resurrection of Christ in its power to bring the believer now as having died with Him, into "the heavenlies" where we have our conflict with the powers of darkness (Eph. 6:10-20). It was the only way open to them and it was strange to them. "Ye have not passed this way heretofore." It was for Christ Himself the path of life, i.e. through death and resurrection. "Thou wilt show me the path of life" (Psa. 16). For His people it constitutes the only way into the heavenly position of which Canaan was a figure. With the knowledge that Christ has died for my sins, and borne the judgment upon the cross, I cheerfully and deliberately identify myself with Him in His death, "that, like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). We are called to make good our title to be in "the heavenlies" by death and resurrection. It is thus that death, man's greatest enemy, becomes one of the possessions of the believer, who thereby finds escape from that place and state to which God's judgment applied. Previous to this the ark had no typical association with resurrection, but henceforth it was to be, in the minds of the people, connected inseparably with that mighty power of God working for their complete deliverance from the sorrows and toils of the wilderness, and bringing them into ultimate rest in the heavenly inheritance.

Moreover, as their deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 12,14.) was to be had in perpetual remembrance, and the passover to be observed by an ordinance forever, so were the twelve stones taken up from the midst of Jordan and set up in Gilgal, to be a perpetual witness of the power of Christ working on behalf of His people. "And he spake unto the children of Israel, saying, When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What [mean] these stones? Then ye shall let your children know, saying, Israel came over this Jordan on dry land" (Josh. 4:20-22). Their right and title to be in Canaan at all was found in this, "the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into Jordan." Victory and triumph were theirs, because Jehovah, the living God, was in their midst.

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