

Thoughts on Numbers 2

Part 1

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[00:00:01] ...around the sanctuary, around the Tabernacle. And I think if we look at what is set forth here, we shall find quite a lot of profit for ourselves.

It's a picture of the people of God that have gathered around the person of Christ. All is in perfect order, as we would expect it to be, because this is what God himself has set up. And it reminds us of a verse, as I think we've emphasized this afternoon, that God has set the members, every one of them, in the body as it has pleased him.

Well now, before we look at the detail in the chapter, I'd like to take a glance backwards into chapter 1. There are two things to emphasize in chapter 1. [00:01:03] First of all, the people are numbered. It comes out in the chapter, they are numbered according to God's desire and purpose.

And the thought of numbering, of course, set forth appropriation.

God was appropriating a people for himself, but a people on earth.

Now, to paraphrase ourselves, we're not a people destined to a place on earth, are we?

Are we not brought to the church of the firstborn ones, enrolled in heaven?

Ours is a heavenly portion.

Let us not forget it. [00:02:01] Let us enter into it. And let us make much of it. Because we belong to the Lord, our living Lord, as we have been reminded. Our exalted head in heaven.

And we are linked with him. Do you remember when the 70 disciples returned to the Lord, full of rejoicing because they had great success?

And the Lord said to them, he said, notwithstanding, in this rejoice not, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. Beloved friends, we're not linked to this earth, this crucified and cast out, the son of God. We are linked with one who is now seated in the right hand of the majesty on high, our living, exalted Lord.

[00:03:04] Now, the second thing in this first chapter is that God was conducting a people through the wilderness and it was essential that they should know their pedigree, their genealogy.

Let me challenge you here. Are you quite sure of your pedigree?

I mean your spiritual pedigree.

There are so many of God's people, true believers, going on to heaven, yes, but they're not sure that they really are saved.

One of the saddest things that came to my notice recently was on a visit to a hospital where one of our sisters was in a long-stay ward. And there was a lady there who shared the same group and she was a Methodist.

[00:04:07] She spoke often about the church, meaning the Methodist church, and she was visited by the minister of the Methodist and fellow workers. And when it was quite evident that she hadn't got long for this life, and she was asked if she was sure of a place in heaven, what do you think she said?

Oh, I hope so. I hope so. That was as far as she could get. But God doesn't want us merely to hope for salvation. He doesn't want us to hope merely that we should be alright at last. He wants us to be sure. He wants us to have the assurance of our salvation. As the Lord Himself, John tells us in his first chapter, in his gospel, [00:05:07] And John says in his epistle, Well, now, having said that, I'd like to come to the second chapter.

As I said before, the tribes are gathered around a divine centre.

A picture of the people of God gathered around a person of trust. It's quite clear here that Moses and Aaron have the nearest place.

The Levites come next, and then the twelve tribes are gathered around in their order. They're divided into four camps, each camp consisting of three tribes, and the twelve tribes form a perfect square.

[00:06:13] Each side showing forth, gathered together under their own specific standard.

Now that raises a question. What is our standard? What are we rallying under? What is our standard? Have you got one? Is it a doctrine? Is it a doctrine? Is it a person, such as Luther or Wesley?

Yes, God's standard is a person, a living person, a divine person, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And God owns no other standard than that of His Son.

And what a privilege to be gathered with Him.

[00:07:03] The Lord says in Matthew 18.20, a verse that you all know, and probably have quoted many times, where two or three gather together unto My name, there am I in the midst of them. Some say that refers only to the prayer meeting. I take it as a divine principle, where two or three at the divine limit are gathered together, divine fellowship.

In My name, that's divine authority.

There am I, divine person, in the midst, a divine center.

What more do you want, beloved friends? Let men have their theology, we have the Bible. [00:08:01] Our church organization is the one body that we've been reminded of this afternoon. We've been baptized into one body. Thank God for that.

But the thing is, we're united with that living, glorified Lord of God's life.

Well now, passing on into the details of this chapter, what strikes me as this.

They all have their place, definitely given to them, assigned to them by God Himself. And we have, first of all, the three tribes on the east side, beginning with Judah. Now you know what Judah means, don't you? It means praise. And the first thing that God looks for, from His people, is a faithful spirit.

[00:09:02] He looks for praise. He received it on the banks of the Red Sea, when they were brought triumphantly through the sea. Delivered from the might and power of Egypt, they celebrated with great joy their deliverance. They sang, they raised a song of praise. But how quickly that praise faded away, and gave place to murmuring and discontent.

God looks for praise from your heart and mine. Don't let's deny it. Don't let's deny Him, of what is due to Him. The Father seeks us to worship Him. To worship Him. And you and I have that wonderful privilege of rendering to Him the praise and the worship of our hearts.

There never was such a one, such a praising one as the Lord Jesus. [00:10:06] Even at a time when all things seemed against Him. When it seemed as if He had spent His time for naught, laboured in vain.

Then it was that He rejoiced in spirit. He lifted up His voice in praise to God and said, I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, because Thou hast revealed them from the wise and the prudent, and hast revealed them unto both.

In the 2nd Thessalonians, we read this, Rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and everything give thanks.

Whenever I read that in the scriptures, I think of a dear brother I used to visit at Winchester, [00:11:03] Mr. Mark Nutter, maybe known to some of you here. He was in a home at that time, and as I was about to leave him, he said to me, dear brother, would you like a sandwich? I said, well, I'm not very hungry, Mr. Nutter. Oh, he said, I don't mean a sandwich to eat. I mean a sandwich in the Word of God. Well, I said, certainly. Anything that will give me sustenance in the scriptures, I'll be pleased to receive. He said, this is it. Rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and everything give thanks. There's a sandwich for you, he said. And don't forget the filling in the middle. Pray without ceasing.

Yes, that's one of the characteristics of the believer. Prayer and reading the scriptures. I think it was emphasized this afternoon. The two things that are open for us in our spiritual pathway is to get low before the Lord in prayer and dependence, [00:12:04] and to open the scriptures quietly and steadfastly and regularly to hear what the Lord has to say to us. Well, Judah means praise.

And God looked for praise from his people.

And I want just to read, just direct your thoughts.

I'll read it to you, you needn't turn to it. It's in Deuteronomy. And it's this. The Lord has avowed thee, that means he has accepted thee this day to be his peculiar people, his special treasure, as he has promised thee, and that thou shouldest keep all his commandments [00:13:03] and to make thee high above all nations which he has made. And then follow three things that God looks for. Make them high in praise and in name and in honor.

Yes, God looked for praise from each one.

We have so much to thank him for. Now, I was just thinking of two Christians, young Christians, that were talking together about their privileges and their responsibilities. And one of them said, now, I think the first thing for a Christian is to do all the good that he can. The other one said, I don't agree.

[00:14:04] It's not the first thing, it's the third thing. Well, whatever do you mean, he said. Well, they turn to the scriptures, and they turn to Hebrews 13, and it says, That's the first thing. Identify yourself with Christ. That's where he is. We have been reminded already. He's cast out of this world. Even in the religious circles, there's very little time for him. There wasn't when he was here. He was cast out of the synagogue.

He's outside the camp today, of that which professes allegiance to him, but denies loyalty to him. [00:15:05] Let us go forth to him. That's the first thing. Second thing, Here we get the praise again. And it's not just on Lord's Day mornings, you know. Let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually. That is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name, confessing his name. We can give thanks not only on a Lord's Day morning, that's a very grand opportunity, but in our daily devotions.

In our daily walk, I was going to say, if we walk along the street, we can have our thoughts centered upon that blessed one who came down here to give his life for us, and to bring us to God. And the third thing is, And the third thing is, [00:16:02] Yes, God is pleased with doing good. But, everything in its right order. We need to get our priorities right. Identification with Christ, being where he is, in reproach, and offering the sacrifice of praise which is so acceptable to him. And devoting ourselves to the interest of others, doing good to all around. Well now, we've departed a little bit from our chapel, but never mind. So, we come to Ithaca, verse 5.

Ithaca, now, if you want to make sure that I'm not just being fanciful or imaginative, I will turn up these names in Genesis, when these sons of Jacob are born, and you will see that the names I give them are the names recorded, [00:17:04] the meanings that are recorded in the Word of God. Ithaca means labor, or fire.

The laborer is worthy of his fire. So that praise comes first, and then our service, if you like, our labor accordance. And Zebulun is connected.

Zebulun means dwelling, connected with, or I think the actual meaning, that meaning is haven or rest. So that we get the thought of rest, and we need that. You see, there's no good washing off in service unless we have come from the presence of the Lord. The Lord Jesus said to his disciples, Come ye after me, and I will make you disciples of me.

We need that communion with him.

[00:18:04] We need to learn of him, because he does say, Learn of me, I am meek and lowly in heart.

So let's see that all our service, whatever it may be, brings out of communion with him.

Because so often we get taken up with our service, and we forget the one who has appointed us to his service. You take the case of, well what can come to mind, Martha and Mary. Mary was cumbered with her service. It was on top of her, so to speak. She even directed the Lord what to do about it. She said, Lord, tell my sister that she's left me alone. Let her that she comes and helps me. But what was Mary doing? She was sitting at her seat, learning of him. [00:19:02] That's the place to be at the feet of Jesus, learning of him. And as you learn of him, and that you grow in grace and in the knowledge of him, and then it is your desire to go forth in service. So you see how it's all connected.

Don't forget that a lazy Christian is never a very happy one. We need to be balanced, you see, balanced individuals. Now we come to the next side of the square, so to speak, the south side. We have Reuben, verse 10. Simeon, verse 12. Gad, verse 14. Reuben, the firstborn.

You know what Jacob said of him, what it means. You see the meaning in the Scripture. See a son.

See a son.

There's only one son that God would have us occupied with, his own son. [00:20:04] This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased. And that's the one that has been before us this afternoon. And the one I would present to you this evening. Our Lord Jesus Christ.

God's own son. And Simeon means caring. And it brings before us the Lord Jesus as the one whose ears were open. He listened. He was a great listener with the Lord Jesus. Or you say, he was the one who spake in a good heart. Creator and upholder of the universe. Yes, he was that. But he came here in wondrous grace and humiliation. And what did he read of him? In Isaiah 15. I close the heavens with blackness and I make sackcloth their covering. [00:21:02] That's evidently a divine person speaking. The Lord God has given me the tongue of the learning. Same word as for disciples. One under instruction. Think of that. The mighty son of God. Taking that lowly place in subjection. That I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary. He wakeneth morning by morning. He wakeneth mine ear to hear at the learning. The Lord Jesus spent whole nights in prayer. The first voice he heard in the morning was the voice of his father. He's left us an example that we should follow his steps. I don't mean that we should just spend all night in prayer. But it is good to get low before him. To spread out our hearts and our knees before him. The Lord Jesus knew what it was then. [00:22:01] The lowly, humble one.

And we need to cultivate that spirit of dependence.

We have no strength in ourselves. We are weak, poor people. And after all we may have done for him. We have to say we are unprofitable. Just briefly, let us link together three scriptures about hearing.

About the Lord Jesus in that dependent place. Psalm 40.

Mine ear hath thou hollowed out, O ye.

It speaks of his incarnation. The Holy Spirit knows what that means because he has interpreted it for us in Hebrews 10. [00:23:04] A body hath thou prepared me. So we think of the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, coming here. His ears open to receive instruction. And then again as we have in Isaiah 50. He wakeneth morning by morning. Mine ear to hear hath the one under instruction. And then finally of course we have that wonderful scripture. The Hebrew servant in Exodus 21.

The completion of the perfect cycle, six years.

The Hebrew servant was entitled to go out free. But he had a choice. He could go out and enjoy his freedom. Or he could say, no.

I love my wife. I love my children. But I will not go out free.

[00:24:01] Isn't that a wonderful picture of the Lord Jesus? Doesn't it fill our hearts to think of him?

With the opportunity of going back to his Father, but he would not go back alone. He would be like the corn of wheat, falling into the ground, giving his life. That Hitler might be free for his praise. That he might have companions to share his glory. Yes, there is another scripture that comes to my mind. More wonderful still perhaps. Although we can't overestimate the wonder of the Lord Jesus taking a bronzeman's place. Having his ear bored, as it were, to the doorway. In devotion to his Father and in his great love for his children. But there is a scripture that comes to my mind, part of Luke. Where it says, [00:25:01] Where it says, Is this the Lord of Glory? Is this the one who came to earth to give his life on the cross?

This is the one who, when the glory dawns, he will come forth and serve his own.

Maybe in the glory of the kingdom, but certainly in the time to come. Wonderful prosperous. To think of the Lord Jesus, glorified above. Serving himself, making his own to sit down and he would wait on him. The one who loved to serve when he was here. [00:26:01] Loved, delighted to serve, as he himself said.

And that's the secret of it, isn't it? Well, we must go back to our chapter. Well, we get dead next, don't we? Well, you'll find the meaning of dead is a truth which suggests power. And if there is to be power in our lives, individually. And power in our collective testimony.

Well, we must know what it is to have God's Son before us.

Reuben, see your son. And to have his example before us. And Simeon, the one who was ready to listen with ear open.

Morning by morning to receive instructions of the disciples. [00:27:01] Are we disciples in that sense? Oh, I know you've got busy lives to carry out.

This little time is there when you rush off to business to read the scriptures. I think there is time if you make it. I think even with a busy life, a few moments, maybe only a few moments. In dependence upon the Lord, leading what he has to say to you. It will be a great benefit for you throughout the day. You'll be able to meet the difficulties and the problems that come before you. With greater power, if you read the scriptures. If your mind is saturated with the word of God. Yes, there's no excuse for

some of us.

We've got all day to pray. But I'm just thinking of the young ones whose time is so much limited. [00:28:02] But do set aside a portion of the day at least. Once that time in the morning, don't cut it out altogether. Make time before you go to bed to get in touch with the Lord. Have your quiet time with him. And you'll never regret it.

Now we come, we've had the three tribes on the east side.

Then the three on the south side. Then when we come to verse 18, we come to the west side. We come to Ephraim and Manasseh.

And Benjamin. We were reminded about Joseph, weren't we, this afternoon. When he came into prominence. [00:29:03] When the one who had been cast into prison, rejected. He becomes ruler of Egypt. In authority and power next to the king. And when Joseph rose to his great honor and glory.

He had two sons born to him. The first born was Manasseh. And he gave him that name because he says, God hath made me forget all my toils and all my father's haste. Manasseh means forgetting. And then Ephraim, the name of his second son.

God hath caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction. So Ephraim means fruitfulness.

And you'll notice that Ephraim comes very close to the tabernacle.

[00:30:05] Tabernacle.

Verse 17, the tabernacle of the congregations were set forward. And then it says on the west side to be the standard of the camp of Ephraim. If we want to be fruitful, we need to be very close to the Lord. Just as Ephraim is close to the tabernacle. In fact the Lord says, abide in me. That's our responsibility, to abide in me, if we are to be fruitful. Do we desire to be fruitful? Of course we do. What is fruit? Is it not the expression of Christ in the believer? Essentially so, I think. The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, [00:31:01] fidelity, meekness, self-control.

What are those qualities? That's a graphic picture of what the Lord Jesus Christ stood for when he was here.

And God is looking down upon us to see if those qualities are shown forth in our lives.

It can only be so as we keep faith with him and have our atonement, looking after Jesus, looking after everything else. Looking after Jesus, the author and completer of faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the sin. Yes, dear friends, that's the secret, looking after Jesus.

And so I want to refer to a New Testament scripture to draw out what I say.

[00:32:06] And we were drawn, I had our attention drawn to the verse of Colossians, and I wanted just a couple of verses there. This is the apostle's prayer for the Colossian saint.

He says that he might walk worthy of the Lord and to all pleasing, being faithful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. What a high standard. Is it true of each one of us? Are we walking worthy of the Lord and to his great good pleasure? Are we being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God? We can't do it in our own strength. I'm sure of that. But he goes on to say, strengthen with all might according to his glorious power.

[00:33:06] Or as the New Translation puts it, strengthen with all power according to the might of his Lord. That is to say, we occupy ourselves with the Lord Jesus in his walk, in his ways down here.

We see much that calls forth our admiration and we seek to follow his steps.

But we need to look upward to where he is, crowned with honor and glory.

There is the power, not to be occupied with ourselves and our visionaries, but to look upward where he is, to have our eye upon him. And to realize that that's our destiny. That where he is, there is the beloved. So that the strength and the power for our godly walk [00:34:06] and the ability to show forth the excellences of Christ can only be as our eyes are upon him. And then it will be that those qualities that are so pleasing to God, so contrary to the natural mind but pleasing to God, they will be reflected in you and in me as we seek to walk here to his praise and to his glory. Just a thought then, Benjamin is mentioned in verse 22, connected with Ephraim and Manasseh. Well we know Benjamin means the son of my right hand.

[00:35:02] The son of my right hand. We know who that is, the one to whom the Lord God has said, sit there on my right hand until I make thy foes my footstool. And I can't help thinking of the dear Apostle Paul.

You know, if anyone set forth the beauty, the qualities of Christ, it was the Apostle.

But this is what he said, brethren I can't not myself to have apprehended or laid hold of, this one thing I do. You see he had one purpose, one great object before him, forgetting like Manasseh, forgetting those things which are behind, whether it was his achievements or his failures, forgetting those things which are behind, leeching forth, stretching out unto those things which are before. [00:36:03] I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. He had his eyes upon the one who was at Christ's right hand. And that's the source of power, occupied with Christ.

Like the dear Apostle, pressing on. There's so many things that occupy us. But that's where we need that steadfastness as persons, to forget the things that are behind us.

We've got a future before us, we need to press on. The Apostle was never going to be satisfied until he reached that goal and was glorified by his glorified Lord.

Now I just want to briefly close the next section. We have in 25, verse 25, Dan, Atta and Naphtali.

Dan means judging.

[00:37:02] And the Apostle says, I did exercise myself to have a conscience clear before God and before men.

There is a sense of God in which we are not to judge. And there's a sense in which we are to judge. The Apostle says, that which is within, within the assembly, you judge. If there's doctrinal evil, if there's moral evil, you're bound to judge it because otherwise you're unfaithful to the one whose name you bear. But judge not that which is in us.

We need to guard against that spirit of censoredness, that tendency within us to judge motive, to accuse a person of something that we're not clear or we haven't got proof perhaps of what we're saying. [00:38:02] We need to be very careful that we don't accuse wrong motive. The Lord says, judge not that which is in us. But there is a sense in which we need to be to judge. And that is to judge ourselves, to exercise ourselves before the Lord. I said about the Lord's Supper, wasn't it?

That a man judge himself, yes, and then not stay away but let him come and remember the Lord. But it's just a warning against carelessly taking the Lord's Supper.

It should be a great privilege that we need to come in a spirit of self-judgment before the Lord so that there's nothing in our lives that would hinder, nothing that would grieve the Holy Spirit of God. In that sense, we need the judgment as set forth by John.

[00:39:05] Then we have Asher, which means happy. Well, we can't be happy unless we do exercise ourselves in self-judgment.

I think that's quite important. And then we come to the last of the tribes, Naxalite, which means wrestling or thriving.

And we can't be without the wrestling, the need for it, while we're down here because we have great enemies to face.

We should be wrestling until the time when the Lord takes us out of this sea altogether.

We are reminded of the need for it in Ephesians 6, where it says, we wrestle not against flesh and blood [00:40:03] but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. And the remedy is to take unto you the whole armor of God. And he says earlier, put on the whole armor of God. Maybe we're just studying it in the Scriptures. We may be able to define all these different parts of the armor. But the practical benefit comes when we put it on. Put on the whole armor of God, that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. It may not be his hostility, his violence. He is a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. But he's a very crafty fellow, many wiles that he would use. [00:41:01] We need to have our loins dirt about with truth, that having done all, we are able to stand.

Well, I would like just to finish my little talk to you by reading a couple of verses to you.

How cheering is our pathway with Jesus as our guide. He's promised to conduct us across life's desert wide. The journey ends in glory. Let's pass the time in song. With Jesus close beside us, the way will not be long. And oh, the joy of seeing the journey's end at last. The sorrows and the sufferings behind us in the past. And oh, the joy of meeting our savior and our friend, our everyday companion. He loves us to the end.

[00:42:04] May God bless this world for us this evening. We'll close with 434. 434 were pilgrims in the

wilderness, dwelling in the camp. 434.