

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 12. Jubilee for Moses.

The establishment of the Tabernacle confirmed the people of Israel as a nation. In Numbers the Lord told Moses to organise the tribes into clans and families, with all men 20 years or older to be listed as able to serve in the army, and here it is fitting to quote Deuteronomy 24:5 as one of God's "commonsense" laws – "If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married." God knew, before the sociology experts discovered it, that the first year of marriage is of extreme importance in establishing the basis for a good relationship!

The first 8 chapters of Numbers set out with extreme efficiency the various duties to be shared by the people. In camp, the tribes were to arrange themselves around the centrepiece of the Tabernacle, 3 tribes on each of the 4 sides, and were to maintain the formation of clans and families within the tribes when they journeyed. With about 2 million people to organise, it was imperative to divide them into manageable groups! Important too was the instruction that the Levites had to lead the rest of the people on the march, carrying the Ark to remind them that it was God himself who was leading them.

Numbers 10:11 gives the signal for the nation to leave Mount Sinai after almost a year- 14 months after leaving Egypt - as the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle. At God's instructions Moses had organised 2 trumpets of hammered silver to be blown by the priests, sons of Aaron, to rally the people for the march. At this time (verses 29-32) Hobab, son of Jethro and so Moses' brother-in-law, was visiting the camp and Moses invited him to go with them. At first Hobab refused, intending to go back to his home in Midian, but Moses urged him to stay with them to act as a guide through the territory with which he was familiar, as in verse 29, "Come with us and we will treat you well, for the Lord has promised good things to Israel." Moses set out Hobab's reward - "We will share with you whatever good things the Lord gives us." And so Hobab obliged and settled with the men of Judah – a Gentile through grace becoming one with the people of God.

Some might think Moses had lost faith in the guidance of God in seeking human assistance. But the cloud would be at a considerable height, showing the general direction but not the detail of the terrain such as springs, oases and plots of pasture, often quite buried out of sight in the mountains and valleys. When God points us in some significant direction He expects us to use available skilled advice and our own commonsense to work out the details.

Alas! Unified the nation might be, but they would still complain! Three days into their journey from Sinai they grumbled at their hardships, Numbers chapter 11, and when the Lord heard them His anger was aroused. Coincidentally, it had only taken 3 days after their deliverance through the Red Sea for them to complain; they had learnt little of God's grace in the past year! "Fire from the Lord" in verse 1 could refer to fire ignited by lightning; mercifully, this purging fire was restricted to the outskirts of the camp. The people of course cried out to Moses, who prayed to God, and the fire died down.

The gratitude didn't last. In verse 4 they voiced their craving for meat – not that they had had much of it to eat in Egypt – but they wailed for the fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic instead of the boring manna. Under stress Moses fell into the temptation of blaming God, in verse 11 – "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me?"

God's gracious answer, in verses 16,17, was to put his Spirit, already given to Moses, on the 70 elders of Israel so that "they will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone. Is the Lord's arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you."

Verses 31-34 tell how a wind from the Lord sent quails from the sea all around the camp to a depth of about 1 metre and the people gathered them greedily, only to suffer from a severe plague as a sign of God's wrath at their unfaithfulness.

Note in verse 4, the "rabble" indicates the non-Israelite group of people who had followed the Israelites out of Egypt and who were a constant source of complaints and trouble in the camp. Their craving for more variety in the food infected the Israelites with discontent and brought judgement on them all. While it is right that we welcome non-believers into our midst, it is also imperative that we don't allow them to dilute our faith or walk with God. Our light must shine bright into the darkness; if it is dimmed it will bring judgement on ourselves as well as on those we are trying to save.

In Numbers chapter 13 we read that the Lord told Moses to send 12 spies into "the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites." However in Deuteronomy 1:22 Moses put the onus on the people – "You came to me and said, 'Let us send men ahead to spy out the land' The idea seemed good to me." Was this God catering to the people's lack of faith, in ordering them to send spies into the land, when He had told them time and again that He would give it to them? Keep in mind that God's help does not dispense with the wise and careful use of all our human recourses. Spying was a normal part of conquest which later Joshua was to use with beneficial results.

From verse 26 on, the spies, one from each tribe, came back with huge trophies of fruit but grim stories of powerful people living in large fortified cities which would surely be the undoing of the young nation. In chapter 14 this stirred the general populace into a frenzy of complaint against Moses and Aaron - "If only we had died in Egypt or in this desert! Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt." Caleb and Joshua urged them in verses 6-10 to have faith in God's promise - "If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land don't rebel against the Lord and be afraid, for their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us."

At that the mob talked of stoning these 2 spies who had kept their faith in God, but in verse 10 we see that God Himself rescued them with the signature of His glory on the Tabernacle. His word to Moses was "How long will these people treat Me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in Me in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down but make you into a nation greater and stronger than they." Yet Moses, in meekness, demurred that such action would bring shame to the name of God, and pleaded, in verse 19, "In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people." God's reply was to forgive the people but not annul their punishment. For the next 38 years they would continue to wander through the wilderness until all those who had come from Egypt would die, and only their children would survive to enter the Promised Land. Only Caleb and the ever-faithful Joshua would have the joy of entering Canaan.

The Israelites had said "If only we had died in this desert!" and God granted them their request! And as for their anxiety over their children, God brought those same children safely into the Promised Land – but only after they had endured the punishment of 38 years of desert wandering brought about by the sin of their parents.

And so the wanderings of Israel continued. Reassurance of their future survival came from God in the form of more laws and ceremonies to be observed in their worship; in spite of their recalcitrance God had not finished with them! One merciful law was that, once settled in Canaan, they should appoint 6 "cities of refuge" throughout the land to which anyone who had accidentally killed another, might flee to escape retribution until his case had been tried before the assembly. (Chapter 35.) And here we should note the penalty for injury as set out in Exodus 21:24 – eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. This law was not

callous but restrictive, given to prevent the escalation of the payback system common among nomadic tribes. The 6 cities were among the 48 given to the Levites and this is appropriate as priests and Levites acted as judges in such cases.

In Chapter 20 we come to the 40th and final year of Israel's desert wanderings, as indicated by the reference in chapter 33:37-39. In the first month of that year they arrived at the Desert of Zin and camped at Kadesh, where Miriam, the sister who had figured so importantly in Moses's life, died and was buried. There was a lack of water once more, and the people chose this critical time to complain not only about the lack of water for themselves and their livestock but about the absence too of grain, figs, grapes and pomegranates!

Moses and Aaron sought the face of the Lord once more, and once more the Lord was gracious, instructing Moses to take the famous staff to a large rock ahead of them and to speak to the rock, which would then pour out its water. Moses took the staff but when he got to the rock he had suddenly come to the end of his tether. Forty years of leadership under tremendous stress, coping with an ungrateful, rebellious mob, keeping his cool under death threats, striving meanwhile meekly to do the Lord's bidding – and finally he cracked. For Moses at that moment God was out of the scene. "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Moses yelled at the restless crowd, as with the strength of anger he raised his arm and struck the rock twice. God kept His promise and water gushed out, plenty for everyone, but God was not pleased with Moses's tantrum: it was not for him to take the glory for himself. He had sullied the amazing relationship that God had afforded him during the past 40 years, and the sentence God gave him is in verse 12, "Because you did not trust in Me to honour Me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

For Moses this was a disastrous blow. Does it seem unfair to you? God is a holy God and will not brook any compromise. For the whole saga God had showered his love on Moses - and in fact, this judgement was in reality another way of showing His love. At 120 Moses was overdue for retirement and this was one proof that it would take a younger man to lead the nation into the challenge of conquering the Promised Land. It is important in Christian service to know when we should hand over the reins.

The going was hard from then on. The nation of Edom would not let the Israelites through their territory in spite of Israel's promise not to damage a blade of grass in their passage. The Edomites, descendants of Esau, never let go of their enmity against the descendants of brother Jacob: the last Edomites in Scripture were the Herods, one of whom tried to kill Jesus as a baby.

In verses 22-28, as the nation came to Mount Hor, Aaron's commission and vestments were transferred to his son Eleazer before Aaron joined his sister in death. Moses was completely alone. In Chapter 21 another bout of complaining brought venomous snakes to the Israelites and many of them died. God told Moses to make a snake out of bronze and fix it on a pole for all to see. Those bitten could look in faith at the snake and be cured, the incident referred to by Jesus in the well-known John 3:14, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life."

In chapter 22 the king of Moab, assuming the Israelites would want to conquer his nation, engaged a "seer", Balaam, to curse Israel. Balaam refused, saying he could not go beyond the command "of the Lord my God." But in his 4th oracle, Balaam uttered a recognized Messianic prophecy – chapter 24:17 – "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob, a sceptre will rise out of Israel." 2 Peter 1:19 and Revelation 22:16 talk of Christ as the "bright and morning star." In

spite of all the mumbling, stumbling, grumbling of Israel, she was the nation from which would arise the Saviour of the world.

The book of Deuteronomy is a gem, a recap by Moses, in Chapter 1:3, of the laws God had given them and the way He had shepherded them ever since leaving Egypt, coupled with the assurance that they would cross the Jordan and gain possession of the promised land. In Chapter 1:31 we see the fatherhood of God in the Old Testament - "You saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son." Chapter 4:20 reminds Israel that "The Lord brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of His inheritance."

Chapter 5:29 shows the longing of God for His people's happiness - "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear Me and keep all My commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!" Moses urges them in 6:4 to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" and looks forward in verses 10,11 to the blessing they would enjoy in the land - "cities you did not build, houses with things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, vineyards and olive groves you did not plant." In chapter 7:7-9 we see God's motivation - "**It was because the Lord loved you** that He brought you out with a mighty hand.... He is the faithful God, keeping His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commands." His love shows itself too in His careful strategy (verse 22) - Israel would not be able to eliminate the nations all at once, or the wild animals might multiply around them.

Chapter 8:3-10 reminds Israel of God's provision of manna for 40 years and that for that time their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell! In verses 7-9 we see the bounty of the land - "streams and pools of water, springs in the valleys and hills, wheat, barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey, the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. You will lack for nothing." Chapter 11:8-15 contrasts the hard work of irrigating in Egypt to the abundance of "rain from heaven in a land the Lord your God cares for" - **and we see the contrast between our self-struggle for happiness and the grace of God showered upon us when we trust and obey Him.**

Chapter 14:22-29 is quite delightful. Set aside one-tenth of your grain, wine and stock, take it to the place of worship and eat it there before the Lord. But if that is too much to carry, sell it at home and bring the money to the worship place and (verse 26) **buy whatever you like**, cattle, sheep, wine etc., and eat it there in the presence of the Lord **and rejoice!** And, verse 27, do not neglect the Levites who look after the worship place and have no allotment or inheritance of their own, and give some to the aliens, fatherless and widows so that they may eat and be satisfied. Sounds like a typical potluck dinner!

In Chapter 29 Moses calls for a renewal of God's Covenant with Israel and in chapter 30 he sets out categorically Israel's choice - life or death - and urges them to choose life, for (verse 20) "God is your life." Unknowingly he foreshadowed the claims of God's Son, echoed more than a thousand years later in John 14:6 - "I am the way and the truth and the life." Israel's choice is ours today.

Chapter 32 is Moses' psalm of praise to his God, read out to all the people, and God in turn tells Moses that the time for his "golden handshake" has come. In chapter 33 Moses pronounces a blessing on each tribe of Israel, culminating in the much-loved verse 27, "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." In chapter 34 this amazing hero climbs up Mount Nebo where God graciously gives him a vista of the whole land of Canaan before He gently closes His servant's eyes to open them on the reward of eternity in His presence.