

How precious is your lovingkindness, O God!

In this psalm of David there is a stark contrast between the sin of the wicked (1–4) and the lovingkindness of God (5–9). David then prays for those who know God and for himself (10–12).

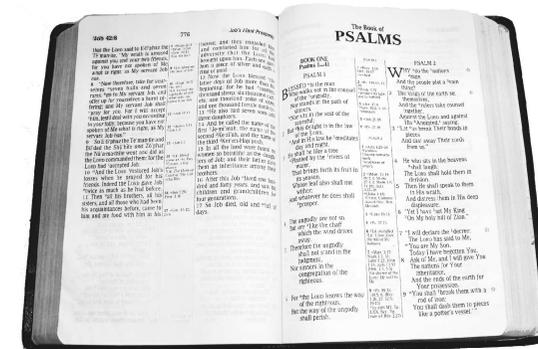
What a grim picture we have of the wicked man! *There is no fear of God before his eyes* (1; Romans 3:18). There are two Hebrew words translated ‘fear’. One word means ‘reverence’, the other means ‘dread’. The word used in verse 1 means ‘dread’. The sinner acts wickedly because he has no dread of God or of divine judgment. He flatters himself in his own eyes and deceives himself with his own wicked words. Rather than doing good, he evens plans wickedness while at rest on his bed (1–4). Many a Christian man and woman will agree that these verses describe them before the grace of God came into their lives. The Lord can change the hard and wicked heart. The message of the gospel can transform the vilest sinner.

We must beware of thinking so much about the wickedness of the world around us that we hardly give time to think about God and to praise him for his goodness. The mercy, faithfulness and righteousness of God reach to the highest heights and his judgments are unfathomable (5–6). Though David was surrounded by the wicked, he was so overwhelmed with the experience of God’s goodness to him that he exclaimed, *‘How precious is your lovingkindness, O God!’* (7). We can confidently trust in the Lord who cares for us and abundantly satisfies us. He gives us life and direction (8–9).

David then prays that God will continue his lovingkindness to those who know him. He prays that the Lord will deliver him from the attacks of the wicked and expresses his confidence that the wicked will be overthrown (10–12). Dare we murmur or complain when we have such a good God who has delivered us from evil? Let us show by our lives that we are contented and satisfied in him. **Let us always remember to praise God for his lovingkindness.** *How precious is your lovingkindness, O God!*

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God’s holy Word simply explained and applied



September 2014

Bible readings from Numbers chapters 20 to 36
Psalm 36

The people contended with Moses

We cannot be certain whether ‘*the first month*’ refers to the first month of the third year of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness, or to the fortieth year. The events recorded in the latter part of the chapter (14–29) did take place in the fortieth year (cp. 33:38). *The people contended with Moses* (3) because there was no water. Their bitter complaining must have been very hurtful to Moses, who at that time would have been sorrowing over the death of his sister Miriam (1). When our hearts are not right with God, we can so easily be insensitive to our fellow-Christians and cause them needless distress.

The Israelites had experienced God’s goodness and grace. He had wonderfully provided for them, but they were quick to complain every time something appeared to go wrong. Why were they so faithless? The Lord had miraculously provided water for them on a previous occasion (Exodus 17:1–7) and he would not fail them now. They never seemed to learn that the Lord wanted them to *walk in his ways, and ... to fear him* (Deuteronomy 8:2–6).

If we complain when things seem to go wrong for us, we are no better than those ungrateful, murmuring Israelites. We must expect our faith to be tried (Acts 14:22). Let us think every day about the greatness and perfection of God, and worship him. Let us remember the goodness of God toward us and his gracious dealings with us. Let us praise him every day for his gracious dealings with us. We will then be better equipped when trials come upon us.

*His love in time past
Forbids me to think
He'll leave me at last
In trouble to sink.
Each sweet Ebenezer
I have in review
Confirms his good pleasure
To help me quite through.*

(John Newton)

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‘Every tribe ... shall keep its own inheritance’

The allocation of an inheritance to the daughters of Zelophehad brought a potential problem to their tribe (Manasseh) whose leaders were far-sighted enough to seek guidance before the problem arose. The problem was that if one of those girls married outside of her tribe, the inheritance would eventually be lost to Manasseh (1–4). The Lord agreed that their fears were well-founded and he directed through Moses that though the daughters of Zelophehad were free to choose their own husbands, they must marry within their own tribe. Moses said, ‘*Every tribe of the children of Israel shall keep its own inheritance*’ (5–9).

There is a vital spiritual lesson for every Christian here. We are heirs of God, having an inheritance reserved in heaven for us (Ephesians 1:11,14,18; Romans 8:16–17). How can a child of God marry an unbeliever? There is no guarantee that the unbelieving spouse will ever be saved. We have an inheritance which they cannot share. The Christian/non-Christian couple cannot be described as *heirs together of the grace of life* (1 Peter 3:7). They have nothing together in common as far as spiritual things go, and are unable to serve God together.

The single state is terribly difficult for many believers to bear or to accept, but the Christian must marry *only in the Lord* (1 Corinthians 7:39). Light cannot have fellowship with darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14). Disobedience to the teaching of Scripture will bring misery and bitter regret. The daughters of Zelophehad were good spiritual women who married into their own tribe *just as the LORD commanded* (10–12). **When we obey God and honour him in our lives we know his smile and blessing upon us.**

Cities of refuge

In many nations long ago, the nearest relative of a murder victim was expected to take vengeance by slaying the murderer. There was always the possibility that revenge would be taken on someone who had not intended to kill, but was guilty of manslaughter. The Lord provided for such people in the promised land by setting apart six of the Levites' cities as 'cities of refuge'. Three of the cities were to be on the east of the Jordan, with the other three to the west of the river (10–14).

It was not enough for someone to attack another person and then to say that he had no intention of killing his victim. The charge for such a crime was murder (16–23). The killer was able to flee to one of the cities of refuge and to have his case fairly judged. If found guilty of murder he was handed over for execution. If he were guilty of manslaughter he had to remain in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest when he was given an amnesty. He left the city before such a time at his own peril (24–29).

When the death penalty is not exacted for murder the land is polluted (33–34). We surely see that in Britain and Europe today. There is increasing violence and wickedness and our newspapers are filled with reports of murders. **Values are now so distorted, that while it is quite acceptable to kill the unborn child by abortion, it is considered barbaric to execute murderers. May God have mercy on us!**

The cities of refuge give us a picture of our safety and security in Christ. *The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe* (Proverbs 18:10). God's holy law condemns the sinner, but when Christ saves us, we are spared, and are no longer under condemnation (Romans 8:1)

*Other refuge have I none;
Hangs my helpless soul on thee!
Leave, ah, leave me not alone;
Still support and comfort me!* (Charles Wesley)

Because you did not believe me

The Lord was gracious to the murmurers and he instructed Moses to gather the people together. Moses was to take his rod and speak to the rock in their presence. The rock would yield water in abundance for the Israelites and their livestock (7–8). The following verses have a very solemn warning: Moses was the meekest man on earth (12:3), but he now failed and sinned by failing to be meek when provoked.

God had told Moses to speak to the rock, but he struck the rock twice with the rod and spoke to the people, '*Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?*' (10–11). He was rash in his speech, and in his pride he exalted himself and his brother. The Lord told them, '*Because you did not believe in me, to hallow me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them*' (12; cp. Deuteronomy 3:24–26; 32:48–52; Psalm 106:32–33). One lapse cost so much! Had Moses been able to go into Canaan, leading the people, he would have seen the fulfilment of his work of leading the Israelites.

The place where these sad events occurred is called '*Meribah*' which means 'contention' (13). The same word had been used at Rephidim where the people complained of a lack of water (Exodus 17:7). This place in the book of Numbers is elsewhere called '*Meribah Kadesh*' (Deuteronomy 32:51) to distinguish it from the Meribah at Rephidim.

We must beware of complacency, especially in those areas of our lives where we reckon ourselves to be strong. We must never consider ourselves to be so strong in the Lord that we are above serious failure. The mighty do fall! Satan is ever waiting to trap us. **Let us be watchful and prayerful, lest we rashly speak or act in a way which will leave us with a lifetime of regret.** *Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall* (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory

The Edomites were descended from Jacob's brother Esau. When the Israelites needed to pass through their territory, Moses expected a friendly response, but the Edomites proved very hostile. They would not accept Moses' guarantee that Israel would keep to *the King's Highway* (a road which ran from the Gulf of Aqaba to Damascus in Syria). Moses promised that Israel would not take anything from Edom's fields and vineyards and that they would pay for any water that they used. Edom came out against Israel with a strong army and *refused to give Israel passage through his territory* (14–21). Edom remained an enemy of Israel throughout his history. The Lord did not ignore this hatred and severely punished them (cp. Isaiah 34:5–6; Jeremiah 49:7–22; Obadiah). Those who oppose God's people oppose God. Those who touch us touch the apple of God's eye (Zechariah 2:8; cp. Deuteronomy 32:10). **Let us not be discouraged by opposition to our Christian work and witness, but persevere in serving God.**

Aaron's death in the fortieth year after the Israelites left Egypt is recorded in the last verses of this chapter (22–29; cp. 33:38–39). God did not allow him to enter the promised land because of the sin at Meribah (24; cp. verse 13). Eleazar succeeded his father as high priest. One of the imperfections of the Levitical priesthood was that its priests were removed by death. The Lord Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, has a far better priesthood. He ever lives to pray for us (Hebrews 7:24–25).

*Before the throne of God above
I have a strong, a perfect plea;
A great High Priest, whose name is Love,
Who ever lives and pleads for me.*

*When Satan tempts me to despair,
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look, and see him there
Who made an end of all my sin.*

(Charitie L. Bancroft)

Cities to dwell in

The tribe of Levi was set aside for the work of God and was to have no inheritance in the promised land. The Levites were to be maintained by the tithes and offerings of God's people (18:21–24; 26:62). The Lord also provided them with forty-eight *cities to dwell in*, in the land of Canaan, complete with pasture-land for their livestock (3,7). Joshua chapter 21 describes the carrying out of this provision.

When Jacob was on his death-bed, he cursed the anger of his sons Simeon and Levi. He was referring to a very unsavoury incident recorded in Genesis 34:25–31. He said of them, '*Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel*' (Genesis 49:7). The Levites were indeed scattered throughout the territories of the other tribes in the forty-eight cities assigned to them. Jacob's curse was turned into a blessing so that God's word could be taught to his people in many localities in Canaan. They were to teach Israel the judgments and the law of God (Deuteronomy 33:10).

The underlying principle of this provision for the Levites is that those whose lives are devoted to the service of God must be financially supported by the people of God (1 Corinthians 9:13–14; Galatians 6:6; 1 Timothy 5:17–18). A well-taught people who lovingly support those who teach them are a great blessing. **Let us now pray for those who labour for the Lord in preaching and in teaching in our church and in those churches known to us.**

*May every pastor from above
Be now inspired with zeal and love,
To watch thy fold, to feed thy sheep
And his own heart with care to keep.*

(William Kingsbury)

Irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides

The Lord here gave two commands for the people to obey when they crossed the River Jordan into Canaan (51–53):

- They were to drive out and to dispossess all the inhabitants of the land.
- They were to destroy all their idols and everything associated with idol worship.

The Lord warned the Israelites that if they failed to drive out the Canaanites, *‘Then it shall be that those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell’* (55). The sad fact is that the warnings were not heeded and the lessons were not learned. The Israelites did not completely conquer and possess the land as God had commanded (Judges 1:27–36) and they soon fell into idolatry (Judges 2:1–3, 11–19). The Canaanites remained as irritants in the eyes and as thorns in the sides of Israel (55).

What does this teach us? We must be ruthless with indwelling sin which is the enemy of our souls (Colossians 3:5). If we do not take God’s commands concerning this seriously, our Christian lives will be blighted. **The things to which we cling will become irritants in our eyes and thorns in our sides. Are you an uncomfortable Christian?**

Numbers chapter 34

This chapter records the instructions that the Lord gave to Moses concerning the tribal boundaries within the promised land. Leaders were appointed for each tribe to divide the land within these boundaries. None of the tribal leaders listed in Numbers chapter 1 are mentioned (they all perished in the wilderness) and not one of the leaders listed here is a son of those men.

When he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived

The Canaanite king of Arad attacked Israel and took prisoners. The people did not complain, but made a vow to God as they prayed for victory (1–2). *The LORD listened to the voice of Israel* (3). The change of attitude made a great difference! The Lord also listened when they started to complain again (4–6). The Lord Jesus referred to the incident found in verses 4 to 9 (John 3:14). These verses illustrate:

- The terrible plight of sinful man. *Sin is lawlessness*, i.e. rebellion (1 John 3:4). Many of the rebels died from the poison of the snake bites (6). The poison of sin brings death (Romans 5:12; James 1:15).
- God’s provision for needy sinners; a look at the serpent of bronze brought healing. God gave his only begotten Son to die in agony to save sinners (John 3:14–16).
- The need to know that we are sinners and to acknowledge our sin to God (7; cp. Psalm 51:2–4; 1 John 1:9).
- The need to obey God and to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved from our sins (cp. Romans 6:17–18; 10:9–13; Hebrews 5:9; 1 Peter 1:22). Only those who gazed at the bronze serpent in obedience to God, and who trusted him, were healed (9).
- There is only one way to forgiveness and cleansing from sin – God’s way, through the Lord Jesus Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). If a dying Israelite refused to look at the bronze serpent, he perished. The sinner who refuses to come to Christ will also perish (John 3:16,18).

Have you confessed to God that you are a sinner? Have you thanked him for giving the Lord Jesus Christ to save you? Have you called upon the Lord, asking him to save you? Do you joyfully obey God’s word? Are you trusting the Lord Jesus day by day? If you cannot answer “Yes” to these questions, I urge you to come to the Lord Jesus now! He will not turn you away.

NB. The people did not worship the bronze serpent. The second commandment forbids idolatry (Exodus 20:4–6). We must not venerate relics or images. Hundreds of years later the people did venerate the bronze serpent and King Hezekiah smashed it in his purge of idolatry (2 Kings 18:4).

Gather the people together, and I will give them water

The Israelites were now on the last stage of their journey to the promised land. They marched around Moab to the east of the southern shore of the Dead Sea. God's exploits in protecting his people were recorded in *the Book of the Wars of the LORD* (a book which has not been preserved). In this dry region the sight of even a small brook was something to be remembered (14–15).

Moving north, the Israelites defeated King Sihon of the Amorites (21–32). God had revealed that he had purposed to destroy the Amorites over 400 years earlier (Genesis 15:16; cp. 1 Kings 21:26). The Amorites had a song which taunted the Moabites whom they had defeated earlier. Moses recorded the words of this song and used it against the Amorites and Moab to proclaim the victories of Israel over them (27–30). The Lord also graciously encouraged Moses before the defeat of Og, king of Bashan, promising that he would give Israel victory over him just as he had led them in triumph over Sihon, the king of the Amorites (33–35).

God said to Moses, '*Gather the people together, and I will give them water*' (16). The Lord had caused an abundance of water to gush out of a rock at Kadesh (20:1–11). On this occasion, however, God gave the water, but the leaders of Israel had to dig the well to obtain it. There is a very practical and timely lesson to be learned from this incident. The Lord is able to save those who are lost without our efforts, but he usually works through human instruments. Success in the work of God often comes through much prayer, hard toil and perseverance.

We must not make excuses for laziness or lukewarmness of heart by hiding behind the sovereignty of God. We must plant the seed of God's word and do the watering and trust in God who gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:7). Let us persevere in our work for him.

Moses wrote down ... at the command of the LORD

The journeys of Israel from the time they left Egypt until they reached the plains of Moab (recorded in Exodus 12 to 17 and in Numbers 10 to 21) are summarised in verses 5 to 49. In the providence of God Moses had been trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians (Acts 7:22) who were experts in writing and in keeping detailed records. *Moses wrote down the starting points of their journeys at the command of the LORD* (2). God had well prepared his servant whom he used to write the first five books of the Bible. **We should never think that the education and skills that we gain in the world are a waste apart from the very necessary means of gaining a livelihood.** The Lord may have a work for us to do for him in the church which requires those very skills.

Though the Lord's final plague in Egypt was upon the Egyptian first-born, his judgments were also upon the Egyptian gods who had been powerless to stop the hand of the Lord against them (4). The Egyptians learned through judgment and plagues that their gods were powerless to help them. The gods of the peoples are useless idols (Psalm 115:3–8). The Lord is exalted far above all gods (Psalm 97:9). The triumphant Israelites crossed the Red Sea and sang, '*Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?*' (Exodus 15:11).

The forty years of wandering summarised in this chapter remind us of Israel's lack of trust in the Lord who had never failed them. They remind us of his faithfulness and warn us against unbelief and of disobedience to his holy will. We are the special people of God. Let us proclaim his praises (1 Peter 2:9) and serve him who has done so much for us.

Be sure your sin will find you out

The tribes of Reuben and Gad promised Moses that they would build fortified cities for their families and that their fighting men would cross Jordan with the rest of Israel to fight for the conquest of Canaan. They would give up their claim to their inheritance on the west side of the Jordan. They also promised that they would not return to their homes until all the Israelites had received their inheritance. Moses replied that this would be acceptable, but should they break their promise, he warned them, *‘Be sure your sin will find you out’* (23). They twice repeated their promise to cross Jordan and to fight with Israel (25–27; 31–32). The promise was kept and Joshua was able to send them back to their homes with his blessing (Joshua 22:1–6). Half of the tribe of Manasseh conquered Gilead and settled there (33–42). They too sent their fighting men into Canaan when Israel crossed the Jordan.

The isolation of these tribes soon led to misunderstanding and tension which almost resulted in war with the rest of Israel (Joshua 22:10–34). The east side of the Jordan may have been rich in pasture-land, but it was very vulnerable to attack. The easy choice is not always the best choice as history later proved (cp. 1 Samuel 11; 1 Kings 22:3; 2 Kings 10:32–33).

Moses did not say, *‘Be sure your sin will be found out’*, but *‘Be sure your sin will find you out’* (23) which is far more serious. **He was saying, ‘Your sin will find you out, it will hunt you down, and it will destroy you.’** Are you refusing to follow the Lord Jesus because the way of self-denial is too costly? Those sins to which you cling will be your ruin. Jesus said, *‘What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?’* (Mark 8:36). If you do not know forgiveness of your sins, I urge you to be wise. Come to the Lord Jesus and ask him to be your Saviour and Lord. If you sincerely repent of your sin and trust in him, he will accept you and save you.

Israel reaches the borders of the promised land

Moses led Israel through Obboth and on to the east of Moab after Edom refused to allow them to pass through their land.

1. Passing over the River Arnon (21:13), Moses sent messengers to King Sihon seeking permission to pass through his territory (21:21).
2. Sihon refused Moses’ request. He went to war against Israel and was defeated (21:23–26).
3. King Og of Bashan attacked the Israelites at Edrei. He too was defeated (21:33–35).
4. Israel possessed land from the River Arnon in the south to Mount Hermon in the north (cp. Deuteronomy 3:8). Israel had now secured the land east of Jordan in preparation for the crossing into Canaan.

You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed

The victorious Israelites returned south from Bashan to camp in the plains of Moab (1). The Lord had told Moses that he had given the Moabites their land and that Israel was not to fight with them nor take that land (Deuteronomy 2:9). King Balak of Moab did not know of this restriction on Israel and he feared the worst (2–4). Knowing that he had little hope of defeating Israel, he plotted with the Midianites to hire Balaam who had a reputation for his ability to bless or to curse people (6). Balak was convinced that if Israel were cursed, they would then be defeated in battle (11). He sent messengers to Balaam with a plea for him to curse the Israelites. Balaam told them to stay the night and promised to bring his answer after God had spoken to him (4–8).

Though Balaam was a sorcerer, he claimed that he was able to obtain direction from God (7–8; cp 24:1). He was an evil man, who for money would have willingly cursed God’s people (7). The Lord did speak to Balaam forbidding him to go on his evil errand, ‘*You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed*’ (12). Balaam, for all his psychic powers, was unable to say anything that would harm God’s people (38). The next two chapters describe the frustration of King Balak as God turned the desired curse into blessing (23:11,20,25–27; 24:9–10). There is a reassuring comment on this incident in Deuteronomy 23:5, ‘*Nevertheless the LORD your God would not listen to Balaam, but the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loves you.*’

Some Christians needlessly fear the curses of gypsies or of occult practitioners. We have no need to fear such people (1 John 4:4). Almighty God loves us so much that he gave his beloved Son to save us (Romans 8:31–32). **He turns curses into blessings. Those who curse God’s people will be cursed by God (24:9).**

Shall your brethren go to war while you sit here?

The tribes of Reuben and Gad came to Moses with a request that they be allowed to settle on the east side of the River Jordan. The lush pasture-land of this area was ideal for their livestock and promised a prosperous future for them (1–5). Their request upset Moses who asked them, ‘*Shall your brethren go to war while you sit here?*’ (6).

Many hazards and battles lay ahead of the Israelites before the promised land could be possessed. If the tribes of Reuben and Gad were allowed to opt out of the battles which lay ahead in Canaan, they would surely discourage their fellow-Israelites from entering into the promised land (6–7). Moses reminded them of the incident in which the spies discouraged the people from going into Canaan because they had not wholly followed God. He was concerned that their actions might also discourage the Israelites from entering Canaan (8–15).

There are many Christians, who in their desire for a comfortable, self-indulgent life, do not wholly follow the Lord. There are those who opt for an easy way while others engage in spiritual work and warfare. Such selfish disobedience to God does discourage the workers and the warriors. **Are you taking things easy when you should be working for God? Do you discourage your brothers and sisters in Christ by your unwillingness to work in the church?** The Lord Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and to take up our cross daily and to follow him (Luke 9:23–24). Remember, we will have to give an account to God (Romans 14:10–12).

*Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fight to win the prize,
Or sail through storm-tossed seas?*

*Sure I must fight if I would reign:
Increase my courage, Lord;
I’ll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by thy word.*

(Isaac Watts)

Not a man of us is missing

Israel's victory over Midian left them with an abundance of spoil. Half the booty was given to those who had actually fought the Midianites and the other half was divided among the congregation. The 12,000 fighting men (4–5) proportionately received more than those who had not been involved in battle. They each had to give one fifth of one per cent of their spoil to the priests as *a tribute for the LORD*. This amounted to more per individual than the two per cent tribute to be given to the Levites by the rest of the people (27–30). The people were soon to settle in the promised land, and the spoil of the battle, including the thousands of cattle, sheep and donkeys, would be invaluable in supplying their needs.

Warfare always brings anxiety, especially for those whose loved ones are listed as 'missing in action'. Israel's army officers were delighted to find that their roll call after the battle revealed that all their 12,000 men were safe. They were able to say, '*Not a man of us is missing*' (48–49). The Lord had so wonderfully preserved them that they were not content to give only what God had commanded. They spontaneously brought a lavish offering of gold *to make atonement for themselves before the LORD*. This was not atonement for sin which requires blood sacrifice (Leviticus 17:11); it was a grateful acknowledgement of the goodness and mercy of God preserving their lives in battle. *Moses and Eleazar the priest received the gold ... and brought it into the tabernacle of meeting as a memorial for the children of Israel before the LORD* (50–54).

God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). **We have many blessings from the Lord. Do we respond by giving sacrificially to his work?**

I could not go beyond the word of the LORD my God

The next day King Balak's messengers returned home after Balaam told them that God had forbidden him to go with them. The Moabite king was a very persistent man, however. He sent a larger delegation of more important dignitaries in order to apply greater persuasion to Balaam. They promised to heap honours upon the sorcerer if he would but curse Israel (17).

Balaam knew that even if Balak gave him all his wealth, he *could not go beyond the word of the LORD ... to do less or more* (18). The offer of Balak, now much more than a *diviner's fee* (7), was too tempting for Balaam to refuse. He told his visitors, '*Stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me*' (19). Balaam was intent on a course of disobedience and the Lord told him that he could go with Balak's men, but he was only to speak the word given by God (20).

God permitted Balaam to go with the princes of Moab (20–21), but his *anger was aroused* because he went (22). Balaam was influenced by bribes to go on an errand of disobedience. He was a covetousness man (cp. 2 Peter 2:14–16; Jude 11). He knew God's will, but wanted to change it for his own ends. He went back to the Lord hoping to obtain a different message from him.

The Lord means what he says and we must never imagine that he will change his will to accommodate our disobedience. **The human heart is devious and we must never persuade ourselves that our will is God's will when his word gives a different indication.** Many professing Christians have made shipwreck of their faith because they have deliberately rebelled against the word of God. We must never compromise the word of God in matters of doctrine or guidance. We are not permitted to *go beyond the word of the LORD ... to do less or more* (18).

The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak

In children's story books, eg. Aesop's Fables, animals talk like human beings. The Bible is not a book of fables, however, and on rare occasions animals did speak. Satan spoke through the serpent to Eve (Genesis 3:1–5) and God made a donkey speak *with a man's voice to restrain the madness of the prophet* (2 Peter 2:16). Balaam boasted that he saw '*visions of the Almighty ... with eyes opened wide*' (24:4,16) but he failed to see what his donkey saw – the angel of the Lord with a drawn sword. The terrified animal turned aside three times and was struck by Balaam on each occasion. God put words into the donkey's mouth so that she could express her indignation to the wicked man (23–30).

The Angel of the Lord then revealed himself to Balaam, telling him that the donkey had saved his life by turning aside. The prophet acknowledged his sin and offered to turn back (33–34). He would have turned back had he truly repented. The Lord had planned to overrule Balaam's perverse intentions and he permitted him to continue his errand. *The Angel of the LORD* told him that he must only speak God's word. The following day he was met by Balak who rebuked him for his unwillingness to come on the first occasion (35–37). Balaam told the king, '*The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak*' (38).

We live in most confusing days when there are many who, like Balaam, claim to have visions of God. This is no sign of spirituality. The ass, a dumb creature by reputation, saw the angel long before Balaam. The false teachers of the 21st century are unlike Balaam because they speak words that God has not given them. They introduce bizarre and occult practices such as visualisation and inner healing into evangelical churches. There are few who discern that these people are misusing Scripture and that they have departed from the faith. We need to thoroughly know the Bible and to have spiritual discernment. **Let us hold fast to God's word remembering the motto of the Reformers, 'Sola Scriptura' ('Scripture Alone').**

To take vengeance for the LORD

God told Moses that Israel should go to war against the Midianites *to take vengeance for the LORD* (3). The Midianites, at the instigation of Balaam, had enticed Israel into sin with disastrous consequences (16; cp. 25:15–18). All the Midianites were to be slain but at first only the men were killed. Balaam was among those slain and his wish to *die the death of the righteous* was not fulfilled (7–9; cp. 23:10).

Moses was angry that the women and male children had been spared and he commanded that they should be slain, only virgins being spared. The young women who were virgins would be absorbed into the nation of Israel through marriage to Israelite men; this would not have posed a threat to the religious life of Israel as all the foreign gods would have been destroyed (14–18).

The slaughter of the Midianites may horrify us and raise questions in our minds about the righteousness of God. We must remember that God is infinitely just and wise, and that his ways and thoughts are far higher than ours. The Midianite women had become a source of seduction to immorality and idolatry which would have ultimately destroyed not only Israel's testimony but also its existence as a nation (16; cp. 25:1–8; Deuteronomy 4:25–28). The Lord could have destroyed Midian by plague, but in this instance he chose to use Israel *to take vengeance* for himself.

The church has no right to use 'the sword' today to promote its message or to punish the wicked. Crusades and 'holy wars' are not permitted for us, though the civil magistrate must punish evil-doers (Romans 13:3–4; 2 Corinthians 10:3–6). **We have no warrant to take personal revenge nor to take vengeance on the enemies of the gospel.** We should rather bless those who persecute us and leave vengeance to God (Romans 12:14, 17–21).

He shall not break his word

This chapter deals with vows, and asserts that a man who makes a vow must keep it (1–2). There were different regulations in the case of vows made by women. A young unmarried woman could have her vow overruled by her father providing he objected at the time it was made (3–4). If she entered marriage while bound by a vow, her husband could annul that vow when he heard of it, but he was not free to do so later (6–8). Widows or divorced women had to fulfil their vows, but a married woman's vows were subject to her husband's sanction. The husband bore the guilt of vow-breaking if he sought to annul his wife's vow at a later time, but had not objected when it was made with his knowledge (9–15).

Jacob made a vow to God at Bethel (Genesis 28:20–22), and Jephthah made a foolish vow with tragic consequences (Judges 11:30–40). Paul also made vows (Acts 18:18; 21:23–34). Jonah in distress in the stomach of the great fish promised God, *'I will pay what I have vowed'* (Jonah 2:9). Could it be that he had vowed unquestioning obedience to God's will but had been reluctant to go to Nineveh?

To make vows to God is a solemn business; when *a man vows a vow to the LORD ... he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth* (2). We cannot expect to enjoy the blessing of God upon our lives if we do not keep those promises so solemnly made to him. Let us search our own hearts and be sure that we are not failing in this respect. *'What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits towards me? ... I will pay my vows to the LORD'* (Psalm 116:12,14,18).

There is another important principle that we can draw from the teaching of this chapter. When we make promises to other people, we must keep them. This is a matter of truthfulness and integrity. A Christian's word must be his bond. How often we promise to pray for certain people or for missionaries, and then we forget.

Let me die the death of the righteous

Numbers chapters 23 and 24 contain four prophecies uttered by Balaam. King Balak took him to the high places of Baal from where he could observe the people of Israel (22:41). He asked Balak to have seven altars built and they offered a bull and a ram on each altar. The sacrifices of the wicked are not accepted by God, but he did give Balaam a word. It was not the word of cursing required by King Balak, but a word of blessing for Israel. Balaam was unable to curse Israel because God had not cursed them (8). The Lord had separated Israel to himself and had greatly blessed them (9–10). The bewildered king remonstrated with Balaam saying, *'What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and look, you have blessed them bountifully!'* (11). Kings and evil men may oppose God and his people, but he will bring down their schemes.

Balaam, in blessing Israel, expressed his desire to have an end like that of God's people. He said, *'Let me die the death of the righteous'* (10). The righteous have peace with God because they know that their sins are forgiven. They do not have to fear judgment (Romans 5:1; 8:1). Death cannot separate them from the love of God (Romans 8:38–39). The righteous can look forward to everlasting joy in heaven. Death for the believer is not loss but gain (Philippians 1:21). The Christian knows that when he dies, he is *absent from the body, but present with the Lord* (2 Corinthians 5:8). When Christ returns, he will be given a new body that will never age, suffer sickness, pain or death (1 John 3:1–3; Revelation 21:4). John Wesley once said of the early Methodists, *'Our people die well.'*

Balaam wanted to die like the righteous, but he *loved the wages of unrighteousness* (2 Peter 2:15). Many people want to go to heaven when they die, but they do not want to live the righteous life demanded of the citizens of heaven (cp. Philippians 3:19–20)! We cannot have it both ways. **Are you seeking to please God and to lead a holy life?**

Has he spoken, and will he not make it good?

King Balak took Balaam to another place, hoping that a partial view rather than a full view of the camp of Israel from the top of Mount Pisgah would enable him to curse the people. Seven altars were built as before and the same ritual sacrifices were offered (13–14; cp. 22:41). Balaam blessed Israel a second time and the king took him to another location where the ritual was again repeated. Balak was a persistent man who was determined to achieve his goal of having Israel cursed. He vainly thought that yet another change of location would perhaps bring a change of mind in God. Mount Peor was also a place where the god Baal was worshipped (27–30; cp. 25:3).

The Lord gave Balaam a message for Balak: *‘God is not a man, that he should lie ... Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not make it good?’* This should encourage us to trust in the Lord at all times. God, in mercy, did not forsake the Israelites because of their sin, but had wonderfully brought them out of Egypt. The triumphant shout of a King was among them (21–22). Are you fully convinced like Abraham, that what God has promised he is also able to perform? (Romans 4:21). Are you rejoicing in the wonderful promises of God? Let us pray with believing hearts. **God remains faithful and he does keep his word. He will not fail us nor forsake us.**

The Israelites were unaware of all this scheming and sorcery being used against them but the Lord was protecting them and fighting for them. When we belong to the Lord, the evil powers of the occult cannot harm us (23). We are engaged in a spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10–12) and we do not always see what the Lord is doing on our behalf. He lovingly protects us against hidden dangers and frustrates the desires of those who would curse us. It was said of Israel, *‘Oh, what God has done!’* (23). Balak despairingly urged the false prophet, *‘Neither curse Israel nor bless them at all’* (25). The Bible declares, *‘He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the LORD shall hold them in derision’* (Psalm 2:4).

Just as the LORD commanded

Today’s reading describes the Feast of Tabernacles (cp. Leviticus 23:33–43). Moses was a faithful servant of God (Hebrews 3:2) who *told the children of Israel everything, just as the LORD commanded* (40). He declared the whole counsel of God and the Christian pastor has exactly the same responsibility (cp. Acts 20:20,27).

The Day of Atonement was the most solemn of all feasts, but the Feast of Tabernacles involved great rejoicing (Leviticus 23:40). The feast ran from the fifteenth to the twenty-second day of the seventh month. By this time the harvest would have been gathered, and for the feast the Israelites were required to live in booths made from tree boughs and branches of palm trees (Leviticus 23:40–42). On the first day thirteen young bulls were offered, and on each succeeding day one less was offered until the seventh day when seven bullocks were sacrificed (13,32). Two rams, fourteen lambs were offered each day as well as a goat for a sin offering (13–16, etc.). On the eighth day there was a solemn assembly when a bullock, ram and seven lambs were offered along with a goat for a sin offering (35–38).

On the eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles the Lord Jesus cried out, *‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink’* (John 7:37). By that time religion for many had become very formal and lacking in reality and joy. **Is your religion like that – empty and meaningless?** Come to Jesus believing, and drink and take of the life-giving water (Revelation 21:6; 22:17). You will not be disappointed.

*I heard the voice of Jesus say,
“Behold, I freely give
The living water, thirsty one,
Stoop down and drink and live.”
I came to Jesus and I drank
Of that life-giving stream,
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived
And now I live in him.*

(Horatius Bonar)

Be sure they are without blemish

The seventh month was of special importance to the Jews, when three religious events took place. The Feast of Trumpets was celebrated on the first day (1–6), the Day of Atonement on the tenth day (7–11) and the Feast of Tabernacles on the fifteenth day, continuing for seven days (12–40).

The Day of Atonement (7–11) is described in more detail in the Book of Leviticus (chapters 16 and 23:26–32). *Atonement* means ‘covering’. The Old Testament sacrifices ‘atoned for’ or ‘covered’ sin from God’s sight so that it no longer provoked his wrath. There can be no atonement or forgiveness without blood sacrifice (Leviticus 17:11; Hebrews 9:22).

The Day of Atonement was the most solemn of all the Jewish holy days. It was the only day of the year when:

- The high priest entered the Holy of Holies, which contained the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God’s presence.
- Atonement was made for all the sins of all the congregation of Israel (Leviticus 16:16–17, 21–22, 30–34).
- They were to humble themselves. The statement, *You shall afflict your souls* means ‘to lower’(7).

The Day of Atonement foreshadowed the great sacrificial work of the Lord Jesus Christ (see Hebrews chapters 9 and 10). The Old Testament sacrifices only brought outward cleansing (*purifying of the flesh*, Hebrews 9:13); they could not bring inward cleansing to a guilty conscience (Hebrews 9:9,13–14;10:4,11). All believers, Old Testament and New Testament, are forgiven on the basis of Christ’s death (Romans 3:25).

The Lord told Moses concerning the sacrificial animals, *‘Be sure that they are without blemish’* (8). Christians have been redeemed *with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot* in order to be a holy people (1 Peter 1:14–19). **Let us always show by our lives that we belong to God’s family.**

The Spirit of God came upon him

Balaam called for the usual sacrifices before he was to speak again but he abandoned any attempt at sorcery, seeing that it had failed to help him in his quest to curse Israel (23:29–24:1). His third prophecy gives a picture of Israel enjoying the abundance of God’s blessing in the promised land (3–9). Can you imagine how the words, *‘How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! Your dwellings, O Israel!’* (5) must have angered Balak? Balaam refers to Israel being ruled by a powerful King, *higher than Agag* (7). Amalekite kings were given the title ‘Agag’ (cp. 1 Samuel 15:8).

The third prophecy ends with a warning which Balak ignored, *‘Blessed is he who blesses you, and cursed is he who curses you’* (9). Balak would not accept this and he showed his anger by striking his hands together. He dismissed Balaam and did not pay him (10–14). He rightly said that the Lord had kept Balaam from being honoured by him (11). Balaam’s fourth prophecy divides into four sections each beginning with the words, *‘he took up his oracle’* (15,20,21,23) and refers to the conquest of Moab, Edom, and other nations.

Balaam was a wicked man, yet *the Spirit of God came upon him* (2). He uttered beautiful and sublime prophecies, including a prophecy of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ — *‘A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Sceptre shall rise out of Israel’* (17; cp. Genesis 49:10; Psalm 45:6). **Balaam had a genuine experience of the Holy Spirit, but he was lost.** *The gloom of darkness is reserved for ever* for those like Balaam (2 Peter 2:15–17).

We must not allow ourselves to be deceived by those who claim that their ministries are marked by spectacular signs and wonders, or ‘words of knowledge’. We must look for the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) in their lives rather than claims of miraculous power which do not stand the test of careful scrutiny. Men may seek to impress us by quoting the Bible but have sinful lifestyles. Let us remember the solemn warning of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 7:22–23).

He was zealous with my zeal

Balaam failed to curse Israel, but he advised the Moabites and the Midianites how they could cause God's judgment to fall upon Israel. The advice to seduce the Israelites into idolatry and immorality worked, and it brought terrible consequences to Israel (31:16; Revelation 2:14). *Israel was joined to Baal of Peor* (3). The worship of this idol involved sexual immorality and feasting on food sacrificed to that god.

We live in a society that tolerates and even encourages the most gross forms of immorality. We may be shocked therefore that God ordered the execution of the offenders (1–5). The Lord also sent a plague which brought some appearance of contrition among the people (6–8). At this very time Zimri, the son of a leader of the tribe of Simeon, brazenly displayed his defiance by showing off his Midianite wife in the sight of Moses and all the weeping people. Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, killed Zimri and his wife, and God halted the plague in which 24,000 people were killed. If disobedience to God had been allowed to continue unchecked, Israel would have been destroyed.

Phinehas saw the vileness and evil in Zimri's sin and the Lord said, '*He was zealous with my zeal*' (11). That zeal brought a holy boldness that did not shrink, even though the offender was a member of a leading family in Israel. God promised Phinehas that the office of high priest would always be held by one of his descendants (12–13; cp. Psalm 106:30–31; Malachi 2:4–7). This promise held true until Christ's death on the cross made the Levitical sacrifices unnecessary. The church has no mandate to execute those who break God's law, but we do need to be zealous for the cause of God and his truth. **Are you lukewarm in your devotion to Christ or do you have a zeal which keeps you true to God?** Are you seeking to lead a holy life? Are you eager to proclaim the gospel to sinners?

You shall do no customary work

Details for the offerings at five great festivals are given from verse 16 through to the end of the next chapter. These festivals are:

- The Feast of Unleavened Bread, which began with the Passover, was observed in late March/early April (on the fourteenth day of the first month in the Hebrew calendar) and continued for a further seven days (16–25). It began and ended with a Sabbath (*a holy convocation*). The Lord told Moses that on these days, '*You shall do no customary work*' (18,25).
- The Feast of Weeks was celebrated on the fiftieth day from the Sabbath which began the Passover (26–31; mid-May in our calendar). This feast later became known as 'Pentecost' and it was also a Sabbath when normal work was to cease (26).
- The Feast of Trumpets (29:1–6).
- The Day of Atonement (29:7–11).
- The Feast of Tabernacles (29:12–38).

Christ is our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7) and when we meet at the Communion service, we break bread and drink wine as a remembrance of his death for us (1 Corinthians 11:23–26). We have already remarked that we do not keep Jewish feasts, but we must observe the ordinance (or sacrament) of the Lord's Supper. If we love the Lord, we cannot be indifferent to his command that we should meet *often* around the communion table.

The Sabbath principle that we abstain from *customary work* enables us to worship God with minds free from the demands of everyday business. **The more that we prepare ourselves and give ourselves to the worship of God on his day, the more precious each Lord's Day will become to us.**

You shall be careful to offer to me at the appointed time

Numbers 28 and 29 give details of the various offerings to be made in Israel's worship of God:

- Daily offerings (3–8).
- Sabbath (weekly) offerings (9–10).
- Monthly offerings (11–15).
- Offerings at special feasts (28:16 to 29:40).

A lamb was to be offered as a burnt offering each morning and evening (3–8) and on each Sabbath two additional lambs were offered (9–10). Further sacrifices were offered on the first day of each month (11–15). The Lord expected obedience from his people concerning the offerings. He said to Moses, *'My offerings made by fire as a sweet aroma to me, you shall be careful to offer to me at their appointed time'* (2). We learn two vital lessons from these verses:

- Our worship must be God-centred. The focus of the offerings was upon God – *my offering ... my food for my offerings ... to me ... to me* (2).
- The worship of God was and is regulated by his word (2). The Israelites were only permitted to sacrifice to God in the way he had appointed and at the time he had appointed. They were not permitted to experiment in their worship and neither are we. The liberty of the Holy Spirit never denies what God has set down in his word. *Let all things be done decently and in order* (1 Corinthians 14:40).

They had to take God's word seriously and so do we. We do not have to observe Jewish feasts or to offer animal sacrifices, but we are to 'be careful' to obey God's word. Our obedience is not only a sign of our love and devotion to the Lord, but it rises to God as a sweet aroma (cp. Ephesians 5:1–2).

An inheritance

The last section of the Book of Numbers begins with this chapter which gives a record of the census taken before Israel entered the promised land. The census was of males of twenty years and above able to go to war (2). A similar census had been taken some thirty-eight years earlier (see chapter 1). Joshua and Caleb were the only men on that first census to appear in this census. The others had perished in the wilderness because of their unbelief (64–65; cp. 14:26–35). A separate census was taken of the Levites as before; this census included all males from one month old (57–62). The family of Moses is given particular mention (58–61).

The census had a military significance showing how many fighting men were available to take the promised land. Its main purpose however, was to enable the promised land to be fairly divided as *an inheritance*, the larger tribes having the larger inheritance (52–56). The Levites did not have an inheritance (62; cp. 18:20).

We do not have an earthly inheritance as a benefit of our salvation, but we do have a glorious heavenly inheritance (Ephesians 1:11,14,18; Hebrews 9:15; 1 Peter 1:4). **Many of us give little thought to our wonderful inheritance. Let us live to please the Lord Jesus who died to save us and who has conquered death.** *Set your mind on things above, not on things of the earth* (Colossians 3:2).

*Saviour, since of Zion's city
I through grace a member am,
Let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in thy name.
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.*

(John Newton)

Therefore give us a possession

Zelophehad of the tribe of Manasseh had five daughters, but no sons. He had died in the wilderness and his daughters were concerned that they too be given an inheritance in the promised land (property was normally handed down through sons). They came to Moses with their problem, pointing out that their father had not died as a rebel against God and that they wanted his name to be remembered. They said, ‘*Why should the name of our father be removed from among his family because he had no son? Therefore give us a possession among the brothers of our father*’ (4).

Moses brought their case before the LORD, who told him that the daughters of Zelophehad were right in their request, and that they were to have an inheritance. The law for inheritance was clarified – if a man died without a son, his inheritance passed to his daughter; if he died childless, his brother received it; if he had no brothers, his father’s brother benefited. Failing that, the inheritance passed to the nearest relative (5–11).

There are many today who strongly oppose the practice of children inheriting their parents’ wealth and possessions, believing that the state should control all of our wealth and the means of production (factories, farms, etc.). This ‘socialism’ is at odds with biblical principles. The inheritance and possession of property is quite in order.

The daughters of Zelophehad were women of faith. The land was not yet possessed, but they believed in the promise of God. They were persuaded that Canaan would be conquered and the Lord rewarded them for their faith. God has ‘*given to us exceedingly great and precious promises*’ (2 Peter 1:4). **Do you really believe these wonderful promises found in the Bible? Are you living as one who believes them?**

A man in whom is the Spirit

God had told Moses that he would not allow him to enter the promised land of Canaan because he had disobeyed his command to hallow him at Meribah (12–14; cp. 20:10–13). Moses was permitted, however, to see the promised land before he died. The Lord told him to go up Mount Nebo in the mountain range of Abarim, from where he would see the land of Canaan (12; cp. 33:47; Deuteronomy 34:1).

Moses was concerned that a godly man succeed him as leader of Israel. He did not want the people of God to *be like sheep which have no shepherd* (15–17). Churches need pastors (shepherds) and many are lacking in this respect. Pray for such churches known to you, that God will provide for them by setting godly men over them.

The Lord told Moses to appoint Joshua as Israel’s new leader. He had been Moses’ *servant* (assistant) for forty years, from the time that they left Egypt (Exodus 17:9–14; 24:13; 33:11). Joshua had had a long ‘apprenticeship’ and he had been patient. He had never sought to usurp Moses’ position as leader as had Aaron and others (12:1–2; 16:3). He had proved himself to be a man of faith (14:1–10) and he is also described as ‘*a man in whom is the Spirit*’ (18). He was *full of the spirit of wisdom for Moses had laid his hands on him; so the children of Israel heeded him, and did as the LORD commanded Moses* (Deuteronomy 34:9). All the training at the best church or Bible college in the world is of no avail unless a man is *full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*. **Let us pray that God will be pleased to raise up men in whom is the Spirit to lead his people in these desperate and confusing days.**

Though all Christians have the Holy Spirit, it is obvious that some have the hand of God upon them in a special way. Stephen, the first Christian martyr was such a man (Acts 6:5). In our reaction against excesses in the charismatic movement, we must not forget that we are exhorted to *be filled with the Spirit* and this is not possible if we grieve him by sin in our lives (Ephesians 4:30; 5:18).