

Scripture. This will be assisted as Christians become more familiar with the theological and biblical distinction between revelation, illumination and guidance and the place of the Spirit in the discovery of the truth of God in Scripture.

ii) *Sin*. It is noticeable that many of the adherents of this movement seem to have a shallow and defective view of sin. The biblical emphasis upon sin as (to quote the Puritans) the 'plague of plagues' needs reaffirming. Failure to do so tends to create an environment which looks for explanations for evil elsewhere and tends to minimise personal responsibility.

iii) *The victory of Christ*. There is a tendency to fail to note that it is the cross where the spiritual powers were disarmed and to see the resurrection as the victory of God in Christ. This creates a spirituality which thinks in terms of power rather than victory through suffering. It predisposes the adherents to an approach to spiritual warfare that thinks in power/confrontation categories. Can this be seen as biblically balanced?

Missing from much of the literature is also the note of Christ having won the victory, of the security of the believer in union with Christ, of the fact that the powers are (in some inscrutable way) merely divine puppets.

iv) *The Powers*. While asserting the reality of the powers (but offering insufficient information to build much more on this revelation) it is significant that the Bible seems relatively disinterested in them. While it hints that things happen in high places far beyond our imaginations and not least when we pray, there is no suggestion that we are to discover more than the Bible reveals nor that we should engage such powers

in any other way than through means of prayer and evangelism.

v) *The last times*. The Bible offers us a general picture of what life will be like during the era between the two appearances of Christ. It hints that things may get worse as the end nears. It offers no hint that we will, however, move into a new 'age' almost qualitatively different from the present. This notion drawn from dispensationalism (with a dollop of New Age thrown in) needs to be roundly challenged. There is but one era between the Ascension and the Parousia and God has fully revealed all that is needful to meet every challenge within it.

### Conclusion

Biblically prepared, the Christian will rarely have difficulty in interpreting the phenomena described in the literature without recourse to the unbiblical constructs of the 'strategic warfare movement'. Some stories will be seen as simply God answering prayer (despite the defective theology and interpretation of those thus engaged!). Others will be seen as Satanic deceptions which are to be challenged with the truth (and, where appropriate, power encounters). Some will be seen as no more than humbug. A few, strange in the extreme, will probably defy all interpretation! However, with a biblical mindset, thinking God's thoughts after him, God's people will be offered an objective standard to assess what is going on around them and will know the resources that they have to meet the needs of the situations they encounter. In this way they will be delivered from mythical encounters and the evil one as he goes about parading as an angel of light.

# THE MESSAGE OF NUMBERS

Rev. Dr. Charles M. Cameron

'From Sinai to Moab' is a four-word summary of the Book of Numbers the fourth book of the Pentateuch, the fourth book of the Old Testament, the fourth book of the Bible. Describing the Book of Numbers, thus, in terms of its place in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), the Old Testament and the Bible highlights for us a threefold context within which we can understand the Book of Numbers.

### Numbers within the Pentateuch

'Numbers' belongs to the Pentateuch. It follows on from Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus. It is followed by Deuteronomy. To understand 'Numbers', we must

go back to Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus and must move beyond 'Numbers' into Deuteronomy.

**Genesis**—'The book of beginning'—tells us not only about the beginning of creation (chs. 1–2). It also tells us about the beginning of sin (ch. 3) and salvation; for in 3:15 we have the first promises of the Saviour. Following the flood of judgment and the ark of salvation (chs. 6–9), the story moves on to God's choice of Abraham to whom God gave the promise: 'I will make of you a great nation' (12:2). The nation of Israel, to whom the Book of Numbers is addressed, is the fulfilment of this promise of God. Behind the nation of Israel, there is the God who chooses. As we read the Book of Numbers, we must remember that God addresses Israel as His chosen people.

In **Exodus** we see God as the God of redemption

and Israel as His redeemed people. The people of Israel have not only been chosen by God. They have been redeemed by Him—brought out of their slavery in Egypt.

The Book of **Leviticus** emphasises that the people whom God has chosen and redeemed are to be a *holy* people. The key idea in Leviticus is expressed in 11:45—‘you shall be holy, for I am holy’.

With the people of Israel described in Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus as a chosen people, a redeemed people and a holy people, we move on to the opening chapter of **Numbers** where it is stressed that the people of God are to wage war for God. Notice the recurring phrase—‘every man able to go forth to war’. If God’s purpose is to be fulfilled among the people of Israel, His people must be ready for warfare—Spiritual warfare in which ‘the Tabernacle of the testimony’ is to be at the heart of Israel’s life. The worship of God and the work of God are to be the chief priorities among the people of God.

Following Numbers, we have the fifth book of the Pentateuch—**Deuteronomy**. Numbers takes Israel to the borders of the promised land Deuteronomy contains further instruction given to Israel as they prepared to enter the promised land. Deuteronomy forms the link between the first four books of the Pentateuch and the remainder of the Old Testament.

### Numbers within the Old Testament

This fourth book of the Pentateuch is also the fourth book of the Old Testament. Following its first five books, the Old Testament story continues in the book of Joshua with the conquest of Canaan.

As we read of Israel’s warfare for God, we will understand why the first chapter of Numbers laid such emphasis on ‘every man able to go forth to war’. The Old Testament story continues through times of rebellion and times of revival. However, it ends with the distinct impression of incompleteness. The last words of the Old Testament are words of promise concerning what God is going to do in the future.

### Numbers within the Bible

This takes us on the third aspect of the broader context—Numbers is part of the bible. We look back to the Book of Numbers not because we want to become Old Testament Jews but because the Book of Numbers is part of the context out of which the Christian faith has grown. To rightly understand our Christian faith, we must go back to the Old Testament, back to the Pentateuch. As we do this, we will come to the book of Numbers and we will learn from the book of Numbers.

We read this book with a concern to understand the *divine* significance of events. The name ‘Numbers’ comes from the fact that this book contains numberings, notably in chs. 1 and 26. Far more appropriate, however, is the Hebrew title, ‘in the wilderness’, the fifth word in the first line of the Hebrew text. What is the meaning of the events which took place while

Israel was ‘in the wilderness’?—This is the question we must ask as we read the Book of Numbers. From this book, we learn that the wilderness was both a place of promise and a place of danger. There was the promised land, lying ahead of them. There were the dangers which kept them ‘in the wilderness’ for much longer than they really needed to be.

### Danger and Promise

The story of ‘Numbers’ begins two years after Israel’s Exodus from Egypt. The people who had been brought out of slavery in Egypt are now learning to trust God ‘in the wilderness’. They are not, however, very good learners. As we read of their wilderness wanderings, their failure to move forward in faith and obedience—for 38 years they were virtually at a standstill—we are challenged regarding our own spiritual progress. There is a sense in which much of Numbers need never have been written if—and this is a big ‘if’—if God’s people had advanced in their obedience to God. The events in the wilderness speak of danger, the danger of standing still when God wants His people to move forward. The events in the wilderness speak of promise, the encouraging assurance that God did not give up on His wayward people who remained, in His sight, chosen, redeemed and holy.

Apply this to the Church of today. 38 years from now would take us on to 2028. There is the danger of drifting into years of spiritual wandering with no significant forward movement in God’s work. There is the promise of God’s faithfulness, the assurance that He will provide us with all that we need to carry His work forward. We must believe the promise and overcome the dangers.

### Unity and Co-operation:

God’s people—we are told in ch. 2—were to be united around the tabernacle with no gap in the ranks. This is a vital lesson for the church of today. We are not to pull in different directions. We are to pull together, embodying in our worship and witness the beautiful spirit of co-operation which we see in ch. 7.

Unity and co-operation in the work of the Lord—these are vital if the work of the Lord is to make progress.

Everyone has their place in the ongoing work of the Lord. All who are willing to serve the Lord will find a place in His service. Before we ever had thoughts of serving Him, He has had thoughts of calling us into His service. Ch. 3—with its emphasis on numbering ‘every male from a month old and upward’—underlines the fact that God has been calling us into His service long before we ever had thoughts of responding to His call. Ch. 4—with its emphasis on number ‘the sons from thirty years old up to fifty years old, all who can enter the service, to do the work in the tent of meeting’—stresses that the service of the Lord calls for maturity. There are two things which God is saying to His people here: The Lord has laid His hand upon us long before we ever

stretched out our hands to Him in service. If we are to be worthy servants of the Lord, we must press on to spiritual maturity. Why is it that many people upon whom God's hand has been laid early in life never attain their true spiritual stature? Is it not because they have been distracted, allowing 'self' to intrude where only God should be? This was the problem with the people of Israel 'in the wilderness': instead of God-centred blessing, they chose self-centred rebellion.

### Faith and Unbelief

To read the words spoken to the people of Israel in 6:24-26 is to be blessed by the Word of the 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'. This is the *promise* of God spoken to His people in the wilderness. However, to see God's people described in 11:4 as 'the rabble' and to read of their longing to be back in Egypt is to be challenged concerning our own consecration: Do we long to go on with God? Or do we long to go back to the world? The sad story of 'the rabble' is contained in the Word of God so that we might learn to avoid the danger of going back to the world and learn to go with God.

The contrast between believing the promise of God and giving in to the dangers around us is brought out clearly in the story—told in ch. 13—of the twelve spies sent into the land of Canaan to spy out the land. The majority report was negative. It was only the minority—the believing minority—who came back with a stirring message which called the people on to greater heights of faith and obedience.

On the face of it, the majority gave a true report: 'the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large' (13:28). The problem with their report was that it had a great deal to say about the difficulties and very little to say about the possibilities. This is always the way with unbelief. It is more impressed by the dangers than the promise of God. The more we talk about the difficulties the more we line up excuses for our own unbelief. If we are to move forward with God, we must learn to eliminate negative thinking, we must learn to be possibility thinkers, looking beyond the difficulties to the God who has given this promise—'The Lord bless you and keep you'.

We learn the positive attitude of faith from Caleb and Joshua. Following the negative report of the majority, 'Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once, and occupy it; for we are well able to overcome it"' (13:30). Joshua and Caleb directed the people's thoughts to the Lord: 'If the Lord delights in us, He will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey' (14:8).

As we read of the contrast between the unbelieving majority report and the believing report given by Caleb and Joshua, we must ask ourselves the question: Am I going with the crowd or am I taking

my stand alongside 'the faithful few who fought bravely to guard the nation's life'?

### The Snare of the past

The contrast between the unbelieving majority of ten and the believing testimony of two faithful men became the contrast between the old generation whose heart was still Egypt and the new generation who were looking forward to the new life in Canaan. Concerning the old generation and the new generation, God says in 14:29-31—'of all your number, numbered from twenty years old and upward, who have murmured against me, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb . . . and Joshua . . . . But your little ones . . . I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised'. This is the contrast between the old life and the new life. Before the new life can begin, the old life must die. The little ones—uncorrupted by Egyptian influences—had grown up under the nurture of God in the wilderness. They were to enter the land, not carrying with them the corruption of the old life but the promise of the new life. If we are preoccupied with the old life, we will echo the complaining words of Israel: 'why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us to this evil place?' (20:5). If, on the other hand, we are rejoicing in the gift of new life in Christ, new life in the Spirit, we will read the words of 21:9 concerning looking to the bronze serpent for healing and life, and we will rejoice in the words of John 3:14-15: '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'. If we are truly seeking to live the new life of the Spirit, we will read the words of 21:17—'Spring up, o well!' and we will pray for a deeper experience of the 'rivers of living water' of which Jesus speaks in John 7:38.

The importance of continuing to live the new life and refusing to go back to the old life is highlighted in the exclusion of Moses and Aaron from the promised land. At Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, Moses and Aaron sinned against the Lord at the waters of Meribah (Contention). There was 'strife' among the congregation who were rebelling against the Lord (20:10, 27:14). Moses and Aaron failed to believe God and they failed to obey God. At the time of this incident, God drew attention to their unbelief—'you did not believe in me' (20:12). Later on in 27:14—God focuses attention on their disobedience—'you rebelled against my word'. The fact that the leaders of God's people—Moses and Aaron—were guilty of unbelief and disobedience emphasises for us that there is never any room for resting on our laurels. As we read of the exclusion of Moses and Aaron from the promised land, we must hear and heed the challenge of God's word when it says to us: 'Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?' (Galatians 3:3). The way of blessing is not the way of the flesh but the way of the Spirit. The importance of following the way of the Spirit is highlighted for us

in the description of the new leader, Joshua. He is described as 'a man in whom is the Spirit' (27:18). As we read—in the Book of Joshua—of Joshua's leadership, we may be tempted to think that it was primarily a military leadership. This would, however, be a mistaken impression. Joshua was a spiritual leader, a man empowered by the Spirit of God, a man who led the people forward in the ways of God.

### Spiritual Warfare

The spiritual character of Israel's military exploits in the land of Canaan is made clear in 33:52. At the heart of Israel's warfare was this holy purpose of giving worship to the one true God: 'you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their figured stones, and destroy all their molten images, and demolish all their high places'. Why were the inhabitants of the land to be driven out?—Because the whole life was bound up with idolatry. Why were the figured stones, molten images and high places to be destroyed?—So that worship might be given to the Lord, and Him alone, Joshua was a military leader because, first and foremost, he was a spiritual leader. When we read of Israel's warfare in Canaan, we discover that their obedience was incomplete. God's charge to Israel to drive out the heathen from Canaan was never completely obeyed. The contaminating influence of false religion was never entirely eradicated from the land of Canaan. This incomplete obedience hastened Israel's religious apostasy and led in time to Israel being taken captive by the Babylonians. The Old Testament story continues as a story of incomplete obedience. God's people have been given a glorious promise of blessing yet they never quite manage to overcome the dangers in a sinful world. In this respect, Numbers is a kind of 'Old Testament in miniature'. It is a story of glorious victory—God leading His people into the promised land. It is also a tragic record of sad failure—God's people preferring the old worldly way of life rather than the new life of the Spirit. Here, we learn of the continuing conflict between the flesh and the Spirit (Galatians 5:17): 'the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh'. This is the conflict from which we are never free. To our dying day, we will face this conflict. If, however, we have begun to walk in the way of the Spirit, there will always be, within us, a longing for our promised future, our final deliverance from all that we mean by the world, the flesh and the devil.

### The Messianic in Numbers

Numbers is incomplete. There is a looking forward to the land of promise. The Old Testament is incomplete. There is a looking forward to the promised Saviour. Our earthly life is incomplete. There is a looking forward to the promised destiny—a destiny which is heavenly, glorious and eternal. We must always look beyond the promised land to the promised Saviour and we must, trusting in that Saviour, look on to our

promised eternal destiny. This line of thought will help us to draw together some further aspects of Numbers upon which we have not yet touched—How does Numbers point beyond the promised land to the promised Saviour? How does Numbers direct our attention to our promised eternal destiny?

There is, in Numbers, a great deal of instruction regarding the sacrifices of Israel and the Feasts of Israel. To attempt to go into detail here would probably be more confusing than enlightening. It will be sufficient to make the point that the Sacrifices and Feasts of Israel are full of prophetic significance, pointing forward to the Lord Jesus Christ for their fuller meaning. We need not concern ourselves with all the many details. Our chief concern is to draw attention to the Saviour to whom the Sacrifices and feasts point—our Lord Jesus Christ. To understand more fully the significance of the Old Testament sacrifices in particular, we would need to enter into a careful study of the letter to the Hebrews. There, it is emphasised that our Lord Jesus Christ is both the Priest who offers the sacrifice and the Sacrifice which is offered. As the great High Priest, He presents the Sacrifice to God His Father. The Sacrifice which He offers is the Sacrifice of Himself—'for all time a single sacrifice for sins' (Hebrews 10:12). As we study Hebrews, it becomes clear to us that it is no longer necessary for us to repeat the Sacrifices of which we read so much in Leviticus and Numbers—'it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins' (Hebrews 10:4). The testimony of the letter to the Hebrews may be summed in the words of 9:11–12: 'When Christ appeared as a high priest . . . He entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption'. We read the Books of Leviticus and Numbers not so that we can repeat the Old Testament sacrificial system. Rather, we study Leviticus and Numbers so that we can come to a fuller appreciation, a deeper understanding of the sacrificial death of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

### Eschatology and Numbers

As we read the 'eternal redemption' secured by the shedding of the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we may turn—in Numbers—to the Balaam/Balak passages (chs. 22–24) for a verse of Scripture which encourages us to believe that God will not let us down. He is faithful and He will fulfil His promises to us: '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?' (23:19). God does not make promises only to break them. He will fulfil His promises. In this important respect, God is very different from human beings. We make promises and very often we fail to keep them. God never breaks His promises. In Christ, He has provided an 'Eternal redemption'. He has promised that all who trust Christ will enjoy this 'eternal redemption'. This is a great promise upon which we can assuredly take our

stand. It is a promise of the God who never fails to fulfil His promises.

We are 'en route' to the final fulfilment of our eternal redemption. As we press on towards our heavenly destination, we require instruction on how to live the life of faith and obedience. Numbers gives a great deal of detailed instruction concerning behaviour. We need not concern ourselves with the details for we are not called to reproduce Old Testament Israel in the church of today. We must, however, that the keynote of holiness among God's people is of vital relevance for the church in the last decade of the twentieth century. It is the New Testament—no less than the Old Testament—which encourages us to 'Strive . . . for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord' (Hebrews 12:14). Whatever differences there may be between the Old and New Testaments, there is complete agreement here: God's people are to be a holy people.

### Time well spent?

Why have we spent so much time studying an obscure Old Testament book? The answer to this question may be summed up in one sentence from 1 Corinthians 10:11—'these things . . . were written down for our instruction'. What is the central message of Numbers for the Church of today? Again, listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:6—'these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did'. 'In the wilderness'—this is the Hebrew title of Numbers. 'In the wilderness'—this is a summary of the situation in which we are called to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. We are 'en route' to our promised eternal destiny but we are not there yet. We have not arrived. We are still 'in the wilderness'. For us, no less than the ancient Israelites, the wilderness is a place of promise and place of danger. For them and

for us, there is 'good news'—'the promise of entering His rest' (Hebrews 4:1). For them and for us there is the danger of failing 'to enter that rest'. For the old generation, always looking back wistfully to Egypt, the promise was not fulfilled because they did not believe: 'the message which they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers' (Hebrews 4:2). This is the danger that faces us—the danger of missing out on God's blessing. The older generation of Israelites did not believe (Heb. 4:2). They were disobedient (Heb. 4:6). These things happened such a long time ago yet they are filled with contemporary relevance. There is never a 'Today' when we do not need to hear these words: 'Today, when you here His voice, do not harden your hearts' (Heb. 4:7). There will never be a 'Today' when we can say, 'I no longer need to hear the words', 'Today, when you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts' (Heb. 4:7). Every day is 'the day of salvation'. Every day is the day in which God in grace, mercy and love is patiently looking for our response of faith—faith in Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord.

Having heard about those who failed to reach the promised land, we must give careful attention to the Word of God when it says to us: 'Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same disobedience' (Heb. 4:11). We are aware of the many dangers which face us. Let us pray that we will be even more aware of the presence of God who will bring us safely home to our heavenly and eternal destiny.

'O Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end . . . O give me grace to follow my Master and my Friend'.

**Rev. Dr. Charles M. Cameron is a Church of Scotland minister in Dumfermline and a regular contributor to Evangel.**