

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE MESSAGE OF NUMBERS

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. Warning. The Paralysis of Doubt

- i. The Facts.
 - a. Discontent due to Jack of Confidence in God.
 - b. Disaster due to distorted Vision of Circumstances and God.
- ii. The Secrets.
 - a. Mixed Motives.
 - b. Mixed Multitudes.
- iii. The Results.
 - a. A narrowed Outlook produced Discontent.
 - b. The Judgment of Sight produced Panic.

II. Comfort. The Patience of the Lord

- i. Provision.
 - a. Order arranged.
 - b. Purity demanded.
 - c. Worship provided for.
 - d. Movement ordered.
- ii. Patience.
 - a. The Methods.
 - b. The Fact.
 - iii. Persistence.
 - a. Back to Kadesh-Barnea.
 - b. The whole Process to Messiah assured.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. Of Comfort

- i. God cannot be defeated.
- ii. God's Methods are perfect.
- iii. God's Provisions are sufficient.

II. Of Warning

- i. The Crisis of Kadesh-Barnea comes.
 - a. To the Individual.
 - b. To the Church.
- ii. Everything depends upon our Attitude to God.
- iii. Our Attitudes towards the Opportunity reveal our Attitude towards God.
- iv. If we are failing, why?
 - Mixed Motives.
 - Mixed Multitudes.

AGAIN it is necessary to draw attention to the close connection between this book and those which have preceded it.

The story is a continuation of that which has gone before. In order to see this clearly, let us read two verses in close connection, the former being the seventeenth verse of the fortieth chapter of Exodus, and the latter the first verse of the first chapter in Numbers.

“And it came to pass, in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month, that the tabernacle was reared up.”

“And the LORD spake unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of the congregation, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they were come out of the land of Egypt.”

The tabernacle was finished, and the glory of the Lord descended and filled it on the first day of the first month of the second year; and the command to Moses to number the people with a view to their passing over into possession of the land was given in the same year in the second month on the first day. Thus there was a month between the story with which Exodus ends and that with which Numbers begins.

The book of Numbers opens and closes in the same region geographically.

In the opening part of the book we find the Israelites on the margin of the land. At the close of the book we find them again on the margin of the land. In the first part of the story they were perfectly prepared, so far as organization was concerned, for passing into the land. At the close of the book they are seen perfectly prepared, so far as organization is concerned, for passing into the land. Between the beginning and the end of the book there is an interval of about forty years. These were years of arrested progress in the history of the nation, and of definite progress in the Divine Self-revelation; and therefore in the Divine process.

Let us carefully note the connection of this book of Numbers, not merely as to its record of historic facts, but in its relation to the process of revelation.

Genesis teaches two principal truths:

- First, the essential relation between God and man;
- Second, that faith is the principle upon which man lives, for the pleasing of God, and the realization of his own life.

Exodus takes up that principle of faith, and expounds it more fully; giving us a vision of God in government, and of those human attitudes to that government which are inclusively expressed in the word “faith.” Divine government is seen as proceeding upon the foundation of righteousness and judgment. The human attitudes of the life of faith are those of worship and obedience.

The book of Leviticus deals with worship, revealing:

- First, the fact of sin as constituting the need of man; and
- Finally, the fact of redemption as constituting the provision of God for meeting that need.

Thus, while Exodus reveals the human attitudes of worship and obedience, Leviticus deals with worship, and Numbers with obedience.

While Numbers tells a sad story of disobedience, its message is one concerning the importance of obedience. It shows how, under the government of God, disobedience was overruled to obedience by discipline.

The message of Numbers we shall endeavor to discover, as on previous occasions, by dwelling first upon the permanent values of the book, which consist in its revelations of the paralysis of doubt, and the patience of the Lord. It is a book of warning, as it deals with the former; and a book of comfort, as it reveals the latter.

In considering the warning of the book, we begin with the second division, which consists of the story of exclusion and wandering.

The first fact recorded is that of the incipient discontent existing among the people. One month after the filling of the tabernacle with the glory of God, that marvellous revelation of His actual presence amongst them, the Lord heard their murmuring.

At first there was no definite statement of complaint. The unrest had not broken out into organized manifestation. That came later. There was wide-spread discontent due to doubt, which was really lack of confidence in God. We must not underestimate the difficulty of the position those people occupied.

The process of organizing a disorganized people into national consciousness is never an easy one to the people themselves.

There is a freedom in slavery which men miss when they emerge into the freedom which abolishes slavery. When the slaves were set free in the United States of America, the Government had to face a problem which they have not solved until this moment. The Negroes came out of slavery, in which there was freedom - evil freedom, pernicious freedom, freedom from the necessity for thought, or planning, or organization - into a liberty in which there was necessity for organization and order. The process is not an easy one, and the work is not yet accomplished [1912].

So the Israelites had been slaves in the land of Goshen; their tasks were appointed, and their taskmasters compelled their obedience. Their difficulties had been great, their bondage cruel, but they were free from the necessity for thought and arrangement. Having escaped from the taskmaster, they imagined that freedom meant escape from rule. They had been taught in the year of their encampment under the shadow of the mountain that they had to submit to law, and it was irksome to them, and they became discontented. This discontent resulted from lack of perfect confidence in God.

Then follows the story of Kadesh-Barnea and the disaster that overtook them there. The spies were sent, the minority and majority reports were submitted; and as is almost invariably the case, the minority report was the true one. The majority declared the land to be fair and beautiful, but impossible of possession, because of the giants and the walled cities. The men of the minority also saw the giants, and the walled cities, but they saw God. The majority had lost the clear vision of God, and therefore were filled with fear by the Anakim and the walled cities. With the loss of clear vision there was the loss of perfect confidence.

The secrets of this failure were mixed motives and mixed multitudes.

Murmuring is the expression of selfishness. Selfishness is due to a lack of singleness of motive. Had these people perfectly appreciated the fact that they were being created a nation to fulfill the purpose of God in the world, and had they been utterly abandoned to that as the one single motive, there had been no murmuring. When they murmured, it was for the fleshpots, for **“the leeks and the onions and the garlic.”**

They attempted compromise between being a nation of the Lord, and a people seeking their own comfort. These mixed motives issued in murmuring.

There were not only mixed motives, there were mixed multitudes. They are found first in Exodus, and last in Nehemiah. When coming out of Egypt, the Israelites were accompanied by mixed multitudes.

In Leviticus we find one graphic picture of the result, a mixed marriage between an Israelitish woman and an Egyptian man, with offspring which violated the law of God, and brought fresh punishment in consequence. These mixed multitudes fell to murmuring. The results were a narrowed outlook producing discontent, and the judgment of sight producing panic.

Such is the first permanent value of the book of Numbers. It reveals to us the fact that when men lose their vision of God, doubt produces discontent and disaster.

When we turn to the other side of the story, we find the comfort of the patience of the Lord. That is an all-inclusive definition.

- Notice first the provision that the Lord made for these people, as recorded in the first ten chapters.
- Notice next the patience of the Lord, as revealed in chapters eleven to twenty-five.
- Notice finally the persistence of the Lord, as manifested in chapters twenty-six to thirty-six.

The provision of the Lord consisted:

- In the order of the camp arranged;
- The purity of the camp demanded;
- The worship of the camp provided for; and
- The movement of the camp ordered, immediately under Divine guidance by the cloud.

The patience of God is the supreme revelation of the book. This patience is not incompetent carelessness, but powerful carefulness. Its methods are many.

- He punished the people for wrong-doing, but always towards the realization of purpose.
- He placed them in circumstances which developed the facts of their inner life, until they knew them for themselves.

That is the meaning of the forty years in the wilderness. They were not years in which God had withdrawn Himself from the people and refused to have anything to do with them. Every year was necessary for the teaching of a lesson, and the revealing of a truth. As Moses declared to them, **“Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee these forty years in the wilderness, that He might humble thee, to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments or no.”**

His method was also that of the adaptation of laws to new surroundings.

The story of the daughters of Zelophehad illustrates this. God listened to the complaint of these women, and made provision for them, adapting His laws - do not misunderstand that phrase, never lowering the standard of righteousness - adapting His laws to meet the requirements of the people, as they passed on their way.

Finally, His patience was evidenced by the supernatural protection of these people.

The resources of God were all at their disposal. Whatever they needed, He supplied. Thus through all the years we see the overruling of the patient God; not patient in the self-centered method of abandoning a failing people, leaving them, if possible, to work out their own salvation; but with the patience that refused to abandon them, and thus enabled them to work out their own salvation.

The patience of God was persistent. He led them back finally to Kadesh-Barnea; and thus the whole process necessary to the ultimate coming of the Messiah, and the full realization of the Divine purpose, was assured.

Thus we find, as we read the book of Numbers, two things forever sounding in our ears:

- The paralysis of doubt, and
- The patience of the Lord.

From these I deduce the living message of the book to our own age. I begin with the last first.

Numbers speaks to this age a threefold message of comfort:

- It declares that God cannot ultimately be defeated.
- It reveals the fact that His methods are perfect.
- It says to all trusting souls that His provisions are sufficient, if they will but appropriate them.

It declares that God cannot be defeated. We saw in Exodus that God cannot be defeated by the opposition of enemies, as we studied His majestic procedure against the obstinacy of Pharaoh. There are those who believe this, but who are not quite sure that He cannot be defeated by the failure of His instruments. The book of Numbers corrects this false impression. It is the story of a failing people. At the very outset, one month from the descent of the glory, they murmured through lack of faith. Was the purpose of God defeated? By no means. There are senses in which those who bear His name, and deliver His message may - measuring always by human standards - postpone the issue; but they can never finally prevent it.

As I read this book, I watch the movements of God, and my heart sings a song of joy as I see that He cannot ultimately be defeated.

It teaches me, in the next place, that God's methods are perfect. Note some of the emphases of that revelation. God will not spoil the result even by sparing Moses. There is no greater comfort than that to be derived from the conviction that God will never allow His love to interfere with His absolute loyalty to the principles of His own Being. It is, however, equally true that He will not fail to recognize fidelity in the midst of infidelity. The men who bore the majority report died in the wilderness; but Caleb and Joshua were preserved, and finally entered the land. Yet again, God will not cast off the frailest, while there remains any opportunity for bringing them into harmony with His mind and will.

While there is the remotest chance of my remaking, He waits for me, and bears with me in tender love through the processes of pain, by which He works to purge me from dross, and realize in me that upon which His heart is set.

God ordinarily works through natural processes, but interferes by supernatural means whenever it is necessary for Him to do so. It is the fashion of the hour to deny the stories of past supernatural interventions, on the ground that there are no such operations of God to-day. It would be more correct to say that men are so blind that they do not see the goings of God. We still speak of remarkable coincidences which, if we did but view from the true height, we should discover every remarkable interpositions of God.

The final note of comfort is the revelation of the book that God's provisions are sufficient for the fulfillment of all the needs of life and service. He has always proved Himself sufficient in resource for such souls as have really put their trust in Him, for the needs of their own life, and the demands of their service.

Turning to the warning message of the book of Numbers, the first point of emphasis must be that the crisis at Kadesh-Barnea always comes to the individual, and to the Church of God. Personally I think we are justified in carrying that statement further, and saying that it comes also to the nation, and that Russell Lowell was right when he sang,

“Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide.”

We, however, will confine ourselves to its application to the individual, and to the Church.

With regard to the individual, I only pause to say that the crisis inevitably comes when faith is confronted by walled cities and Anakim, and is called upon to proceed against them in simple confidence in God. What we do in the crisis always depends upon whether we see the difficulties in the light of God, or God in the shadow of the difficulties.

The crisis comes over and over again to the Church of God.

In the past she has sometimes passed into possession, but too often has passed back to the beggarly experiences of the wilderness. At this hour the whole Church is at Kadesh-Barnea. God is calling her to go out and possess the nations in the name of the Christ, with a new urgency, created by the opening of all the doors of opportunity.

At this moment in very deed the whole land is before us. What are we going to do? Everything depends upon whether we see the walled cities and the giants, or God. Nothing less than a triumphant faith, born of a clear vision of God Himself, will enable us to go forward. It is only faith which can cooperate towards infinite issues. Sight can do small things. Faith alone is equal to infinite things. Sight can build a coffee-tavern in a slum, and perhaps it is worth doing; but to suggest to sight the building of the city of God is to fill it with panic in the presence of all the difficulties.

The question of the hour for the Church is one as to her relationship to God.

The question of the hour in foreign missions is not a question of finance; it is not a question of men.

It is only whether the Church is prepared to obey in faith.

If we listen to the reports of men who judge by sight, we shall do nothing. We shall be told that the task of evangelizing Japan is hopeless, because the ethic of its own religion is sufficient for its need. We shall be told that it is a perilous thing to enter China, because revolt is incipient everywhere, and presently will manifest itself in rebellion. We shall be told of unrest in India, and that missionaries ought not to imperil their lives by going there.

In brief, we shall hear only of the walled cities and the Anakim.

Oh, for Calebs and Joshuas, who are prepared to say, Anakim, yes; walled cities, certainly; hindrance upon hindrance; but these all in the light of God.

Oh, for the spirit of Paul, who wrote: **“I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost, for a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries,”** He saw the open door, and the adversaries; and both of them combined to constitute the reason of his determined tarrying at the post of duty.

The living message of this book of Numbers is that everything depends upon our attitude towards God.

Let that, however, be stated, for the purpose of heart investigation, in another way. Our attitude towards opportunities reveals our attitude towards God.

- Are we murmuring and discontented with the method of the Divine government? Let us beware lest the fire of God break forth upon us in anger.
- Are we afraid in the presence of the problems at home, and the tremendous opportunities abroad? Then let us remember that our fear is born of our lack of faith.

The man discontented with all that the life of faith means looks back to the land of bondage, and sighs for the leeks and onions and garlic. His lust for these is evidence of his lack of fellowship with God. The man who is looking at the lands to be possessed, and recognizing all the glory of the fruitage, and the beauty of the pasture, but will not go up because of the difficulties, has lost his vision of God.

They were discontented and afraid - why?

The answer of Numbers is the answer of to-day.

False attitudes are created by mixed motives and mixed multitudes.

Mixed motives. I speak, as God is my witness, to my own heart. Art thou afraid of the toilsome pathway, and the weary battle, and the bruising? Then it is because selfishness is still dominant. When the eye is single, the heart undivided, and love unified upon the one principle of winning God's victory, there is no halting, no turning back.

The old Hebrew phrase, "**a pure heart,**" is "an undivided heart."

In order to do God's work in the world, we need the undivided heart.

Turning from the individual to the Church; the reason of her halting is the mixed multitudes. We shall always be paralyzed as long as we consent to be patronized by worldliness inside the Church. We shall never be strong while into the assemblies, where we consider our missionary obligation, we admit the counsel of men of sight.

God is ready. Are we?

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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