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The Bible Story

Volume 2

Chapter 31

The Tabernacle Built

MOSES had now returned from atop Sinai. God had given him plans for a tabernacle. "Every detail of how the tabernacle should be built, I have with me," Moses explained.

Why the Tabernacle?

"God has ordered us to build this tabernacle as a temporary dwelling for Him to be present with us. God has not yet promised to dwell in you by His Spirit. He has promised to be among you and with you in every crisis so long as you obey Him," Moses said to the crowd. "For now He will be pleased with us if we give generously and willingly of our materials, wealth, skills and labor. Every one can have a part in doing something for our Creator."

Shouts of "What can we do?" and "Just how can we help?" came from all parts of the vast congregation.

Moses answered by telling them that all who were willing and able should bring in gold, silver, brass, cloth dyes, fine linen, goats' hair, red rams' skins, seals' skins, acacia wood, oil, spices, incense and precious stones.

"There is also a need for willing workers who are skilled in carpentry, metal work, weaving, carving and all the crafts and arts necessary to build and decorate the tabernacle and everything connected with it." (Exodus 35:4-19.)

Moses didn't beg the people for anything. He simply told them what was required. The huge crowd broke up, and the Israelites returned to their tents.

Before many hours, much of the necessary material was brought. Laborers, craftsmen, artisans and maidservants volunteered their services so readily that a crowd grew close to Moses' tent. (Exodus 36:1-3.)

Israelites Bring Many Valuable Offerings

"These people say they have come to give gifts for the tabernacle," an officer explained to Moses and Aaron. "What shall we do?" (Verses 20-29.)

"Assign men of good character to receive the gifts at once," Moses answered. "Summon skilled men to immediately set up tents and enclosures in which to store these things."

For the next several days thousands of people came to give the things for which Moses had asked. Because the camps were spread out for a few miles, it was far into the night when some of the gift-bearers arrived. They also wove diligently on their looms to produce the beautiful fabrics that were needed, and they brought daily that which had been finished. So

generous were the people that more than enough was brought for the building of the tabernacle.

Moses was pleased at this great display of zeal, unselfishness and ambition by so many of the people. It was plain to him that thousands of them were anxious to make up for their past sins. Still too fresh in their minds were the unpleasant memories of their wanton prancing before the golden calf. But most of the people who came to give simply had a sincere desire to help because they realized that this was a wonderful opportunity to be of service to God.

God had already told Moses on Mt. Sinai whom to choose to head this task of making the tabernacle, so Moses proclaimed to the people that Bezaleel, a grandson of Hur from the tribe of Judah, would be in charge. Bezaleel's assistant was to be Aholiab of the tribe of Dan.

Israelites Work Industriosly

These two men were of good character, highly skilled in all the crafts of building and decoration, in teaching their helpers, and possessing good Judgment and wisdom in the arts of material design and production. Moses had passed on to them the detailed instructions for building the tabernacle. (Exodus 35:30-35.)

Knowing how much material was necessary, through figures Moses had given him, Bezaleel realized that more than enough had been brought in. Even so, the people kept on coming with more. Bezaleel spoke to Moses, who quickly made it known that nothing more should be given. But there were some who had put off giving their share, and who rushed their offerings in too late to be accepted.

Bezaleel and Aholiab lost no time in teaching those who needed instructions and assigning craftsmen and laborers to their various tasks. Soon everyone was busily and happily working. Carpenters started hewing boards out of the acacia logs and planks that had been brought in. Metal workers melted down or pounded out the metals. Weavers and seamstresses worked on cloth. Gem-cutters planned how to use the precious stones.

Work on the tabernacle was something that couldn't be rushed. It required great care and skill, for everything that went into this project was to be made as close to perfection as human hands could make it. The men and women were very careful to perform superior workmanship in making God's tabernacle and its furnishings.

Bezaleel and Aholiab did much of the work themselves -- especially on such objects as the chest that was to contain the two tables of stone on which the Ten Commandments are written, the altar on which sacrifices were to be made and the priests' garments. (Exodus 3, 38, 39.)

Even though the workers applied themselves ambitiously, it required about six months to build the tabernacle. That was because there was a need for so much intricate and detailed workmanship.

Tabernacle Richly Decorated

Nearly fifteen tons of gold, silver and brass were used. This represented only a small part of the wealth of the Israelites, much of which had come from their former Egyptian neighbors or

from being washed up on the east shore of the Red Sea after Pharaoh's army had been engulfed in water.

Among the things made last was the special clothing for the priests. As the items were finished, they were brought to Moses for inspection. Nothing was approved until he was satisfied that it was made strictly according to God's instructions. Finally Moses called all the workers together to commend them for tasks done well, and to ask God's blessing on them. (Exodus 39:43.)

He reminded them that God, who is perfect, is pleased when men strive toward perfection in anything worthwhile, whether it is material, physical or spiritual. That's worth remembering when something needs doing. Too many people try to get more and give less, which is the opposite of God's way. Quality pleases Him, and quality requires one's best efforts.

The Israelites had been gone a year from Egypt by the time the tabernacle was finished. It was set up and ready for use on the first day of the second year of the journey to Canaan. (Exodus 40:1-4, 17) Just to the west of Moses' tent was an open area centering the twelve camps. There workmen erected God's tabernacle that was to be taken down and moved whenever the people moved. (Numbers 1:50-54; 3:38.)

An Enclosure for the Tabernacle

To give privacy to the priests who would preside there, a long curtain of fine linen was strung on braced posts of brass about ten feet high. This fence enclosed an area about two hundred feet long and half as wide. The space between the tabernacle and the fence was called the court of the tabernacle. (Exodus 27:9-19 and 38:9-20.)

The only entrance into the court was an opening left in the east fence. The altar, about six feet high and ten feet square, was just beyond the opening. Its boards, hewn from acacia trees grown in the Mt. Sinai area, were covered with brass. It was hollow inside (Exodus 27:8), but filled with earth to prevent the wood from burning. (Exodus 20:24.) Wood and offerings were to be placed on the dirt part, from which ashes could be removed daily (Leviticus 6:8-13) with shovels and pans made for that purpose.

Like everything of the tabernacle, the altar was made to be carried. There were heavy brass rings on the corners of the brass grate encircling the lower half of the altar. The boards of the altar rested on a narrow rim of the grate. (Exodus 27:4-5.) Through the rings long poles were to be inserted for lifting the altar from the dirt filling for conveyance whenever the Israelites were directed to move their camps. (Exodus 38:1-7.)

Between the tabernacle and the altar was a large brass bowl called the laver, always to be full of water. In it the priests were to wash their hands and feet before going about their duties. (Exodus 30:18-21.)

The tabernacle was put up in the west section of the court. It was about sixty feet long. Its width and its walls were a third of the length. The walls were built of gold-covered acacia boards set on bases of silver. The front end was open except for a curtain. Another heavier, larger curtain of sealskin was stretched over lighter ones of rams' skins, goat hair and linen. Only the colorful, figured linen curtain could be seen inside the tabernacle, which needed no floor because it was always to be set on level ground. (Exodus 26:1-25; 36:8-34.)

There were two rooms. The first one, covered with gold, was about forty feet long and half as wide. This was known as the holy place. It contained a gold-covered table that was to hold twelve loaves of bread to represent the food offerings of the twelve tribes of Israel, a gold lamp stand with places for seven oil lamps and a gold altar for burning incense.

The second room was half the size of the first. This very sacred area was to be entered only by the high priest and only on the Day of Atonement, once a year. Here was a gold-covered wooden chest called the ark of the covenant, about the size of a large trunk. It had a solid gold lid called the mercy seat, on which were mounted two gold figures facing each other. Inside the chest were the two stone tablets on which God had engraved the Ten Commandments. Aaron's shepherd's rod was there. There was also a special container for manna, holy anointing oil and other objects of unusual meaning. (Exodus 37:1-9; Hebrews 9:3-8.) This holy of holies, as the inner room was called, was the place God designed for His glorious Presence while leading the Israelites on the journey to Canaan.

A huge crowd formed to see how the tabernacle would appear when its many parts were put together. It was colorful and majestic, but only the upper part of the outside could be seen. The curtained fence prevented the people from witnessing even the sacred rites of ordaining the equipment in the court.

Moses was the first to enter the court. After he anointed the articles and utensils there and in the tabernacle, they were to be regarded as holy. He then brought Aaron and Aaron's sons into the court. They washed at the laver and dressed in their priestly attire. Moses anointed them with oil, and they were ordained by God's power to be priests. This meant that their following generations were also to be priests.

Everything was put in order. Bread was placed on the table in the holy place. The seven lamps were lighted. Sweet incense was burned on the golden altar. A burnt offering and a meat offering were made at the large altar. (Exodus 40:17-33.)

The Israelites were accustomed to seeing the cloud move down from above Mt. Sinai and hover over the tent where Moses went to talk to God. This time it moved down toward the middle of their camps, appearing so close and large that some of the people fled to their tents. Those who stayed to watch noticed that the cloud had a beautiful, sparkling quality that exuded the feeling of vibrant life. While awed millions watched, it floated down over the tabernacle.

Moses, Aaron and his sons were still inside when the luminous vapor settled down to impart a sensation of peace and energy Moses had experienced before. Rays of multicolored light moved through the vapor, becoming so intense the humans had to back out of the tabernacle to leave it to God to occupy.

Chapter 32

The Levitical Priesthood

GOD will allow you to enter completely into His tabernacle service only after you have spent seven days and nights in your duties at the door," Moses told Aaron and his sons. "Do exactly as you have been told, or you may have to pay with your lives." (Leviticus 8:1-4, 31-36.)

A week later the elders were told to bring offerings for the first services in use of the altar. All the people were also told to be present. After the first carcasses were placed on the altar, Moses, Aaron and his sons went out to stand before the people while Moses informed the crowd that God was pleased with the offerings.

A Fire from Israel's God

Suddenly a hissing bolt of fire shot out of the tabernacle, arched upward enough to be seen from outside the curtained fence, and struck the altar! The offering there was quickly consumed by an energy more like lightning than ordinary flames. This close display of God's power so startled the people that they fell forward in awe. (Leviticus 9:22-24.)

"This is God's holy fire," Moses told Aaron. "Your sons should never allow it to die." (Leviticus 6:13.) "Twice a day live coals should be taken from the altar and carried in a censer to the holy place to be sprinkled with incense at the golden altar." (Exodus 30:1-9.)

From then on the tabernacle was in constant use. Early each morning Aaron's sons came to carry out their preparation duties. Then animals were slaughtered, dressed and offered for all Israel. This was done again in the afternoon, so that an offering was always on the altar. (Leviticus 6:9, 12-13.) The unblemished animals used for burnt offerings typified the Messiah who would later come to die for the sins of the people instead of the people having to die.

Why Animal Sacrifices?

Aaron and his sons had to carry out their duties properly. There were several kinds of offerings planned by God to distinctly remind the Israelites of their sins, and to give them an opportunity to worship Him with a feeling of close contact. These Offerings were to teach Israel the habit of obeying their God. (Galatians 3:24.) They also taught the need for their God to provide a Saviour to pay for the sins of the World. The offerings were not to pay for sin. Salvation never came through animal sacrifices. They were given to Israel until the coming of the Saviour (Galatians 3:19), and were to remind the people that One would come to shed His blood for their sins. (Hebrews 10:3, 4, 8)

There were burnt offerings, food offerings, peace offerings, offerings for sins of ignorance, trespass offerings and others. For each there was a special ceremony outlined by God. (Leviticus 1-5.) For example, if a man wished to make a personal burnt offering as a gift to God or in recognition of the coming Messiah, he was to bring one of three things. It had to be a healthy, unblemished male from his cattle, sheep or goats, or turtledoves or pigeons. There was a ceremony for each kind of creature, some of which were more involved than others, but each ending with the animal's flesh being burned.

Sacrificial ceremonies included more than animals. Olive oil, flour from grains and incense were used. Some, if to be burned, were used in combinations, such as unleavened breads not sweetened by honey. Whatever the ritual or its necessities, all had to be done exactly according to how God had instructed Moses. Nothing was to be changed, added or omitted.

Two Priests Rebel

Two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, arrived for work one morning to find the altar fire barely alive. In their eagerness to get the flames going, they piled on wood that was moist from the morning dew, burying the last of the live coals.

"Our father, Aaron, will be here any minute to get live coals for the altar in the holy place, and now they're under this wet wood," Nadab observed worriedly. "We'll have to pile some of it off."

"Why go to that trouble?" Abihu asked, snatching up a censer. "There's a campfire outside the gate where we can get live coals right away!"

Knowing that only fire from the large altar was to be used in the holy place, Nadab was about to protest, but said nothing when he thought how much easier it would be to obtain coals at the campfire. Silently he picked up another censer and hurriedly joined his brother. Then the two rushed back with the glowing coals, relieved to find that Aaron still hadn't showed up.

After a few minutes they realized the campfire coals were becoming ash-covered. If they weren't used right away, coals would have to be dug out from under the new fuel on the altar after all. Unwisely, they decided to make the delivery of live coals to the holy place, something only Aaron was to do. After leaving the fire in the holy place, a strong uneasiness seized them. They made a frantic rush for the door, but too late.

Fingers of fire hissed out of the inner room and struck them lifeless under the curtains of the tabernacle entrance. (Leviticus 10:1-2.)

A little later, when Aaron arrived, he was concerned to find nobody in sight, although fire was now beginning to burn vigorously on the altar. Across the court, in the doorway of the tabernacle, he then saw his sons lying motionless. He hurried to reach down to them.

"Don't touch them!" Lesson in Obedience

Aaron glanced up to see Moses approaching and motioning him away from the dead men.

"They died because they disobeyed God by bringing strange fire before Him and trying to take over duties that were yours," Moses explained. "God warned them, and He means His warnings."

Aaron stood in silent misery, gazing at the flame-blackened bodies. Finally he turned away, realizing that disobedience had to bring punishment. In spite of the shock of his nephews' deaths, Moses lost no time in arranging for burials, and for replacements by Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's two other sons.

"Don't mourn because of Nadab and Abihu," Moses warned Aaron and the two other sons. "If you do, it would show that you feel God has dealt unjustly with them." (Leviticus 10:6-7.)

People were sobered when they heard Nadab and Abihu had died by the direct hand of God. Even a funeral wasn't to interfere with tabernacle ceremonies. Aaron had to carry on with his duties, and Eleazar and Ithamar had to start with theirs. Their period of service began with a new ruling that priests on duty would have to abstain from wine and strong drink, the excessive use of which could dull one's best judgment. It was possible that such had happened with Nadab and Abihu.

Serious events didn't necessarily steer matters smoothly. In one case of a goat being used as a sin offering for the people, Moses happened to go to the holy place to find nobody there. Neither was the goat that was to be eaten (at least in part). Moses then discovered that the goat had been completely burned on the altar. He quickly found Eleazar and Ithamar.

"Why was the offering left to burn?" he angrily asked. "Why wasn't it eaten in the holy place, as holy meat to bear the sins of the people?" (Verses 16-18)

Embarrassed and feeling guilty, the brothers were trying to think of reasonable answers when Aaron walked up to explain that he had told his sons not to bring him any meat to eat because his recent losses had left him with little appetite.

"Would forcing down food under such circumstances be acceptable to God?" Aaron asked.

Moses felt sudden compassion. He realized Aaron had done well to continue his duties under his emotional strain. He knew that God pardons human errors not willfully committed. He put a comforting hand on Aaron's shoulder and said nothing more about the matter. Inasmuch as God gave no indication of displeasure, Aaron obviously was forgiven for breaking a ceremonial rule.

Chapter 33

Laws of Health

EVERYBODY should be healthy. God intended that His own people should not only know the truth about food but live radiant, healthy lives.

What "Clean Food" Means

Food that is clean doesn't always mean that it is free of every kind of dirt. It can be pure in that respect, but at the same time it can be unfit to eat. God made animals, birds and fish in a class good for human food and in another class unfit for humans to eat. The Bible calls one kind "clean" and the other kind "unclean."

This was known before the Flood. Noah knew what to do when he was told to take seven pairs of each kind of clean animals and birds into the ark along with one pair of each unclean kind. (Genesis 7:2-3.) The detailed knowledge of such things had been lost over the centuries that the Israelites had mingled with the heathen Egyptians, who had no interest in obeying God.

The same was true of the Ten Commandments. Adam knew what they were. So did Noah, Abraham and many others. At Mt. Sinai they were brought to the Israelites so they could know again what was God's will. To Israel went the responsibility of preserving the laws in writing and keeping pagan beliefs and rules from becoming mixed with them.

God gave a simple rule by which clean animals could be known from the unclean. If an animal chewed a cud and had parted hoofs, it was made to be eaten. (Leviticus 11:3-4 and Deuteronomy 14:6-8.) Cattle, as well as several other kinds of animals, take in their food without spending time to chew it enough. They later bring mouthfuls back up from their stomachs for more careful chewing. These re-chewed bits are called cuds.

The Bible also gives examples of animals not fit for food. The camel chews the cud, but doesn't have divided hoofs. They are slightly indented on the front, and with grooves on top, but not divided. The rabbit has paws with toes instead of hoofs. Cats, dogs and horses don't chew cuds.

Raccoons, squirrels and opossums are also unclean to eat. Pigs have divided hoofs, but don't chew cuds.

"You shall not eat swine or any other animals that do not part the hoof and chew the cud," God warned. (Leviticus 11:7-8; Deuteronomy 14:8.)

God Always Has Good Reasons

The Creator never does anything without a good reason. His mind is far superior to human minds, which are rarely able to understand divine decisions and actions. Nevertheless, man tries to figure out why God tells him to do certain things. And when he can't discover God's reasons, he generally decides obedience is unnecessary.

Man should obey for his own good, regardless of how little he understands. Only then is he blessed. Unhappily, millions have decided that such animals as pigs and rabbits are proper to eat, especially if God is thanked for them.

Now that more is known about animal anatomy, it is evident that certain animals have digestive systems that don't carry off as many poisons as do others. A hog digests its food in about three and a half hours. A cow requires twenty-four hours to do the same thing through two digestive processes screening out impurities that would otherwise pass into its flesh and milk.

The main reason any animal is unclean is that it wasn't made to be eaten by man. God made some animals for human food. Others were for work, for pets, for consuming waste products and for controlling the numbers of creatures. If man could have discerned which animals were unclean, there would have been no need for the Bible to inform him.

Water Creatures Fit for Food

God also gave a similar way of knowing what water creatures were to be used as food. To be clean, they must have two features -- fins and overlapping scales (which sometimes drop off with age). (Leviticus 11:9-12; Deuteronomy 14:9-10.)

Wide varieties of creatures are ordinarily considered great delicacies. Crabs and lobsters are acclaimed around the world as succulent delights, though they are nothing more than flavorful but unclean, spider-like crustaceans that feed mainly on decaying carcasses.

Other unclean denizens of the water include the frog, turtle, abalone, scallop, shrimp, shark, whale, eel, squid, various catfish, European turbot, sturgeon, lobster, octopus, clam and oyster. Most of these are thought of as wholesome and nutritious food by millions of people, including most of those who descend from the ten tribes of the House of Israel. Whale oil is also used in foods by many who do not know it is unfit for food. Almost all other common fish on the market are clean.

The human body has degenerated since Adam. Should man be surprised if he found that much of that degeneration has been due to centuries of consuming unclean creatures?

The Bible doesn't directly give a rule by which clean birds can be recognized. It simply lists all different kinds of those that are unclean. Outside of mentioning the quail, the dove, the pigeon and the sparrow, God doesn't specifically name the clean ones. (Leviticus 11:13-20; Deuteronomy 14:11-18.)

It is easy to learn which fowl are clean simply by noticing the characteristics of birds which are named as clean or unclean.

Studies of fowl have revealed some striking differences between the two kinds. Clean fowl have six unusual characteristics. One or more of these characteristics is lacking in unclean birds. A clean bird has a crop AND, second, a gizzard with a double lining which can easily be separated. Two such digestive organs are doubly helpful in changing its food into meat that is good for humans and insuring against poisonous waste matter going into its flesh.

Third, a clean bird does not prey upon other birds. Fourth, it does not devour food while flying. Fifth, its hind toe and middle front toe are both long. Sixth, when it stands on a perch, it spreads its toes so that three front ones are on one side of the perch and the hind toe on the opposite side. All unclean birds lack at least one of these characteristics. Clean birds have all these characteristics.

Clean fowl include the chicken, pheasant, peafowl, ptarmigan, guinea fowl, prairie chicken, pigeon, dove, partridge, grouse, quail, turkey, duck, goose, all song birds and the teal and swan. (The swan is named in the King James or Authorized Version as being unclean, but this is a mistranslation. The water hen should be mentioned instead.)

Unclean birds include the eagle, vulture, kite, buzzard, osprey, raven, crow, magpie, ostrich, owl, hawk, cormorant, sea gull, water hen, sandpiper, plover, pelican, stork, coot, heron, bittern, crane, grebe, rail, roadrunner, woodpecker, penguin, parrot, albatross and bat.

God also named other creatures that are to be regarded as unclean and detestable. (Leviticus 11:20-23.) They are the weasel, mouse, lizard, snail, mole, snake and worm. Such were to be considered so detestable that anything their dead bodies touched, such as food or dishes was to be regarded as unfit for use until thoroughly washed. (Verses 24-43)

"Do not defile yourself with these unclean creatures," God warned. "Keep yourselves clean and sacred, so that you will be more acceptable to your holy God." (Verses 44-47)

Regardless of what God said, millions who claim to be faithful, obedient Christians feel anything with a high vitamin content must be good for them. They argue mistakenly that the laws of clean and unclean food, inspired by God for all people for all time, were merely "old Jewish laws" "nailed to the cross" at Christ's death (Christ was impaled on a stake).

Some People Lust for Forbidden Food

To justify their eating unclean foods, many of these people turn to the fourth chapter of I Timothy, and point with triumph to the fourth and fifth verses, wherein Paul said:

"For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer" (RSV).

Taken out of its context, this statement would probably cause the reader to conclude that either Paul didn't agree with God or that God has changed His mind and favors the eating of the filthiest of fare as long as God's blessing is asked on it. But Paul didn't disagree with God, who never changes. (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8.) Neither do His laws. (Matthew 5:17-18.)

To understand I Timothy 4:4-5, one must read from the beginning of the chapter. Paul was referring to religious extremists who fall away from the truth or never quite get to it. They are the kind such as are against marriage and certain clean foods. The word EVERYTHING in the fourth verse refers to every creature "consecrated by the word of God." Only clean creatures were consecrated or approved as fit for human food.

Picking certain words and phrases out of the Bible and adding them together to try to prove untruths is an ancient trick. Such deceit can generally be uncovered by comparing scriptures

and by carefully reading whole chapters to find exact meanings of certain words, phrases and sentences.

God Did Not Cleanse the Unclean Creatures

Another example of misunderstanding is based on Acts 10:9-16. If one reads only those verses the impression is conveyed that Peter was told that God had cleansed unclean creatures, and that Peter should not hesitate to eat them. But verse 17 shows that Peter knew God did not mean for him to eat unclean meat. Peter noticed that no animal's nature had been changed; they were still unclean! So he began to wonder what the vision did mean! He did not jump to a hasty conclusion.

Verses 28 and 29 show that the vision was for pointing out that Peter should not regard any MAN, regardless of nationality, as common or unclean if he seeks to live rightly.

No matter what is believed about clean and unclean creatures, the two kinds still exist. The nature of unclean animals has not changed. They are the same today as they were before the Flood, in Moses' day and in Peter's time. Those who obey the Creator in these matters receive definite blessings.

Chapter 34

The Plan of Salvation

GOD'S great plan for man's future has to do with salvation -- being spared from sin and death and being given the gift of eternal life. Moses wanted to know about this. God explained it to him so that he could pass on the vital information to the Israelites.

Why Man Needs Salvation

If there were no sin, man wouldn't have to be saved from it. People who say they don't need salvation don't know what sin is or what eternal life means. Man should know he is mortal, subject to death, and needs the Spirit of God as a gift to make it possible to live forever. God made this plain to Moses about the time the tabernacle was erected. Most of the book of Leviticus, written by Moses, has to do with the rules meant to keep Israel the wisest and cleanest nation on Earth. God also made known the rituals required to teach the Israelites the need of a Saviour and the habit of obedience. These temporary ceremonies are called "the works of the law" in the New Testament. They ceased to be needed at Jesus' death.

The book of Leviticus makes it obvious that God's laws, which explain right from wrong, are helpful in making all people much happier. But down through time many religions have sprung up who ignore those rules by labeling them "Jewish laws," and referring to Leviticus as an account of the ancient "laws of Moses."

Many people regard the words LAW, JEW, MOSES and ISRAELITE with contempt. Their religious leaders unknowingly have either failed to teach them the truth or have deliberately withheld the truth from them. Those who have brought the truth, including Jesus Christ have been slain or ridiculed because the truth they announced conflicted with the beliefs of many religious sects. Men have always hated those with God's truth. (Mat. 23:29-35.) Those who sneer at the Commandments given to Israel are inviting on themselves the miserable results of sin.

What's Wrong with God's Laws?

There is nothing wrong with the laws given to the Israelites through Moses. Here are some of them. Because they were broken, Jesus had to die.

Having anything to do with idols or foreign gods is forbidden. (Leviticus 19:4.)

No marking, such as tattooing, is to be done on the body. (Leviticus 19:28.)

There are to be no evil sexual practices. (Leviticus 18)

No one is to marry anyone to whom he or she is closely related. (Leviticus 18:6.)

Pagan holidays are not to be observed. (Leviticus 20:1-5.)

No interest is to be charged in giving financial help to an Israelite or anyone journeying with the Israelites. (Leviticus 25:35-37.)

No one is to go to a fortune teller or medium for advice. No one is to have anything to do with a wizard or sorcerer or anyone in contact with demons. (Leviticus 20:6.)

God reminded Moses that the Israelites, who had been influenced for centuries by the Egyptians, should refrain from consuming blood in their meat. (Leviticus 17:12-13.) He made it plain that the life of all flesh is in the blood. "Anyone who kills or catches any beast or fowl for food must thoroughly bleed the creature and bury the blood. No one is to eat any creature that dies of itself or is killed by other beasts." (Verse 15, first part)

The only use of blood was as an atonement, by sacrifice, to remind Israel of their human sins and of the death of Jesus Christ as Saviour.

Plan of Salvation Revealed

Israel's God told Moses the Plan of Salvation for mankind was so important He would require the people to observe certain annual holy days as reminders. He had already given in Egypt a time to keep Passover, which foreshadowed the death of the Messiah to pay for sin. The Feast of Unleavened Bread, which followed, symbolized putting away sin out of one's life. Another special time, celebrated when Israel's God spoke the Law at Sinai, was the Feast of Firstfruits or Pentecost. This feast signified that only a few are being called to salvation now. They are the firstfruits of God's spiritual harvest. Then came the Feast of Trumpets, foretelling God's intervention in world affairs. The Day of Atonement, or harmony, followed. It was ordained by the Creator to fall on the tenth day of the seventh month, Tishri. That is in September or October of the man-made Roman calendar, which will soon be replaced by God's correct calendar. God reckons days from sundown to sundown, so this whole day was to start at sundown on the ninth of Tishri and end at sundown of the tenth. During those twenty-four hours the people weren't to work or consume food in solid or liquid form, although very young children could nurse and some people with health issues could eat and drink. (Leviticus 23:26-32.)

It was the only day of the year on which the high priest was to enter the inner room of the tabernacle on ceremonial business. God told Moses to warn Aaron that if Aaron otherwise came into the room without God's permission, he would lose his life in the way his sons had lost theirs.

In performing his duties as high priest, Aaron ordinarily dressed in the elegant garments designed by the Creator. But on the Day of Atonement he was to be especially clean bodily and dressed in spotless linen clothing designating simplicity and humility rather than high office. Only then could he approach God in the inner room where the ark and mercy seat were placed. (Leviticus 16)

The special ceremonies that day were to make it clear to the people that sinners must come to God through His high priest. The human high priests of the family of Aaron typified the coming Saviour who would die to forgive sins. Today, our high priest and Saviour is Christ. Aaron was first to sacrifice a bullock or young ox for himself and his family as a sin offering. He was to sprinkle some live coals from the altar with incense. Then they were to be taken to the Holy of Holies so that the sweetened smoke would waft over the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. If he failed to carry this out properly, he would be subject to death. (Leviticus 16:12- 13)

He also was to take some of the bullock's blood into the inner room to sprinkle it on and before the mercy seat as an act of atonement for himself, his family and the other priests. Having his sins forgiven, he would qualify to ask God to forgive the sins of all Israel. The priests and all the Israelites were to be in a repentant state of mind, not only this day but all year, even if they were not promised the Holy Spirit and eternal life.

The high priest was then to be presented with two goats. One was to be placed on his right and the other on his left. He was to take a bowl in which there were two identical coin-like emblems called lots. One was marked "FOR GOD" and the other "for AZAZEL," one of Satan's names. In many Bibles the word Azazel is mistranslated SCAPEGOAT. Being guilty of sin, Satan is no scapegoat.

After the bowl was shaken, Aaron was to put each of the lots on a goat. The goat on which the "FOR GOD" lot happened (by God's choosing) to be placed was the one to be used for a sin offering for the people. It represented Christ's sacrifice to reconcile the world to God. The goat's blood was to be sprinkled before and upon the mercy seat as atonement for all the sins Israel had committed. (Leviticus 16:15-19.)

On returning to the court, Aaron was to confess the sins of Israel over the goat marked "FOR AZAZEL." Thus the wrongdoings of the Israelites that were motivated by Satan were to be heaped on the animal representing Satan, the author of sin. The goat representing Satan was to be led into the desert to portray the banishment of Satan, who will be removed from mankind when Christ returns to make the world at one with God. (Revelation 20:1-3.) The person who took the goat was to wash his clothing and bathe before returning to camp. (Leviticus 16:20-22, 26.)

After these ceremonies Aaron was to exchange his special linen clothing for his ornate priestly garments, and give a personal burnt offering of a ram and another for the people. (Verses 23 and 24)

All went well in carrying out these things. In spite of their weaknesses, the Israelites became aware that they were the only people to whom God was revealing His plan pictured by the holy days. In choosing them to preserve His truth, He was mercifully willing to forgive their sins even though He did not promise them eternal life at that time.

The Day of Atonement became an annual Sabbath to be observed forever by all people (Leviticus 23:31), but the sacrificial acts of the priests were required only until Christ came to die for the sins of the world.

No More Need of Sacrifices

The sacrificing of animals on that day was no longer necessary after Jesus Christ was sacrificed, as the Lamb of God to die for the sins of this world. (Hebrews 10:4, 10-12, 18) When God provided as our Passover Jesus Christ, there ceased to be any need to sacrifice animals as a reminder of sin. (Hebrews 10:3.)

The Day of Atonement remains, however, a holy period of resting and fasting, but most church authorities ignore it. They claim that it is an ancient Jewish day. If one asks who the Jews were, one would ordinarily be told that they were a people known as Israelites who came out of Egypt under Moses' leadership.

That answer wouldn't be very factual. Most people have never thought about who the "lost" ten tribes of Israel might be or where they went after their nation was taken captive into the ancient land of Assyria, or where they are now. God purposely hid their identity until these latter days. Yet it was to these people, as well as to the Jews, that God commanded the keeping of the seven annual festivals!

These ten tribes can at last be identified!

The matter is crystal-clear to millions who have found the truth in their Bibles. However, religious groups in general refuse to recognize this discovery because it doesn't fit with what they have taught for so long.

For centuries there has been an erroneous belief that the Earth has two kinds of people – Jews and Gentiles. They are actually ISRAELITES and Gentiles. The Jews are of Judah, only one of Israel's twelve tribes. Israelites of today, which include peoples of Northwestern Europe and their descendants in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, should be doing the things God commanded them to do, and converted Gentiles should be obedient in the same way.

For the genuine Christian, the Day of Atonement pictures a better era not far away, when sin will be placed on the one who originated it. That is Satan. Not until then will man come into true accord with his Creator. That time is only a few years away. Meanwhile, many things must occur. Even now false prophets are proclaiming Christ has already arrived or is about to arrive at any moment. They don't know God's timetable and His Plan of Salvation because these don't keep the holy days.

Seven Steps to Plan of Salvation

In summary, the seven steps in God's Plan are pictured by seven special holy periods of time. These special days are Passover, the Days of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, Festival of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the Festival of Tabernacles, and the Last Great Day. People who have forgotten these days have forgotten the TRUE PLAN of Salvation which these days picture. They have come to believe in a COUNTERFEIT plan!

We have already learned the meaning of Passover when we read about the Exodus.

The Days of Unleavened Bread picture putting sin out of our lives. (I Corinthians 5:7-8.) Leaven is a type of sin. A wave sheaf offering was made during the Days of Unleavened Bread after the Israelites reached the land God had promised them. (Leviticus 23:10-11.) This sheaf of grain pictured the ascended Christ being accepted by God the Father as the perfect sacrifice and as the very first of the firstfruits from the dead. (Compare John 20:17 with Matthew 28:9.) Very few people know that Christ ascended to Heaven and returned that same day.

On the fiftieth day after the resurrection, always on a Sunday in May or June on the calendar in use by today's world, Pentecost is to be observed. Even the Apostles were keeping it after the law of Moses ceased to be needful. (Acts 2:1) This day points to the time when the Holy Spirit was first made available to mankind since Eden. It could not come until after Christ's death, except for those few prophets, judges, priests and kings whom God specially called. This festival also points to the time of the FIRST HARVEST of human beings, 144,000 -- to be reaped at the return of Christ. Those who have forgotten this day have forgotten that this is only the time of the first harvest.

The Festival of Trumpets, another day of rest, is to be observed on the first day of the seventh month, Tishri, in the fall. (Leviticus 23:23-25.) It pictures the time mentioned in the book of Revelation when all seven trumpets will sound. At the blowing of the seventh trumpet, Christ will return (on the day of Pentecost) to meet in the air those who will be resurrected to rule with Him on Earth. (Revelation 11:15-17; I Corinthians 15:52) Not every nation will give in at the very hour Christ arrives, but every nation and government will soon be made aware that there is no choice but to accept Christ's perfect, loving rule. (Zechariah 14:16-19.)

Next is the Day of Atonement. It pictures Satan imprisoned, no longer deceiving the world, for 1,000 years. Then comes the final time of harvest of human beings pictured by the Festival of Tabernacles.

The Festival of Tabernacles, beginning on the fifteenth day of the seventh month (sometime in September or October), is ordained to last for seven days. It is a time God's people come together to worship Him after the summer crops are harvested. The first day was (and still is) a holy day of rest. This festival foreshadows the thousand-year period when Christ and the resurrected Saints will rule the Earth. (Revelation 5:10; 20:4, 6.) People such as Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, dead and with no knowledge of anything over many centuries, will be among those resurrected in the first resurrection to eternal life. They will rule with Christ in the Millennium. (Acts 2:34-35; Hebrews 11.) Millions not yet born will be saved in the great spiritual harvest during the Millennium when Satan isn't around to deceive them.

After the seven days, there follows another special holy day of rest.

Today most people never think of observing the eighth, or Last Great Day, as a time of rest, not realizing that it is to commemorate the period after the Millennium when millions who have died in the past who have not had any opportunity to understand the truth, will be brought to physical life in the second resurrection and be given their first opportunity to come to the knowledge of salvation. Just think of the joy to be experienced by those who never before heard or knew the truth. Those who do overcome will eventually join the joyous ranks of the immortal saints who will have met Christ at His Second Coming more than a thousand years before! (Revelation 20:11-15; Matthew 12:42; Isaiah 65:19-25)

Every human being who has ever lived or ever will live, will have the opportunity of learning God's great Plan. (II Peter 3:9; I Timothy 2:4.) God will deal justly with everyone. Each person (Romans 2:11) will have a full understanding of the right way and must make his own decision as to whether he will obey God. (Hebrews 8:11.) Some have already had their one and only opportunity today. There is no second chance.

Finally, the Earth will be enveloped in a fire that will consume everything on its surface. Even the seas will be completely evaporated by the intense heat. (II Peter 3:10-12; Revelation 21:1.)

Then God will come down from heaven in His gigantic holy city, which will descend to Earth. Many doubt Bible statements about this jewel-like city. From then on this mammoth city will be the headquarters and dwelling place of God and His children -- now spirit beings -- who will help Him rule the universe forever. (Revelation 21:2-8.)

Chapter 35

"Choose You This Day"

MAN was put on earth with the power to choose between good and evil. No mere animal has such power -- or such a great responsibility to make the right choice.

But Man has to be told what is good and what is evil. God has to reveal it. That is why, again and again, God told Israel, generally through Moses, that the people must observe all the laws He had given them if they are to do good. He promised them many wonderful things if they would faithfully keep the rules given to them for their own happiness and security.

What God Has Promised

"If you will do as I have directed," God said, "many worthwhile rewards shall come to you. You shall receive plenty of rain. The land you are coming to shall yield such large crops that

your grain harvest shall last till the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last till it's time again to plant grain.

"You shall have plenty to eat. I will drive all evil beasts out of your land. You shall be safe from your enemies. If a hundred of them try to attack you, it will require only five of you to chase them away. If ten thousand soldiers come at you, it will take only a hundred of you to cause them to turn and flee for their lives!

"I will respect you. I will cause you to have many healthy children and grow into a great nation. I will be pleased to continue dwelling among you." (Leviticus 26:3-9.)

What else could any people ask for? Good health, plenty of good food, safety from enemies, safety from any evil creatures, good weather and peace of mind for obeying God -- all these could be theirs on and on into the future. What would any nation give right now in these troubled times to have all these good things?

Then God went on to relate the terrible things that would come on the Israelites if they disobeyed.

Why Wrong Living Brings Hardship

"If you ignore my rules," God told them, "and if you refuse to live by them and break the agreement we have made, then your future shall be one of misery, hardship and despair.

"You shall become full of fears and constant worries. Your enemies shall kill you in great numbers. They shall win many battles and take over your homes and the crops you have sown. Your feeling of dread and danger shall be so great that you shall flee in fright even when no one is after you.

"If you still refuse to listen to me after all this punishment, then I will bring many other awful things upon you. I will send severe famines and horrible plagues. At the same time, your enemies will trouble you more and more.

"I will send ferocious wild beasts to destroy your livestock and eat up your children. So great shall be your fear of evil things to come on you, that you shall even be afraid to venture out on the nearest roads or trails." (Leviticus 26:14-22.) Then God continued:

"If these things fail to convince you that I mean what I say, and if you continue to refuse to live by the laws that are best for you, then I will punish you even more severely!

"Your enemies shall completely conquer you. I will send terrible diseases on you. They shall spread among you when you gather together in your cities. Your supply of food shall dwindle down and down until you become aware that you are facing starvation!

"If you still feel that your ways are better than mine, your food shall become so scarce that some of you shall roast and eat your own children!" (Verses 23-29)

Such a prediction probably seemed absurd to the Israelites, but it came true in Samaria and in Jerusalem many years later when their enemies cut them off from their food supplies.

What Idolatry Is

God also foretold what would happen if the people insisted on secretly worshipping ridiculous objects regarded as having miraculous powers.

The foolish respect and adoration of certain lifeless objects isn't something done only by people considered primitive and ignorant. Even in civilized nations today there are many who prize such articles as coins, rabbits' feet, crosses, statues, images, insignia and such which are believed to bring "good luck" or harbor some unusual influence. This is a form of silly idolatry in which the first two Commandments are being broken. Having undue regard and desire for wealth, prestige, influence and pleasure -- that is, they mean more than respect for the Creator -- is also idolatry in God's sight.

God had this to say to the Israelites concerning idols: "I will destroy them and the places in which you worship them. I will wipe out your cities and make your fields barren. Your families, tribes and nations shall be scattered as slaves to heathen nations." (Leviticus 26:30-33.) "But to those who realize they have sinned, and become humble and wise enough to admit it, I will be merciful."

One would think that these wonderful promises and stern warnings would have caused the Israelites to make the right decisions for the future. Some were inspired to better living, but what most of them did afterward is an unhappy story that will come later, proving that God means what He says He will do.

Resentment Leads to Anger

There was a man living among the Israelites whose father was an Egyptian, and whose mother was an Israelite of the tribe of Dan. Because he was half Egyptian, he was regarded by some as an unwelcome outsider.

One day this man started to pitch his tent in a desirable spot amid the tents of the tribe of Dan. An Israelite saw what he was doing, and angrily strode up to him. "Who told you to take the best tent site?" the Israelite indignantly asked.

The Egyptian-Israelite was greatly upset by those remarks. He stopped what he was doing and in loud tones told the critical Israelite what he thought of him.

In his mounting rage he went on to yell out some terrible things about God. He cursed his Creator and called Him vile and awful names. Some of the Israelites who witnessed the scene were hardened men to whom profane language was commonplace. But such foul profanity aroused them to seize the offender and bring him before Moses.

Witnesses went with the officers to tell what had happened, and to ask what punishment should be given to one who had so loudly mocked and reviled the Creator.

"Hold the man for now," Moses instructed them, "I must find out from God what should be done with him." (Leviticus 24:10-12.)

Why God Required Capital Punishment

"This man who has cursed his Creator and others so spitefully is unfit to live," God told Moses. "If he continues to live he will cause others to sin and make themselves and their neighbors miserable. Take him to a place far outside the camps where witnesses to his profanity and hatred must cast heavy stones on the curser until he is dead!"

Moses passed on these instructions to the people, who did as God commanded. The Egyptian-Israelite died soon afterward. (Verses 13-23)

The penalty of death imposed swiftly after a crime probably seems harsh and unjust treatment to some readers. Some might even think of God as a stern monster, eager to see people suffer for even the slightest reason.

A careful reading of the whole Bible will bring out the fact that, rather than being cruel, God is far more merciful, just, patient and forgiving than any human being. If He were like you or me, He would have become so disgusted with mankind that He would have blasted every one out of existence many centuries ago.

One of the judgments given to Israel was that anyone who cursed his parents should be subject to death. If breaking the Fifth Commandment is thus punishable, the punishment could be no less for one who curses God, the Creator of all parents.

God's judgments are just, but humans try to substitute lesser ones. A person guilty in God's sight isn't overlooked. The only hope of escaping punishment is through Jesus Christ, our Passover who died for man's sins. Sinners who feel very sorry for their wrong deeds, call on God for forgiveness and strive to live according to God's laws, can look forward to a bright future.

Those who see others doing wrong and seemingly avoiding punishment should never feel envious. Why feel envious of those who will eventually be punished? Punishment is certain unless there is repentance. (Ps. 37)

Moses Has Visitors

Perhaps you will recall that Moses was raised and educated in the palaces of Egypt, but that he later fled from there and went eastward to the land of Midian, where he became a herder of sheep. While he lived there he started writing the first book of the Bible. There, too, he was married to Zipporah, daughter of a priest named Jethro, the man for whom he worked. Two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, were born to Moses and Zipporah. (Exodus 2:21-22; 3:1;18:1-4) When Moses, at God's command, set out to return to Egypt, he took his family with him. (Exodus 4:20.) However, Moses later decided there were good reasons not to take his family, and he sent the three back to stay with Jethro.

Months had passed since Moses had seen his family. One day a stranger rode into camp – this was shortly before all the events at Mt. Sinai we have been reading about. He told alert guards who quickly surrounded him that he had a message for Moses. He was escorted to Moses' tent after the guards made certain he wasn't armed.

Moses was so pleased to hear of the approaching caravan of his father-in-law that he decided to go back with the messenger. Some of his officers went along. They found Jethro's tents pitched only a few miles from the camps of the Israelites.

Moses was happy to again be with his wife and two young sons. He greatly enjoyed a visit with them inside Jethro's tents. (Exodus 18:1-7.) Afterward, he had a long talk with Jethro, who was aware of the flight of the Israelites from Egypt but who was surprised to learn that his son-in-law had taken such a prominent part in the matter. Jethro was highly interested to hear from Moses all about the plagues, the miracles, the parting of the Red Sea, and the manner in which God had provided for the people.

Jethro was of a priesthood family that served God among the Midianites who descended from Abraham. Assured by Moses that he would be welcome, Jethro gave orders for the tents to be taken down and packed. Accompanied by Moses and the Israelite aides, the caravan moved on and into the camps of Israel.

Later, Jethro made a burnt offering and sacrifices to God. As a priest, he had an important part in the ceremonies. Afterward, Aaron and Moses and the elders joined him in a feast. (Exodus 18:12.)

Jethro Sees Moses in Trouble

Early next morning, when Jethro came out of his tent, he was puzzled to see a crowd in the middle of which Moses sat, listening to some of the people talking intently to him.

"Moses often sits there till sundown judging those who are having trouble with their neighbors," an officer explained to Jethro.

Jethro slowly shook his head, but said nothing about the matter until that evening when he could again visit the weary Moses.

"I am surprised," Jethro told Moses, "that you try just by yourself to hear all the cases of the people. See how tired you are now! If you continue in this manner, you will wear yourself down till you will be far from the healthy person you should be in God's service. Besides, the long lines of people become weary waiting for you to get around to them.

"Let me suggest something," Jethro continued, moving his tent cushion closer to Moses. "Surely there are many hundreds of capable men among the tribes -- men who have the eagerness and time to help you in this thing. Why not try to seek out a number of honest, unselfish, fair-minded men of good judgment? Place the best of these men as judges over groups of a thousand. Place men of lesser ability over groups of a hundred, and still others over groups of fifty and groups of ten.

"If a judge over ten people doesn't have the wisdom to decide a case, let him go to the judge of fifty who is over him. If the judge over fifty fails, let him go to the judge over a hundred. If even the judge over a thousand can't decide a case, let it be brought to you. Thus a great part of your task of judging could be on the shoulders of others, because surely most of the lesser problems could be judged or solved by other men whom you have instructed in God's ways of justice and fair conduct."

Coming from a wise and devoted priest of God, this advice seemed to have much weight. It occurred then and there to Moses that God was suggesting this through his father-in-law, using human agencies as God has always done to such a great extent. (Exodus 18:13-23.)

"I believe God would have me do as you say," Moses declared. "Tomorrow morning I shall send out officers to summon the best leaders, from whom I can choose the kind of men who can help me!" To them God imparted His Spirit even though it was not the time for the Israelites in general to receive the Holy Spirit and be converted.

In the days that followed, Jethro's suggestion worked out well. It was a great relief to Moses, who couldn't have carried on and on with such a heavy load unless God had imbued him with tremendous, superhuman vitality. (Verses 24-26)

Although Moses wanted Jethro to go on with the Israelites, Jethro felt that he could be of greater service by returning to his people. Moses was sad when Jethro's caravan departed, but he was thankful for the advice and the joy that had come to him. (Verse 27)

Chapter 36

Israel Breaks Camp

A month had passed from the time Moses had the tabernacle built and put into operation. It was a year since the Exodus. God informed Moses that it was time to find out how many males of twenty years and older were among the Israelites. (Exodus 40:17; Numbers 1:1-3.)

The First Census

It was necessary to have accurate record of the people so that order could be maintained, especially when the people broke camp.

Accordingly, all males of twenty years and older were required to register at certain points, and to give information about themselves and their families. (Numbers 1:17-19.) This census wasn't to include strangers, men of the tribe of Levi, or any who were too old to go into battle in case the Israelites had to wage war against attacking armies. (Numbers 1:45, 47.)

When all were registered and their numbers added, the able-bodied male Israelites amounted to 603,550. (Numbers 1:45-46.) This was quite an increase over the seventy males who had gone down into Egypt when Joseph was ruler. Together with women, children, strangers and the tribe of Levi, there were at least 6 million people compactly camped near Mt. Sinai! Besides, there were many tens of thousands of animals to feed. So much food and water were required that there had to be special order and control by God's leadership through Moses.

Of the twelve tribes, Judah was the largest with 74,600 men. (Numbers 1:26-27.) It is today one of the smaller. The smallest tribe numbered at that time was Manasseh, with 32,200 men, but the tribe multiplied rapidly in later years and is today one of the largest! In these last days, Manasseh -- whose descendants are the stock that founded the United States of America -- has become the most powerful nation on Earth. Yet it is just one of the ten tribes of the "lost" House of Israel, which can no longer be considered as "lost." Nevertheless, there are many self-styled authorities who are struggling to keep the knowledge about the ten tribes

hidden forever because true knowledge of them doesn't fit in with their narrow, erroneous doctrines. God said that the identity of the ten tribes would be made clear near the time of the end. It has long since been made clear to those who study the evidence with a desire to understand. Without that knowledge, one can't understand very much of the Bible or of God's great plan of salvation for the nations.

God Requires Order

The census having been completed, Moses and Aaron were instructed by God concerning the lay-out of the camps of the various tribes. Up to that time there was fair order, but God wanted precise order and arrangement so that from that time on there would be proper system and control whenever the people camped. (Numbers 2)

Although the tribe of Levi wasn't included in the census that had just been taken, it was numbered later by God's order. Males were counted from a month old and upward, and were found to number exactly 22,000. (Numbers 3:39)

Specific and definite duties were assigned to the various families of the Levites. Everyone learned what he was to do. God had planned all of it so that there wouldn't be any confusion. (Numbers 3:5-38; 4:4-33.)

God dislikes confusion. (I Corinthians 14:33.) That means that everything our Creator does is carefully thought out, systematic, orderly, true and perfect. He doesn't like half-truths, disorder, conflict, theories, guesswork, false doctrines, lies or propaganda. God has nothing to do with today's religious confusion except to draw out from this confused world the individuals who are zealously seeking the truth.

Before Israel left Sinai, God also gave them the order in which the various tribes were to break camp and spread out in their vast caravan on the move toward Canaan. (Numbers 10:11-28.)

Meanwhile, there were other necessary instructions for that day from God. All unclean people -- those with leprosy and other contagious diseases and those exposed to dead bodies -- were to be separated within the camp or put far outside the camp to stay for various periods. (Numbers 5:1-4; Leviticus 13:1-8; 15:1-13; 21:1-3.) This was not only a health measure for the good of the people. God didn't want unclean persons existing so close to the holy area in which He was to dwell with the Israelites. These measures were necessary before the coming of the Holy Spirit. Cleanliness outside was to teach the people the need of God's power to clean the human being from within through the Holy Spirit.

At this same time God also made plain certain rules for those who were not Levites, but who wished to be set apart for a time of special service to God. Israelites who wanted to do this were called nazirites. They are not to be confused with the Levites. God honored the intentions of those individuals who wished to take nazirite vows and blessed them for their zeal.

During the time people were nazirites they (men or women) weren't to shave or cut their hair. They weren't to touch any dead body. They weren't to consume any wine. Neither were they to drink grape juice. Grapes, either fresh or dried, weren't to be eaten. (Numbers 6:1-8) This was a SIGN of their special service.

Christ Was Not a Nazarite

Many people have believed that Jesus Christ was a nazarite because he was raised in Nazareth, a town in the district of Galilee about seventy miles north of Jerusalem. This is not true. People who come from or who are in Nazareth are called Nazarenes. They aren't nazarites unless they have taken the nazarite vow. Christ was not a nazarite. He drank wine. (Matthew 11:19.) If He had been a nazarite He could not have drunk wine without sinning.

Some who believe Jesus was a nazarite mistakenly claim that the wine Jesus drank was grape juice -- but even grape juice was forbidden to nazarites!

Because of assuming that Christ was a nazarite, many people have believed that He had long hair flowing down to his shoulders. Christ didn't have long hair! By-gone pagan artists, trying to make Jesus look pious, gave him a sick, sad, effeminate appearance, and even went so far as to add long hair in their vain imagination.

Inasmuch as Christ was a hard-working carpenter who ate only clean foods and observed the laws of good health, we know he was a very masculine fellow with physical strength and endurance. Because he loved all people, he was a sociable, friendly, cheerful person who was thoughtful of others and courteous at all times. What matters most, however, is what Christ is like now. Hebrews 1:2-4 and Revelation 1:12-16 tell us of Christ's present power and appearance.

Transporting the Tabernacle

One morning Moses was called out of his tent to see an unusually large crowd slowly approaching the tabernacle from a distance. But it wasn't the crowd that commanded his attention.

Six covered wagons, each drawn by two oxen, stood between the crowd and the tabernacle! "These are gifts from the heads of the twelve tribes," an officer explained. "They're being offered to help carry the equipment of the tabernacle." (Numbers 7:1-3)

Moses was a little puzzled as to whether or not he should accept the wagons for that purpose. He knew that the ark, for one thing, was to be carried on the shoulders of men, but God hadn't yet made it known how most of the heavy equipment would be moved.

Later, back inside his tent, Moses quickly knelt in prayer to ask God what should be done.

"Accept the gifts they have offered," God answered. "Give the wagons to the Levites to use. This is as I have planned it to be." (Numbers 7:4-5.)

Moses was relieved to hear this from God, and he was happy to realize that the gifts from the Israelite princes were of their own idea and free will.

After donning his best attire, Moses went out to the waiting princes of the twelve tribes. He happily accepted the wagons and the oxen, and turned them over to Aaron so that they could be put into special use by the Levites. (Verses 6-8)

The wagons and the oxen weren't the only gifts from the heads of the Israelite tribes. So many other things were brought in that the prince of each tribe was assigned a particular day in which to present his gifts and make his offerings. (Verses 10-11)

The total from all the tribes amounted to twelve large silver dishes in which to knead dough for the shewbread, twelve deep silver bowls (all of them filled with fine flour mixed with oil) for receiving blood for sacrifices, twelve golden spoons filled with incense, twelve kids, thirty-six bullocks, seventy-two rams, sixty male goats and seventy-two lambs. (Numbers 7:12-23, 84-88.)

After the tribes had finished giving these things, Moses went into the tabernacle to thank God for what so many people had contributed. Thereupon a voice spoke out of the mercy seat. It was God's voice directing Moses to tell Aaron concerning matters having to do with the tabernacle and the Levites. (Numbers 7:89; 8:1-2.)

The instructions included those touching on the Passover. The Passover is always to be observed on the fourteenth day of the first month, Nisan. But for those away on a journey, those who for any reason are unable to keep it on that date, the Passover is to be observed on the fourteenth day of the SECOND month, Iyar. (Numbers 9:9-12.)

This also applies to the New Testament Passover memorial to be observed by God's people today, as recorded in Matthew 26:26-28. Those who for some special reason can't observe the New Testament Passover (with unleavened bread and wine as a memorial of Christ's death) on the original date, should make every effort to observe it exactly a month later according to God's calendar.

The need for the sacrifice of the paschal lamb ceased at Christ's death for He was the Lamb of God offered for the sins of the world.

God also instructed that two long trumpets of solid silver should be made for use in contacting the people. The blowing of only one trumpet was to summon the heads of the tribes for a meeting. The blowing of both trumpets was either to call for a solemn assembly of all the people or was the signal to move out of camp. They were also to be blown in such varying manners that the hearers would instantly recognize an alarm to prepare for war, happy occasions, solemn days, beginnings of months and times of offerings. (Numbers 10:1-10)

One might doubt that two trumpets, even large and long, could be heard by millions scattered over miles. But a horn of the type God wanted made, blown by a strong person of good lung capacity, could easily be heard for miles in the clear desert air in the vicinity of Mt. Sinai.

One morning shortly after the trumpets had been made and put into use, the Israelites came out of their tents to see that the cloud had moved away from the tabernacle during the night and was high in the sky!

It wasn't long afterward that the two silver trumpets, lustily blown by Aaron's two sons, blasted out the signal for the breaking of camp.

Israelites Resume the March

There was great excitement among the people. They had been encamped before Mt. Sinai for almost a year, and the signal had arrived to move on. The cloud had moved upward from the tabernacle. Men hurried to get their livestock and tents ready to move. Woodsmen and hunters rushed back from the mountains. Women worked feverishly to get the family belongings together. Excited at the thought of going somewhere, children ran happily about, but not to become lost or get in the way.

Meanwhile, men took down the tabernacle. They had been so well trained in this task that it was done in a remarkably short time. It was rather astonishing that two million people were ready to move so quickly on such short notice.

In accordance with God's orders, the first tribe to move out of camp was Judah. Others followed in the order given them. The Levites, carrying the tabernacle equipment, were spaced in two different areas among the other tribes. The tribe of Naphtali was the last to leave. (Numbers 10:11-28.)

A few hours later the mammoth caravan had disappeared through the mountain passes to the northeast, leaving the Sinai valley silent and lonely.

Among the strangers who had stayed with the Israelites at Sinai was Hobab, Jethro's son. This brother-in-law of Moses, along with a clan he headed, had joined them when he came with his father to visit Moses and bring Zipporah, Moses' wife. As a native of the desert, he had a keen knowledge of the desert. Moses therefore hoped that Hobab and his people would go along with the Israelites.

Hobab, who loved God and saw that God's people needed him, joined his clan to the tribe of Judah, which always led the way when the Israelite caravan moved through the wilderness. In this way his men could use their knowledge of the desert in choosing the best pathway for the Israelites to use in following the cloud and the pillar of fire. After the Israelites entered Palestine, Hobab and his relatives, the Kenites, settled down with the tribe of Judah, choosing for themselves a wilderness area that was similar to their old homeland. (Judges 1:16)

In any event, probably Moses wouldn't have pressed him to go with them if Moses could have foreseen that they weren't going to reach Canaan until 39 years later!

For three days the vast line of humanity and animals slowly struggled across the rocky plains and hillsides characteristic of that region. Moses uttered a public prayer for protection each time they started out and each time they camped. (Numbers 10:33-36.)

Complaining IS Rebellion

As usual, there were those who began to complain. By the end of the third day from Sinai, there were many who were loudly voicing their grievances to those about them.

"This is worse than slaving for the Egyptians!" they yelled. "We all should join together and demand less travel and more rest! If we try to keep this up, we shall all die!" Before Israelite officers could organize to quell the shouting, a peculiar thing happened. The pillar of fire, blazing in the sky above the ark, flared upward. The evening air felt as though it were suddenly charged with some tremendous force about to explode.

That is exactly what happened. Throughout the whole camp, as though they had come out of nowhere, were strange, sizzling bolts of fire. They hissed and streaked in all directions – many of them ploughing into the people who had just been shouting so loudly. (Numbers 11:1) It happened so suddenly that most of the people hardly had time to be frightened. But now they froze in alarm as they found themselves staring at the lifeless bodies of those who had complained!

God meant business! Complaining about how God directs His servants IS rebellion against the Government of God!

Chapter 37

Quail for the People

A CRY of horror and grief went up from the people of Israel. God's sudden, awful punishment reminded them of the manner in which the Creator had struck during the time of the Passover one year previously. Then the victims had been Egyptians. This time there also were Egyptians, because Egyptians who had come in the mixed multitude with the Israelites were in part to blame. But a large number of the offenders were now Israelites.

Israel Cries for Mercy

Because the shooting, exploding bolts of flame struck offenders in every part of all the camps, Moses was quickly aware of what was going on. Immediately, however, there was a rush of officers from all the camps to tell Moses what was taking place, and to inform him that the people were screaming for mercy and asking for Moses to pray to God to stop the fiery explosions. (Numbers 11:2)

When Moses learned that so many people had already been slain by the fire from God, he immediately went into his tent, fell on his knees before the Creator.

The deadly spurts of flame gradually disappeared after Moses' diligent prayer. Terrified people who had raced wildly about the camps eventually returned to their tents to count their dead.

Next day was a bitter one for the Israelites. Many bodies were buried in the shifting sands of the high desert country. God's wrath had such a deep effect on many of the people that they named the area Taberah, which meant "a burning."

But in spite of this terrible warning to complainers, many of the people continued to murmur about their conditions. Most of them were the strangers who were among the Israelites, but their bitterness spread throughout the camps like some awful, contagious diseases.

The main food of the people was still manna, a wonderful, energizing food direct from God. At Sinai, the gathering of manna wasn't much of a task, inasmuch as the people had plenty of time for doing it. But since leaving the Sinai valley, some felt that it was a burden to have to get up very early to gather the manna, and then start to travel. This, therefore, was one of the things the complainers began to be bitter about. Although those slain by God had been buried only a short time, manna became a subject loudly and sarcastically discussed by increasing thousands. The poisonous thought promoted by these complainers was that manna was a poor substitute for the food they had enjoyed in Egypt.

"Manna doesn't give enough strength for this tiring journey," was the unhappy comment from the grumblers. "What we need is meat!" (Numbers 11:4)

Mankind then, as now, was very prone to the power of suggestion. More and more Israelites who had the best of intentions fell victims to the influence of the lustful, untruthful remarks circulating about the camps. "Manna can't take the place of the food we had in Egypt," the whiners kept saying.

Such foolish remarks caused an increasing number of Israelites to doubt that manna was anything more than what was required to barely keep people alive. At the same time, the complainers kept reminding others of the wonderful foods they had enjoyed in the past.

"Remember the crisp, succulent cucumbers and the sweet, mellow, mouth-watering melons we liked so well in Egypt?" they asked of all who would listen. "If God can give us so much of this tiresome manna, why can't He also produce foods like those? Why are we denied simple, delicious vegetables like garlic and onions? Or even leeks, those plants with the unusually luscious flavor? We need such things to build our morale, and we need meat to build our strength!" (Numbers 11:5-6.)

Bitterness Grows

When reminded by his officers of the ill feeling that prevailed, Moses was distressed. He knew that some of the people would always complain, regardless of what the conditions were. But so much complaint, right on the heels of the mass slaying by God, pointed to nothing but growing trouble.

The bitter attitude grew by the hour. Officers came to Moses more frequently with reports that there was even wailing and crying by Israelites who felt that God was being unmerciful to them by denying them the foods they craved -- especially meat. A wave of self-pity and semi-hysteria seemed to be passing over all the camps.

Moses was sick with discouragement. He told his aides that he didn't wish to be disturbed for a while, and went into the inner part of his tent to pray.

"What have I done," he asked God, "to cause this trouble to come on me? How can I be a father to all these thousands of unruly people? Must I try to carry them, like babies, to the land You have promised them? How can I stop their growing demand for other kinds of food?"

"Do you feel," God asked Moses, "that this task I have given you is too great?"

"I only know," Moses replied, "that the wild demands of thousands of people are too much for me. I can't see any way of taking care of what they ask for, or of handling them while they are in such an extreme state of mind. If I fail to give them the foods they are demanding, they are likely to get entirely out of control. If You allow that to happen, then please take my life now. I don't want to be here to witness such a rebellion." (Numbers 11:10-15.)

"The people are overcome with false pity for themselves," God told Moses. "You must not be likewise. If you feel that your responsibility is too great, then choose seventy of the strongest leaders and most honorable men among the older men of Israel and have them come to the tabernacle. There I shall meet you, and shall give them the special understanding I have given you. They will then realize how you are being troubled by the people. They will help you by pointing out to the people that you are right in what you require of them, even though those requirements may at times seem harsh." (Verses 16-17)

"Will this cause the people to cease their complaining?" Moses asked God.

"No," God answered. "But from then on none of them can honestly say that I haven't given them fair warning for anything that may come because of their disobedience. Warn them to stop their complaining and prepare for a feast of flesh. Tell them that this feast won't last just one day, two days, five days or twenty days. Tell them it will last a whole month, and that they shall have so much flesh to eat that it will become sickening to them. Tell them that as they have complained so much because of not having anything but manna, they won't be able to hold the flesh on their stomachs."

"But how can you provide meat for over two millions people for a whole month?" Moses inquired. "Must all our flocks and herds be slaughtered to take care of the appetites of the people for flesh? Or do You have some way of bringing a huge amount of fish from the Red Sea?"

"Why do you seem to doubt that I have power to take care of these matters?" God inquired. "Go do as I have commanded, and you shall soon witness what I have planned." (Numbers 11:18-23.)

Moses at once told his officers to tell the people that God had been greatly moved by their complaints, and would send them so much flesh that they would wish they had never asked for it.

The news brought great excitement to nearly every camp. Many people ran from tent to tent, loudly and joyfully repeating what Moses' officers had told them. This, they imagined, was something to celebrate. Before long, musicians had gathered here and there, and there was singing and dancing in many areas.

Most of the celebrants were interested only in God's promising them meat for a whole month. Very few seemed to be concerned by His remark that they would regret asking for it.

Seventy Elders Chosen

Meanwhile, Moses chose the seventy elders who were the most capable, and called for them to meet before the tabernacle. After the group of carefully picked men had arrived, Moses went into the tabernacle and fell on his knees to await God's presence. It wasn't long before the cloud settled down over the tabernacle.

"From this moment on," God said to Moses, "the seventy men you have picked will have a special gift of understanding. They will have greater respect for Me. They will realize without any doubt that you are My chosen servant, and they will have greater respect for you. They will have a better attitude and more correct outlook on matters having to do with the people's reaching Canaan. They will have the ability to show at least some of the Israelites how wrong they are in complaining against you. Thus you won't feel that you are so alone in your struggle to keep the people obedient. They will receive the same spirit from Me that you have, Moses."

It happened just as God had foretold. The elders began to talk among themselves with great harmony and understanding. When Moses came out of the tabernacle to join them in hours of brotherly conversation, there was a most unusual spirit of harmony and wisdom. Later, when the elders went back to their various camps, their special understanding greatly enabled them to help the people in many matters. (Numbers 11:24-25.)

Two of the seventy elders chosen by Moses, Eldad and Medad, weren't able to get to the tabernacle. But they, as well as the others, were at the same time imbued with the special understanding that was a gift from God. Fired with inspiration, these two men walked out among the people and made moving remarks proving God's and Moses' authority.

"Why do you complain and why do you listen to those who complain?" they asked the people. "God is very displeased by what has been going on. Unless there is a great change of attitude soon among the people, many of you will die within a short time!"

A large crowd gathered around Eldad and Medad. Bystanders regarded the two with anything from mild interest to amazement as the two elders prophesied of things that had to do with God's future plan for the Israelites, and in such a manner that very few listeners failed to show the greatest respect for them. (Verse 26)

Months previously, when Moses had earnestly prayed for the Israelites to win in a long battle with attacking Amalekites, a young man by the name of Joshua had led the Israelites' army to battle while Aaron and Hur held up Moses' hands as Moses prayed. (Exodus 17:8-13.) This same young man happened to be present when another young man ran and told Moses that Eldad and Medad were speaking to the people. Joshua realized at once that the two couldn't have spoken so well and in such an informed manner without inspiration from some source.

This troubled Joshua. He felt that two men making such an impression on the people might cause the Israelites to seek a new leader.

"You should send men to stop them, sir!" Joshua warned. "Otherwise, they could cause many people to regard them as leaders, and this could cause trouble for you at this time when the people are showing so much disobedience."

Moses wasn't worried, however. He realized that this was a case of God having given Eldad and Medad special understanding along with the sixty-eight other elders who had been chosen to help bear a part of Moses' responsibility.

"Don't be concerned that they'll be any trouble to me," Moses told Joshua. "In fact, I wish every Israelite could be inspired with their God-given understanding of what it means to all of us to obey." (Numbers 11:27-30.)

The Quail Arrive

After the elders had returned to their camps and Moses had gone to his tent, a strong southwest wind came up. It increased to such velocity that the people began to be concerned about their tents being blown down. Most of them forgot about their tents, however, when they noticed a peculiar dark streak gradually growing larger on the southwest horizon. This strange sight caused great concern among the people. Some thought it was merely a low cloud or a bank of fog, though fog in that desert area would have been quite unusual.

Even Moses was puzzled when his attention was brought to it. But when he noticed an increasing number of birds flying swiftly to the northeast, he abruptly realized how God was about to supply the meat the Israelites had been demanding. He remembered how God had sent flocks of quails (Exodus 16:11-13) when the people had first complained about having to steadily eat manna.

"Have it announced to all the camps at once that God is now providing all the flesh for which the people have been begging." Moses instructed an aide. "Tell them that God isn't giving it to them to supply any need, but that He's giving it to them as a lesson of obedience they'll soon understand."

The dark cloud grew more swiftly. It was only a little while later that the sky became blackened with a tremendous flock of quails. Many of them flew only three or four feet above the ground. Many fell to the ground exhausted and ran about the ground, trying to get their tired bodies into the air again.

When the amazed Israelites realized that they were being set upon by such tasty fowl, they seized the nearest useful objects, such as sticks and spears and boards, and started beating low-flying birds to the ground, and striking those exhausted birds which scampered in all directions.

While some excitedly slaughtered birds, others hastily plucked them. In spite of the strong winds, the camps soon became alive with an unusually large number of fires over which quails were hastily roasted.

After months of existing mostly on manna, the Israelites were so excited because of receiving meat that they tore and bit and chewed at the flesh of the birds as though they had been starved. They took turns catching, roasting and eating, but it required many hours for all of them to get their fill of the roasted quail.

All that day the strong wind persisted, and flocks of quails passed over the camps continuously. The excited people flailed away at them, knocking the birds to the ground, snatching them up to swiftly prepare them for roasting or to pluck and salt them for eating later.

As sundown approached, it was expected that the wind would die down and that the birds – if they continued to pass over -- would manage to fly at higher altitudes. But the strong wind continued all night. And all night, by the light of bright campfires, the Israelites went on batting down all birds within reach.

Next morning the wind still hadn't abated. Flock after flock of quails skimmed over the camps. There were so many fowl that they were seen fifteen to twenty miles on both sides of the camp areas. The wind continued all that day, and hordes of birds with it. There seemed to be no end to them. By this time many people were still downing them, but not with the eagerness of the preceding day.

Near sundown the wind finally started to subside. The flocks of quails became smaller and smaller, until no more, even single stragglers, were seen to pass over.

Thousands of weary quail-catchers slumped upon their beds. Regardless of their obvious desire to get even more fowl than they could use, they were relieved when there were no more to try to get. After two days and one night of bird-bagging, the camps were full of thousands and thousands of tons of fowl. Besides the millions of quails already eaten, there were piles of them between tents, countless numbers strung up to dry and huge amounts being roasted, boiled, fried or barbecued.

Not everyone had tried his hand at bagging the quails because not all of the Israelites had lusted for meat. But there were more than a half-million able-bodied men in the camps, and few of them refrained from the sport of quail-catching. One can get some idea of the amount of fowl brought out of the sky by using the figure 500,000 -- the number of men who probably gathered the birds -- and multiplying it by the SMALLEST amount of birds bagged by anyone during the time the quails passed over the camps.

The taste of roasted, succulent quail flesh was a welcome treat to the Israelites. But perhaps it wasn't quite as wonderful as many had expected. When one builds up a lustful, consuming desire for something, it often turns out to be more desirable in one's imagination than it does as a reality. Thus it was with so many of the lustful ones of Israel and their quails.

As for God's promise to supply the Israelites with meat for a whole month, the Creator more than kept his word. The huge amounts of birds bagged by the Israelites, if properly preserved, would have lasted more than a month -- even if eaten greedily by the more ravenous Israelites.

The Punishment Comes

But something began to happen to cause the Israelites to suddenly lose interest in quails. People began to get sick.

From all points in the camps came the increasing moans and groans of those who had gorged themselves. Their digestive systems, used to the mild manna month after month, were heavily over taxed by the great amounts of half-chewed flesh that had been swallowed hour after hour.

To the horror of friends and relatives who helplessly watched them, the agonized victims rolled convulsively, then lapsed into unconsciousness that was soon followed by death.

More and more died this horrible death as the hours wore on. By the time the self-inflicted plague had come to a halt, an area not far from the camps had become a vast graveyard!

Chapter 38

Twelve Scouts Search Canaan

PERHAPS you will remember the time when the Israelites who complained were suddenly, supernaturally electrocuted by bolts of lightning. At that time the people begged Moses to exhort God to have mercy on them. (Numbers 11:1-3)

Later, when many died because of eating too much quail flesh, no screaming groups of people came to beg or demand of Moses that he again plead with God for them. Many were too ill to come to Moses, and those who weren't ill realized that the dead and the sick had brought these conditions on themselves.

Nevertheless, there were some here and there who even later persisted in eating quail flesh that was beginning to spoil. The result was more illness and a few more deaths.

Moses Causes Criticism

On the route to the promised land, Moses met an Ethiopian woman -- apparently one whom he had known and lived with over forty years before in Egypt. Without consulting God, and even though he was now married to Jethro's daughter, Moses now married the Ethiopian. The historian and priest Josephus gives us what may be special details about her background.

Because of this event there developed a strong feeling of envy by Miriam, the sister of Moses and of Aaron. Instead of privately taking up the matter with Moses as she should have done, Miriam made a public issue of it.

"Moses had no business doing that. He is just upsetting everybody," Miriam complained to Aaron. "Moses should have consulted me."

Although he realized that Miriam was wrong in being envious and critical, and that she was attempting to exert far too much authority, Aaron was inclined to agree that Moses shouldn't have made any great decisions without taking at least some of the matters up with him and his sister. But he was for letting the matter drop right there and discussing it in private with Moses. Miriam had no intention of doing that, however.

"I think we should take this matter to the people," Miriam went on, "Surely God is inspiring you and me as to what should be done. But Moses acts as though he is the only one in touch with God. Unless he's stopped, he'll take all authority to himself and do just as he pleases with the people."

"Perhaps you're right," Aaron mused. "The feeling of too much authority could have a bad effect on any man -- even our brother Moses."

Nothing in this world has ever been done or thought or spoken without God knowing about it. Although Aaron and Miriam were chosen servants of their Creator, they displeased Him by their critical, envious and unkind remarks about another chosen servant who was above them in authority.

Alone in Aaron's tent, the two felt a peculiar sensation, as though someone were very close and watching them.

God Summons Miriam and Aaron

"Miriam! Aaron!" a stern voice startled them. "Go to the tabernacle!"

Fearfully they looked quickly about, but they saw no one, though the voice seemed to be right beside them.

"Could -- could it have been God or an angel of God speaking?" Miriam stuttered nervously.

"It must have been one or the other," Aaron murmured, swallowing with difficulty. "We had better go to the tabernacle right away."

Outside the tabernacle they met Moses, who also had been summoned there. Aaron and Miriam -- especially Miriam -- were uncomfortable in Moses' presence because of talking about him as they had done. The three of them stood in uneasy silence, waiting for something to happen. (Numbers 12:4)

Slowly the cloud of God descended over the tabernacle. There was a blinding blaze of light from within the curtained inner room. The three Israelites shielded their eyes with their arms and backed away from the unusual brilliance. Then, a voice:

"Now listen to Me! Lest there be any doubt as to the one through whom I choose to speak and direct in these times, be assured that Moses is the servant who is to bear the greatest responsibility. Let it be known that I, the Eternal, speak to him directly as one being to another, and not in some mysterious manner, or in dreams and visions, as I speak to ordinary prophets. You, Miriam, and you, Aaron, it is time you know that these things are so. Why, then, were you so foolish as to speak against Moses, my chosen servant?" (Numbers 12:5-8.)

Aaron's face was the color of ashes as God concluded His rebuke. Miriam cringed in fear. Moses was both embarrassed and angry to learn that he had been the object of wrong remarks by his brother and sister. Nevertheless, he felt a little sorry for them because he knew that God often acted with terrible swiftness when it was His intention to punish anyone.

Miriam and Aaron were relieved when they saw the blinding light in the tabernacle disappear. They were even more relieved when they saw the cloud float up from the tabernacle.

"God is departing," Miriam whispered to Aaron. "Surely He wasn't too displeased with us, or He would have done more than just talk." (Verse 9)

"Don't speak like that!" Aaron warned, glancing uneasily at the departing cloud. "God doesn't forget. We should get back to our tents and pray for mercy!"

Irrked by his sister's senseless statement, Aaron turned to look searchingly at Miriam. That searching look caused him to draw back in horror.

The flesh on his sister's face, neck, arms and hands had suddenly taken on a sickly white hue! Aaron shuddered as he tore his eyes from her ghastly face.

He knew that she had suddenly become a leper! (Verse 10)

"Moses!" Aaron called in a quavering voice.

Why God Rebuked Miriam and Aaron

Moses was slowly walking away at the moment. He turned and came back because he sensed the despair in Aaron's tone. When he saw Miriam's condition, he was very upset. Miriam for the first time noticed her hands. She gave a shriek and collapsed on the ground. Aaron quickly knelt down beside her and looked pleadingly up at Moses.

"Don't let God take her by this terrible disease!" he begged. "Ask Him to forgive our foolish sin and heal her." (Numbers 12:11-12.)

Moses knelt down, leaned over with his face to the ground and called out to God.

"Make her well now, God!" he cried out. "Be merciful and forgive her and Aaron of their sins! Remove this awful disease from my sister now!" (Verse 13)

Then God suddenly answered Moses: "Because of her disrespect for authority, Miriam must be shut out of the camp and My presence for seven days."

To her horror and disgrace, Miriam was led to a distant spot far outside the camp, there to sit and loathe herself in utter misery.

Meanwhile, the Israelites were prepared to start out again. But the cloud didn't move forward, and this obviously meant that God was delaying the march until Miriam would be brought back into camp healed. (Verses 14-15)

After a week had passed, she was brought back into her tent. God had answered Moses' prayers and had healed her. She and Moses and Aaron were very thankful. At the same time, Miriam was sorry for having spoken out so boldly and wrongly against Moses. If she had failed to repent, God would have refused to take away her terrible leprosy, and it would soon have caused her death.

Miriam learned the lesson that all should learn -- that speaking evil of the servants God has chosen to work for or represent Him is indirectly speaking evil of the One who created the whole universe and every one of us. God tells us that wisdom begins with respect for Him. (Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 9:10.)

Journey to the Promised Land

After Miriam had been brought back into the camp at Hazeroth, the people moved northward for several days. Although it was late summer, they journeyed on through the hot desert country to Paran, eventually coming to a secluded oasis area called Kadesh or Kadesh-barnea. (Numbers 12:16 and 13:26)

It was on the border of the promised land of Canaan. At Kadesh the cloud came to a halt far more than a night. The people found several wells and springs in that region, and there was enough grass for their animals. It was evident that God meant the Israelites to camp at that place for at least several days. The tabernacle was erected just as it had been at Sinai, and the various tribes set up their camps in the same positions.

"Choose twelve capable men -- one who is ruler from each of the twelve tribes -- for a scouting expedition up into Canaan," God instructed Moses. "They are to bring back a full report on the land. Then the people will learn from their own respected leaders that it is a good land they are approaching." (Numbers 13:1-2)

Moses picked twelve outstanding men from the twelve tribes. These included Joshua, a young man who had previously been very helpful to Moses, and a man named Caleb of the tribe of Judah. Joshua and Caleb were chosen as leaders of the expedition. (Verses 3-16)

"You twelve are to go up into Canaan as scouts," Moses told them when they were brought together. "It's up to you to find the best and easiest route there. Carefully observe everything. Notice whether the land is flat or hilly and what kind of crops it bears. Note the people, to find out how numerous they are, whether they are warlike, peaceful, strong or weak. Find out what their villages and cities are like, and what strongholds they have. Be sure to see where the best forests are located, as well as the best grazing and farming areas. Bring back some produce of the land. And don't fear for your lives, because you can rely on God to protect you as long as you obey Him." (Numbers 13:17-20.)

The Scouting Expedition Begins

Going to Canaan wasn't simply a matter of packing a few things and leaving. The scouts needed some idea of the general lay-out of the land. This knowledge came from the Kenites -- Moses' father-in-law's family -- and from traveled strangers at Kadesh who had joined the Israelites. From them Moses obtained information concerning the boundaries, mountain ranges, lakes, streams, forests and desert areas of Canaan. This was carefully studied by the twelve picked men, and maps were made for them to follow.

When at last the picked scouts had said good-bye to their families and friends, they set out northward from Kadesh across the narrow Zin desert. After plodding wearily in the heat over many miles, they topped a rise to gaze down on a vast expanse of water more than 4,000 feet below them!

Today this body of salty water is known as the Dead Sea. It is almost 1,300 feet below sea level -- the deepest chasm on the land surface. It is forty-seven miles long from north to south, and is nine and a half miles across at the widest spot. It is 1,300 feet deep at its greatest depth. The dimensions were slightly different back when the Israelite scouts suddenly came upon it.

"This must be what is known as the Salt Sea or the Sea of the Plain!" one of the men exclaimed, pointing to the whitish shoreline far below. "You know what that means!"

"It means we have reached Canaan!" Joshua shouted triumphantly. "We know from what we have heard that this large lake is part of the eastern boundary of the promised land!"

There was happy excitement among the twelve men. Having some idea of where they were, they felt successful and more secure. That night they camped on the towering area overlooking the water, and next morning started down from the mountains to skirt the west shore of the long lake.

For the next few days their progress was fairly easy. However, the midday heat was quite intense, and they found that it was wise to travel only in the mornings and evenings.

The Jordan Valley Visited

At the north end of the Dead Sea they turned eastward to come to the Jordan River, the main stream emptying into the Dead Sea. There in the river bottom region they saw that there were many beautiful farms and that the crops were excellent.

The scouts continued northward, sometimes following the Jordan River and sometimes veering off toward the mountain range to the west. They had purposely avoided the country east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea because the promised land was then from the Jordan River westward. (Numbers 33:51-53; 34:1-2, 12 and Deuteronomy 12:10.) The people they met stared suspiciously at them, probably regarding them either as wandering traders, bandits, or vagrants.

A few days later they arrived at another body of water known today as the Sea of Galilee. It was known also as the Sea of Chinnereth. This lake, seven miles wide at the north end and thirteen miles long, was the one near which Jesus Christ would spend much of His life. It is about 200 feet to the bottom at the deepest point. The hills back from its east shores jutted up to 2,000 feet. Its surface was about 700 feet below that of the Mediterranean Sea.

The scouts traveled on northward far past the Sea of Galilee to a town called Rehob, on the northern border of the promised land, in the land of Aram, known today as Syria. Having knowledge of where they were, the Israelites recognized that they were very close to the northern boundaries of the promised land, and so they turned back southward. (Numbers 13:21)

Moving down through the fertile regions between the Jordan River and the Great Sea (the Mediterranean), the scouts saw even more people than they had seen near the river. Crops looked even better, trees bore more fruit and there were more signs of prosperity.

The scouting Israelites had been coming to more and more great cities teeming with people and bristling with fortifications. The people continued to stare at the twelve strangers as they trudged along the road. The Israelites made no effort to visit with them. It was wiser to keep to themselves than run the risk of getting mixed up with robbers or violent men. The scouts were well-armed for purposes of hunting, and their rugged, bearded appearance undoubtedly warded off more than one group of bandits who might otherwise have attacked them for whatever was in the Israelites' packsacks.

The scouts decided to journey to the east shores of the Mediterranean Sea. They had heard awesome tales of how warlike the people were in that region. These, the Philistines, were the ones through whose land God had kept Israel from traveling when they had first left Egypt, even though it would have meant a much shorter trip.

The Scouts Meet the Philistines

There the scouts were especially cautious. They moved around the towns and villages instead of going through them. Here and there they noticed armed Philistine men who obviously were soldiers or civil officers. Once they spotted a whole platoon of such men at a distance, but the scouts weren't set upon, stopped or even questioned.

Crossing back to the southeast, they came to Hebron, one of the oldest cities in the world. It had been founded seven years before the founding of Zion, the first city founded in post-Flood Egypt. (Numbers 13:22)

At Hebron the scouts were so curious to get a good look at the people and buildings and bazaars that they considered traveling right through the streets.

"I should like to go through the town as much as any of you," Joshua frowned thoughtfully, "but I think it's too much of a risk. If we all go together, we could be looked on as a band of renegades, and officers might stop us."

"How about splitting up into two pairs?" Caleb suggested.

"That should help!" Joshua nodded. "But we can't become too separated. Each couple must be far enough apart that we won't be regarded as a group, but close enough to be within sight of each other at all times."

Accordingly, the twelve divided into six pairs and joined a straggling line of all kinds of people approaching Hebron from the north.

Hebron wasn't a large city teeming with great crowds, but its narrow, stony streets were lined with shops where knots of rather drab humanity bobbed and shuffled in and out. Mixing in with the hodge-podge of people and pack-animals, the scouts saw and heard many interesting things. Shopkeepers called out their wares to them. Small, ragged boys begged them for hand-outs. Grinning, beady-eyed men, spotting them as strangers, slipped up beside them and offered to guide them to various places of amusement.

Intent on getting through Hebron, the Israelites weren't halted by salesmen, beggars or men who had more than guide service to sell. They moved through the bazaar area and into the southern fringe of town. Joshua and Caleb, who were ahead, saw several armed helmeted men pour out of a nearby building and station themselves menacingly in the street.

"We can't go this way!" Caleb whispered. "Those soldiers mean to block our path!"

It was obvious that the scouts had at last run into serious trouble, and just when they had almost completed their trip!

Chapter 39

Scouts Report Seeing Giants!

THE ISRAELITE scouts sent out by Moses had traveled by foot over much of Canaan. They had looped around to arrive at Hebron, a city not too far from Kadesh. Kadesh was the scouts' starting point, where the twelve tribes were encamped and awaiting reports from the twelve-man expedition.

On leaving Hebron, the Israelites suddenly found themselves confronted by several soldiers blocking the narrow street.

"We can't turn back now," Joshua said in a low voice to Caleb. "If we turn back, they'll probably take after us!"

Giants!

As the scouts neared the soldiers, they were amazed to realize that some of them were almost twice as tall as ordinary men! The towering soldiers saw the expressions of growing unbelief

on the faces of the scouts, who now were close enough to notice the hostility on the faces of the soldiers. Suddenly the scouts realized that it was only mock hostility. The giant men broke into loud, hoarse laughter and stepped aside to let the six pairs of Israelites continue down the street. It was evident that a favorite pastime of the soldiers -- the giant descendants of Anak -- was to playfully startle strangers who had never before seen such tall men. (Numbers 13:22)

The scouts breathed sighs of relief and thankfulness as they left the laughing soldiers behind them. They kept on to the south -- where they saw numerous other giant tribes -- until they arrived at a fertile valley known as Eshcol, through which ran a small stream. This was grape country and time for harvesting grapes. The Israelites were astounded at the great size of the grape clusters.

"We were instructed to bring back samples of the produce of Canaan," Joshua reminded the men. "So far we have gathered only a few things, and our trip is nearly over. This is perhaps our last opportunity to take some of the unusual fruit growing here."

Not wanting to invade a private vineyard, the men cut down a large cluster of grapes apparently growing wild. They hung the cluster on a pole for two men to carry it between them back to Kadesh. The grapes weren't so heavy that two men were required to lift them. It was a matter of letting the massive cluster hang free so that it wouldn't be crushed. However, the bunch of grapes was all of two feet long, and each grape was as large as a plum!

The scouts also plucked healthy fruits and luscious figs from the area. Burdened with their increased loads, they turned south toward Kadesh.

They arrived at Kadesh just forty days from the time they had set out. Although many people went out to meet them and to ply them with questions, the scouts reported at once to Moses. Knowing that the people were anxious to learn what their spies had seen in Canaan, Moses later called for the people to assemble close to the tabernacle. (Numbers 13:23-25.)

As a leader of the expedition, Joshua was asked first to give a public account of what had taken place. He came out on a high platform, so that the crowd could see him, and sketchily related what the men had seen and done.

Joshua's Report

"It is a good land," he concluded. "Large areas of it are very fertile, as many of you can see by this display of unusual produce. There is plenty of grazing country for our flocks and herds. We should thank God that all these good things are there for the taking when we move northward."

Meanwhile, all the other scouts except Caleb had gathered in a group and were earnestly talking. When Joshua had finished speaking, he asked any one of them to add to what had already been said. One scout, obviously chosen as a spokesman, came up to face Moses, Aaron and the throng of people.

"The land of Canaan is indeed fertile in some regions, just as Joshua has stated," the speaker said in a strong clear voice. "However, when he spoke of our seeing a few very tall men, he failed to mention that all the people are very large and tall. He also left out the facts that all

the cities have high, thick walls behind which are large, well-trained, powerful armies. It is foolish to even think of trying to enter Canaan. We would all be slaughtered!"

There was an awkward silence. Moses and Aaron, as well as most others, were greatly startled by what they had heard. Then the silence suddenly gave way to a growing murmur from the crowd. Joshua and Caleb exchanged anxious glances. Caleb leaped on the platform and raised his arms for silence. The murmuring gradually subsided, but not completely.

"I ask you to hear me on this matter!" Caleb spoke out loudly. "This man whom you have just heard doesn't speak for all twelve of us. For some reason he has lied about the cities all having high walls, all the people being giants and all the armies being large and powerful. The truth is that God can surely overcome the inhabitants of Canaan for us!" (Numbers 13:26-33.)

The ten scouts quickly crowded onto the platform, shouting and gesturing.

"No! No!" they chorused. "This fellow is the one who isn't telling the truth!" There was much confusion, both around the platform and throughout the crowd. After a few minutes Moses and his officers were fairly successful in restoring order. God does not like confusion.

"This has been a disgraceful exhibition, especially by men of your past good reputations," Moses said sternly to the ten scouts. "If you actually believe it would be a mistake to go into Canaan, then you must give more reasons than you have already stated, and with proof!" There was a quick consultation among the ten men, and again their spokesmen stepped up to address the people.

"I'll admit that I didn't tell you exactly what conditions are in Canaan," the speaker shouted, "but neither did Joshua or Caleb. The real truth is something none of us wanted to bring to you because it seemed cruel to fill you with complete dismay and disappointment. However, probably many of you won't believe what I am about to tell you."

Here the speaker paused, at the risk of being interrupted, so that the audience would be even more eager to hear his words. He was counting on Moses giving him a full chance to say what he had to say.

"Now here are the terrifying facts," he continued. "For some reason these two leaders probably won't back me up on these things. But nine other scouts will. In the first place, the climate of most of the land north of here is very bad. It has produced mostly desert territory. Water is scarce. Disease and pestilence have taken the lives of ordinary people like ourselves. The survivors -- and they must number into many thousands -- are all giants who are actually so tremendous that we were only as grasshoppers in their sight. They didn't pay any attention to us because they looked down on us as only insects. These people have descended from fierce Hamitic tribes. They are so mountainous and powerful that it would take only a few of them to stamp all of us into the ground!"

A great sound of discontent welled up from the crowd. At a command from Moses, Joshua stood up to speak, but the growing noise from the people drowned out his words even to the nearest listeners.

"His lies have frightened the people!" Joshua said to Moses after leaving the platform. "They don't even want to listen to me."

"Most of them know that they have listened to lies," Moses said. "They prefer to believe what isn't the truth so that they will have excuses to return to Egypt."

"Ten of my fellow scouts must be working with those who are trying to get the Israelites to turn back," Joshua remarked bitterly.

"It is very plain," Moses agreed. "This growing movement to try to return to Egypt is getting out of hand."

The Crowd Breaks Up

Moses soberly watched the yelling Israelites milling excitedly about, and shook his head in disappointment. In recent weeks, in spite of the trouble these people had given him, his hope had grown that his task of leading them to the promised land was about to end. An end to the Journey now appeared about as possible as single-handedly herding millions of wild burros into a corral.

For a few moments he considered trying to address the people, to remind them how futile it would be to start back without God's help. But already the huge throng was breaking up. Officers were faithfully working to keep the crowd in order, but the people were too noisy and excited to listen to any more speeches.

Wailing, weeping and murmuring, the people milled around between camps and tents, loudly complaining that it would mean death to all if they were to set foot in what they referred to as a disease-ridden land of giants to the north. All night this noisy and childish exhibition went on.

Meanwhile, however, many thousands of the Israelites had no part in the demonstration.

By early morning many of the complainers were worked up into such a highly emotional state that they again formed into a crowd that advanced angrily toward the tabernacle. Some of the demonstrators went so far as to carry sticks and stones.

"We wish we had died in Egypt!" thousands of them yelled.

"We wish we had died in the desert!" other thousands chorused. "God has dragged us out to this miserable place only for the purpose of having us slain by giants! Our wives and our children will all die if we follow Moses any further!"

"We want to go back to Egypt!" was a common cry. "Let us choose a leader who knows what is best for us -- one who knows the shortest and fastest route back to Egypt!" (Numbers 14:1-4)

"We have already picked out those who can lead us!" some of the Israelites screamed. "Let us put down Moses and his officers so that our leaders can take over!"

Only the most rebellious and rabble-rousing dared suggest ousting Moses, and not a great part of the Israelites fell in with such a suggestion of violence. However, it was plain to Moses that this unhappy situation could explode into a worse one within minutes. There was only one wise thing to do. Moses motioned to Aaron. The two of them mounted the platform. For a few seconds they silently regarded the clamoring crowd. Then they knelt down and bent over with their foreheads touching the floor of the platform. In this abject position they called on God to step in and take control of the people.

When the demonstrators saw their leaders bowing in prayer they quieted down to a low murmur.

Angered and shocked at the manner in which their fellow scouts had spoken and acted, Joshua and Caleb decided to take advantage of this quieter period to try once more to bring the truth to the people. Joshua once more went to the platform and walked out in front of Moses and Aaron.

"Fellow Israelites!" Joshua cried out. "I'm here again to assure you of what all twelve of us have witnessed -- that Canaan is a good, productive land. There are no giants such as have been described to you, though there are some men who are several feet taller than our men. There is a good supply of water. We saw no unusual signs of disease or pestilence. Canaan is so much better than any land we have come through so far that it would be very foolish not to claim it. Let us not rebel against our Creator. Otherwise He might decide to withhold this Promised land from us!"

People looked on with stony faces as Joshua stepped back and Caleb came forward to stand in front of the two men who were still prostrate.

"What Joshua has just told you is true!" Caleb shouted to the people. "God is offering us a wonderful future if only we obey Him. Surely He is already displeased by your attitude of refusal to go into Canaan and take what our Creator wants us to have for our own happiness. As for fearing the Canaanites, there is no reason for that. As long as God is with us, no people -- even if they were all giants -- can overcome us!"

As soon as Caleb ceased speaking, the murmuring from the crowd grew louder and louder. In spite of a number of alert guards surrounding the platform, the bolder and more excited ones in the crowd moved menacingly close. Out of the hubbub of shrieks and yells two chilling words became more and more distinct.

"Stone them! Stone them! Stone them!" (Numbers 14:5-10.) Very soon the phrase became a monstrous chant from the lungs of the frenzied thousands. Still Caleb and Joshua stood on the platform with the kneeling Moses and Aaron.

Chapter 40

Mob Attacks Moses

SUDDENLY the mob closed in, pressing the guards against the underpinning of the platform. A few small stones shot out of the crowd and bounced off the platform, where Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb stood.

Those who attempted to hurl heavier stones were hampered by the surging mass of human beings. A few men managed to squirm past the guards and climb onto the platform. They crouched around the four figures who were already there, eyeing them threateningly. It was evident that these intruders were waiting for more to join them for the purpose of seizing Caleb, Joshua, Moses and Aaron.

At that instant a blinding flash came from inside the tabernacle. Even though the curtains of the structure veiled its full brilliance, the brightness was so intense that people were temporarily blinded. A moment later an ear-splitting roar rumbled out of the tabernacle. The ground quaked as though a whole mountain had been dropped from the sky!

The intruders staggered off the platform and into the struggling mass surrounding it. The words "Stone them!" abruptly ceased from the crowd. The only sounds now were those of alarm in the frantic scramble to draw back from the platform and the tabernacle.

Realizing that God had intervened, Moses and Aaron gave thanks and got to their feet.

"Have the ten traitorous scouts arrested and brought to my tent," Moses instructed Joshua and Caleb. "I must go now to the tabernacle to talk with God."

At the tabernacle God asked Moses after he had knelt inside the tabernacle, How much longer will these people vex me with their evil ways? How many more signs must I give them to prove that I mean what I say? Now I should have nothing more to do with them except to blot them out of my sight forever. Then, starting with you, I should build up a greater and a mightier nation!"

"But if you destroy all Israel," Moses replied, "the Egyptians shall hear of it. In fact, every nation on Earth will sooner or later know of it. Word has spread that you are the kind of God who dwells with His people, and Who leads them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When news goes abroad that Your people died in the desert, the nations will believe that You lacked the power to bring them safely into the land You promised to them. I beg you, God, to forgive these people of their sins, but I'm not asking You to let go unpunished those who have stirred the people into wanting to return to Egypt instead of going on into Canaan."

There was a silence. It was painful to Moses, who couldn't be certain how God would respond. He realized that his mentioning the preserving of God's reputation in the eyes of other nations -- especially Egypt -- wasn't necessarily a strong point. God, with His perfect memory and awareness, wasn't in need of being reminded. Finally the Creator replied.

"Because you have prayed as you have for the Israelites, I shall forgive their sins as a nation. I shall not make a complete end of them. My reputation for mercy and power and glory will one day be known in every nation of the world." (Numbers 14:11-21.)

Moses was greatly relieved and heartened to hear these words from the Creator. He remained for a little while with his forehead to the ground. But just as he raised his head and was about to utter his deep thanks, God's voice boomed out at him again.

"I have just told you that I am willing to forgive the sins of the Israelites. At the same time, however, I will refuse them entrance into the promised land because they have broken their covenant with me. This means that those who have rebelled against me shall never come into Canaan! They shall die in the desert! This curse doesn't apply to those who are under twenty years of age -- the very ones whose fathers complained that they would surely die in the desert because I couldn't protect them. Neither does it apply to obedient people such as Joshua and Caleb. But it does mean that most of Israel shall wander forty years in the mountains and deserts before reaching the land they have refused and hated. That is one year for every day required for the scouts to search Canaan!"

"But we have already spent about a year and a half coming to Canaan," Moses said. "Do you mean that we are to spend forty years going to a place that is only a few hours distant?"

"Inasmuch as you have already been nearly two years on the way," God replied, "it will require full thirty-eight more. That is My judgment on Israel because of their rebellion." (Numbers 14:22-35.)

Just a few minutes previously Moses had felt as though a great weight had been lifted from him when he was assured that the people would not be suddenly blotted out. Now the dismal outlook of thirty-eight years of leading the Israelites was something he could scarcely face.

"Where must we go from here?" Moses inquired wearily.

"You must leave tomorrow and start southward."

Told by God to carry this depressing information to the people, Moses and Aaron returned to the platform. A vast, murmuring throng was still present. Joshua and Caleb hurried to join Moses and Aaron.

The Ten Scouts Slain

"We didn't have to arrest the ten scouts," Joshua reported, pointing to a knot of people crowded around something on the ground. "They're all dead!"

"Dead?" Moses repeated in surprise. "How could it be that all of them would die at the same time?"

"We couldn't find out," Caleb explained. "Just a little while ago they were seen talking together over there. An instant later they were lifeless on the ground."

Moses quickly realized that God had taken their lives because of their false reports, but there wasn't time just then to be concerned about the scouts and their families. Moses had to tell the people at once what was in store for them. (Numbers 14:36-38.)

When he passed on to them what God had spoken, the people received the startling news with mixed emotions. Some were speechless. Others moaned and loudly complained. A small part of them were jubilant because of hoping to return all the way to Egypt. Most of them, sobered by the strange, sudden death of the ten scouts, were quite shaken by the outlook for the future. Many thought God wasn't fair. Only a fraction of them were willing to admit to themselves that by their bad conduct they had spoiled a wonderful future and had brought hardship down on their children.

"Remember," Moses concluded, "that from now on we no longer have the priceless blessing of God's guidance and protection. We are like a flock without a shepherd. Only yesterday God wanted us to go into Canaan. If we had obeyed, God would have scattered any Canaanites who might have tried to prevent us. But now we don't even dare stay here lest the people over the mountains to the north come down and slaughter us! Be ready at dawn, therefore, to move south."

Rebels Plot by Night

That night was a restless one for Israel. The more the people thought about God's ruling to turn back, the more they wondered how they could make up for their sins. In fact, certain ones secretly met to plan what to do and how to organize the people into doing it.

Meanwhile, the Israelites were not the only ones aware of their blazing, all-night campfires. Alert and unfriendly eyes were peering down from mountain heights to the north, watching to see what the horde of people in the desert valley would do next.

Moses, too, was restless. He spent much of the night in thought and prayer. Very early in the morning he dropped asleep from exhaustion, only to be awakened by Joshua.

"People are breaking camp already," Joshua exclaimed. "It isn't even daybreak, but there are rumors that thousands are leaving."

Moses stepped out of his tent. Most of the campfires were burning low at this hour, and it wasn't possible, in the dense pre-dawn darkness, to see what was taking place. But in the still, cool air came the faint jangle of metal and the voices of men shouting commands to their shepherd dogs. Moses knew the sound well, and he sensed that a huge caravan was moving out. But why? And where was it headed? "Should we call every available officer to try to stop them?" Joshua asked.

"No," Moses answered, shaking his head solemnly. "We're already in enough trouble without shedding blood among ourselves. Just try to find out where these early risers think they are going."

Aaron joined Moses before Joshua could report back. The light of dawn streamed in rapidly from the east, making plain to Moses and Aaron a long column of thousands, with their flocks and herds, slowly moving out of the camps. Moses was hopeful that he would discover

the column moving through a defile to the south -- the direction in which God had said they should go.

To Moses' dismay the light of dawn showed that the wide line of people was moving north. This was the road to Canaan! This was the way these people had refused to take only hours before. Having been warned not to go in that direction, thousands of the Israelites were disobeying by sneaking off that way. (Verses 40-43)

"The Amalekites and Canaanites are just beyond that mountain!" Moses exclaimed, clapping his hands to his head. "Probably they're armed and waiting! This could mean a terrible slaughter for all those people!"

Moses and those with him watched in discouragement as the thousands of Israelites and their flocks dwindled from sight in the distant pass.

"Even if all the rest of our armed men went after them," Moses said, shaking his head, "it wouldn't make much difference. God will not protect those who have departed or those who would go to their rescue." (Numbers 14:40-43.)

Moses then instructed his officers to see that the tabernacle was packed and ready to move, and that the people should start breaking camp at once. He knew there was a possibility that their enemies, undoubtedly hidden in the mountains, would stage an attack on the camp.

Before the sun was very high, the remaining greater part of the Israelites was moving through the defiles to the south. Many a person left Kadesh before he wanted to, however. Thousands had hoped to remain long enough to receive some word of what had happened to friends and relatives who had departed toward Canaan.

Meanwhile, the Canaan-bound Israelites and their plodding flocks and herds were close to the top of the pass that led northward from Kadesh.

Rebels Are Ambushed

Suddenly hundreds of armed men leaped out from behind the trailside boulders! Shouting as though demented, they came running at the startled Israelites with spears and swords. Hundreds of Israelites died even before they could get their weapons ready for action. Shrieking women and children turned and tried to run back down the trail, only to trip helplessly over one another. To add to the confusion, the herds stampeded and the flocks swarmed wildly in all directions. The main body of Israelites gradually began to move backward. But by now a great number of the enemy -- Canaanites and Amalekites -- had almost sealed off their retreat by thronging behind the agitated column of Israelites. The Israelites had walked squarely into a vast death trap! (Verses 44-45)

The slaughter that resulted was frightful! Even animals fell by sword and spear, though most of them escaped into the mountains. The people were not so fortunate. Within only minutes the pass was littered with the bodies of men and women. But because their numbers were so much greater than those of their attackers, part of them escaped and fled back toward Kadesh. The Amalekites and Canaanites took after them, pursuing some of them quite a distance to the south. Most of those who escaped hid among the rocks until the enemy was gone. Then

they set out to try to catch up with the main body of Israelites that had departed to the south from Kadesh.

About sundown the Israelites made camp a few miles southwest of Kadesh. Hours later, when most campfires were either out or very low, there was great excitement from the north side of the camp. Weary, footsore escapees were beginning to arrive. Many who returned needed their wounds dressed. Some died. Others gave horrifying accounts of the bloody affair.

Chapter 41

Rebels Challenge God's Government

THE REBELS who had escaped the Amalekite ambush were a pitiful sight indeed.

"You who have been spared," Moses told them, "should thank God that He chose some to be able to return here so that the rest of us can be reminded what can happen to people who don't have God's protection. Otherwise, you would now be captives or dead."

As was common with the Egyptians and not uncommon with the Israelites, there was much weeping and wailing and loud expressions of sorrow and regret the rest of the night. A part of the people seemed to be getting a picture of how bleak and uncertain their lives would be without God's guidance and protection.

The cloud and the pillar of fire were not removed, because it wasn't God's intention to entirely forsake Israel. (Deuteronomy 1:31-33; Nehemiah 9:19-21.)

It was a case of the Israelites breaking their agreement with God, which meant that God was no longer bound to give them the help, guidance and protection that He had promised to give if they would obey Him.

From then on for nearly forty years God decided the movements of Israel by such things as the lack of abundance of water, the presence or absence of grass for their animals, the state of health of the people and many other factors.

They camped only long enough to lick their wounds and then continued southward through several more stopping places. From there they moved into the desert area west of the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba and northeast of Mt. Sinai. This was the area where, on their way northeast from Mt. Sinai, so many of them had complained so harshly against God. (Numbers 11:1-3) They had said that they would rather die there than go on. This was the place where a great part of them would eventually die.

Sabbath Broken Again

Fall had arrived, and the nights in the desert were becoming colder. Campfire material was rather scarce. For some, the collecting of fuel was fast becoming a full-time job. The people had to go farther and farther out from the camps to obtain it if they stayed in one spot very many days.

One Sabbath a man was seen spending the day busily gathering dried sticks and branches far outside the camps. Most Israelites respected the Fourth Commandment and feared to labor on the Sabbath. Thinking that perhaps the man wasn't aware that it was the seventh day of the week, a few people went out to warn him.

"I don't care what day it is!" the man growled, hardly looking at them. "I worked all week getting food for my family and animals. There wasn't time to gather fuel, and so I have to do it now. If God wants me to get all my work done before the end of the week, He'll have to add more days to it. Meanwhile, I'm not going to just sit in my tent and twiddle my thumbs just because some fancifully robed priest says it's wrong to support my family on the Sabbath!"

This matter was reported back to camp. Before long two officers went out to talk to the man.

"You are an evil example to others," the officers told him. "People who see you laboring all Sabbath without instant punishment might try to do likewise. Then they would receive the punishment you will eventually receive."

The fuel-gatherer glowered at the officers and swung his load of sticks from one shoulder to the other.

"Why should I be punished for trying to keep my family warm?" he snapped. "I can decide what is best for me and mine without any meddling from you or God!"

This arrogant display of rebellion brought on a hasty arrest by the officers, but it was no small task to take the man back to camp. He struggled and fought and cursed all the way.

When Moses was told of the matter, he wasn't certain just what should be done. Many Israelites had secretly wished the Sabbath were just another workday. But none of them so far had outwardly shown such strong feeling against God and authority as this man had shown.

Moses knew that this matter would quickly become known by all the people. He also realized that if they found that one could succeed in being so defiant about breaking the Sabbath without quick and heavy punishment, numberless Israelites might attempt the same thing.

This was a problem Moses had to take to God. As usual, God quickly made clear to Moses what was to be done.

Next morning, acting on orders from Moses, officers led the offender back into the desert. A huge crowd silently followed, constantly enlarged by a flow of grim-faced people who had heard what was going on. Acting on instructions from Moses, they stripped the offender of his outer clothes, then stoned him to death. (Numbers 15:32-36.)

The apostle Paul explains in Romans 13:1-7 that God ordained that criminals be punished. God takes no pleasure in seeing wicked men die (Ezekiel 33:11), but He knows that law-breakers are better dead -- to await the second resurrection -- than left around to harm others or lead others to do evil. God in His mercy sees that evil men are better off punished than left alive making themselves and others miserable and unhappy.

Discontentment Grows Again

Not long after the Israelites left Kadesh, another wretched event took place that resulted in another great disaster. The situation developed because a state of envy existed in the minds of some of the people who wanted to be priests or who wanted certain of their friends to be priests and leaders instead of Levi's family.

Foremost among such men was a man named Korah, one of Levi's great grandsons and a first cousin to Moses and Aaron. He strongly felt that he should have been chosen for a high office. In fact, he had the idea that he should be in Moses' position as head of Israel. He was joined in this ill attitude by three Reubenites, Dathan, Abiram and On. They were of the opinion that Moses was favoring his family too much, and was not properly distributing the offices of authority. These men thought all the congregation should have a voice in government. (Numbers 16:1-3)

For a long time these men had been seething with discontent and planning how they could move in to take over the priesthood for themselves. This scheme against Moses was the same as scheming against God (Numbers 26:9), but these men were desperate for power. Gradually they managed to persuade high-ranking Israelites that their cause was right. Eventually two hundred and fifty Israelite leaders agreed to join these influential, smooth-talking schemers in the hope that all would move into higher rank with greater power and more income.

One morning when Israel was camping at a stopping place on the way southward, all these ambitious men gathered before Moses' tent. With Korah, their best speaker and worst schemer leading them, they came to demand of Moses that some changes be made in the priesthood. When Moses was told that a crowd of high ranking men had come to demand some changes in government, he wasn't surprised. He had sensed for weeks that this kind of trouble was brewing. Now, as he came out of his tent, he expected to see only a handful of men. He was rather startled to see more than two hundred and fifty, and he was considerably upset to recognize so many trusted men of high rank among those who now stood before him with unfriendly expressions. (Numbers 16:2)

"Why are you here?" Moses asked.

Korah Wants More Authority

"We are here because we believe you are taking on too much power for one man," Korah answered. "You and your priests act as though you are holier than any of the rest of us. If we are God's chosen people, then ALL of us are holy. That means that all of us have equal rights in matters of government. However, you use your authority to put men who are your friends in the best positions in government. (Verse 3) We demand that you yield some of those offices to the congregation so we can choose our own officials." Korah, being a good speaker, knew he could be elected to a high office if the people were allowed to choose their own leaders.

What Korah really was after was complete control of all Israel. Leaders of nations have always been the objects of envy by greedy men. Seizing leadership has always been a selfish, bloody game, with the greatest losers generally turning out to be the citizens. Even Israel, God's chosen nation, wasn't free of this kind of ambitious trouble makers.

Moses was shocked by this blunt demand from Korah. He could see that the men weren't just bluffing. It was plain that they were willing to go to extremes to gain what they had set out to do. Setting armed soldiers on them would only mean bloodshed. Besides, most of the Israelites would sympathize with the victims of the soldiers, since they were popular, well-known leaders, and the situation would become worse.

Without even going back into the privacy of his tent, Moses knelt forward with his head to the ground and asked God for help. A few of those assembled became uncomfortable as they stood in the presence of a humble man calling on his Creator for aid. They included On, one of the Reubenites. He wanted no more of the matter, and slipped out of the scene. Other onlookers merely smiled at what they considered an attempt by Moses to gain their sympathy by appearing pitifully pious.

"This is no time for a show, Moses!" Korah called out. "Stand up and explain why at least some of us shouldn't be priests in place of some of those who are now in service merely because it was your whim to put them there." Korah, a Levite, already had a high office, but he wanted an even higher office -- the priesthood that was given to Aaron. (Verses 8-11)

Moses slowly came to his feet. Those who watched him couldn't know that God had just inspired him to know what to say. Ignoring Korah, Moses addressed Dathan and Abiram.

Moses Tries to Save Rebels

"Before you carry this matter further, let us discuss it in my tent," Moses said, thus giving them an opportunity to separate from Korah.

"There is no reason to talk with you," Dathan and Abiram replied. "We refuse to listen to your excuses for leading us from the good land of Egypt and into a desert where we are to die. Your only aim has plainly been to control the people, no matter what becomes of them." (Verses 12- 14)

These untruthful charges upset Moses. He was tempted to summon soldiers to slay every rebel before him. But he knew this was not according to God's plan of dealing with them, and he controlled himself.

"You have started something you will have trouble finishing," Moses declared to Korah in a voice that reached the whole crowd. "Your belief that just anyone can be in the priesthood without being ordained by God is not a true one. However, if all of you insist on trying to force your way into such offices, every one of you should be here tomorrow morning with incense and with a censer filled with hot coals. Aaron and his sons will also be here with their censers. God will make it known which ones he will choose as priests and their helpers." (Verses 4-7)

Korah smiled when he heard this. He lacked respect for God, and he felt that he had bluffed Moses into giving in to the extent that he and his followers could gain a foothold in wresting power from Moses.

Rebels Challenge Moses

Next morning the crowd of two hundred and fifty, plus Korah, Dathan and Abiram, appeared before the tabernacle. Every man carried a censer filled with hot coals to show his readiness to go at once into priestly service. Korah had spread the word throughout the camps that he was going to challenge Moses, and that there would be a showdown to free the people from what was wrongfully referred to as Moses' unfair leadership. As a result, a growing crowd of curious people built up behind Korah's men.

Moses came out to face Korah. With him were Aaron and Aaron's sons, all of whom held censers with hot coals. The elders of Israel were also present.

There were minutes of strained silence. God hadn't told Moses what to do beyond asking the men to show up with censers. Moses didn't know what would happen next, but he was certain that God would somehow make it very clear which group would be in power from then on.

Suddenly there was a brilliant flash from the tabernacle, followed by a second and a third. It was plain to most that God was in the tabernacle. (Verse 19) Some of them drew back, fearful of what might happen. Even a part of Korah's followers appeared to be ready to leave, but Korah told them to stand firm. Korah had become so rebellious that he actually doubted that God could hinder him and his men from gaining leadership of Israel, and the blinding display of light from within the tabernacle didn't move him from his ambition.

Realizing that God wanted to give them some message, Moses and Aaron stepped away from the others and approached the tabernacle.

"Remove yourselves and the priests and elders from these people who face you," God commanded in a voice that only the two men could hear. "I want you at a safe distance because I intend to wipe all the others out of existence!" (Verses 20-21)

Moses shuddered at this alarming remark from God. The Creator had threatened to do the same thing before, but Moses had begged him not to, and God answered Moses' prayer. There was nothing to do now but again ask God to spare the people. Moses and Aaron bowed down in fervent prayer.

"Look at him!" Korah exclaimed to those about him. "He's trying again to gain the sympathy of the people by appearing pious!"

On the contrary, Moses wasn't concerned at that moment what the people thought. He was concerned for their lives, and he pleaded with God not to be angry with many people because of the evil deeds of a few. (Verse 22)

God Spares the People

"I shall do this much," God said. "I shall spare the congregation if you can succeed in getting the people back to their homes and away from the tents where Korah, Dathan and Abiram live. Any who go near the homes of those three men will risk losing their lives."

Encouraged by this merciful statement from God, Moses sent his officers out to warn the crowd to break up and return to their tents, and not to go near the tents of Korah, Abiram and Dathan. Slowly and a bit unwillingly the people sauntered away.

"You said that God would choose His priests if we would assemble with censers," Korah called out to Moses. "You have only proved to the people that you are not a man of your word, because nothing has happened. Tomorrow we shall return. The people will think the matter over, and tomorrow they will be ready to back us up in what should be done about your authority."

"You should remember this in the meantime," Moses replied. "If you live till tomorrow, then you can know that I will not continue to be the leader of the Israelites."

This strange remark was ignored by Korah, Dathan and Abiram, who returned to their respective homes, which were close together on the south side of the Tabernacle. (Numbers 2:10 and 3:29) Korah felt that he had made another successful step, and that it would be only a matter of a day or two before the mass of Israelites would swing over to his side. As for his two hundred and fifty followers, they also left and went back to their various camps.

Later, Moses and Aaron and the elders went to make certain that the people were not congregated around the homes of the three main offenders. They found their residence free of visitors, which was as God wanted it to be. Moses then warned them that because they persisted in a scheme to take over the government, God would cause the ground to open up and swallow them. (Verses 23-30)

Dathan and Abiram came out of their tents, along with their wives and children, to hear what more Moses had to say.

"Now he's trying to threaten us with an earthquake," Dathan scornfully shouted to Abiram. "Can you think of anything more fantastic?"

"I'll believe it only when it happens -- and maybe not even then," Abiram shouted back with a grin.

Too Late to Repent!

"We have given these men fair warning," Moses said to those with him. "Perhaps God would spare them if they would repent, but since they refuse to repent, it's obviously too late now. Let us leave here before something dreadful happens."

Almost as soon as their backs were turned there was a growing rumble from within the Earth. The ground trembled, then heaved upward directly between the tents of Abiram and Dathan and the tent of Korah, which was close by in another camp!

Chapter 42

"The Earth Opened Its Mouth!"

SCREAMING terrorized people of all three families -- Korah, Dathan and Abiram – rushed wildly and aimlessly in all directions. Then the quivering mound of ground suddenly collapsed and fell back into a deep, yawning chasm! Tons of soil and rock slipped off the vertical sides of this horrifying hole and thundered down into dark oblivion, taking people, tents, animals and most everything that belonged to Korah, Dathan and Abiram. (Numbers 16:31-33 and 26:10.) It was as though a gigantic mouth had opened in the Earth's crust for the one purpose of swallowing the rebellious men and their possessions!

Children Miraculously Escape

The only ones spared in this unusual catastrophe were the children. (Numbers 26:11) God miraculously saved their lives by causing them to run in the directions in which they could escape. That way God could keep His promise to take all the children safely into the Promised Land. (Numbers 14:31 and Deuteronomy 1:39.)

For a few seconds the ground thrashed and rolled, churning the victims into the black depths. Then the sides of the pit crashed together with a mighty roar, dirt and sand spewing high into the sky in a dusty cloud. The pit closed so firmly and so evenly that there was little evidence left to show that three homes, their families and all their flocks had peacefully existed there only a few seconds previously. God had struck with such quick punishment that the victims were both slain and buried in one devastating event!

This calamity was witnessed by a horde of inquisitive Israelites who madly scattered in horror from the scene of destruction, fearful that the ground would open up again and swallow all of them. (Numbers 16:34) People and tents were trampled in the chaotic mass stampede to flee from where the Earth had opened and closed so suddenly.

Among those who fled were the two hundred and fifty men who had followed Korah and who had brought their censers to see if God would choose them as priests. There were many among them who had begun to regret going along with Korah. But when they witnessed the dreadful end of their champion, they were filled with terror. Most of them fell in with the shocked people streaming away from the scene of destruction.

Even though they were soon scattered among thousands of others, all two hundred and fifty men suddenly met death by bolts of fire, shooting down from the sky. (Verse 35)

Later, God told Moses that one of Aaron's sons, Eleazar, should gather up all the censers carried by those destroyed men because the censers had been consecrated for priestly service.

"The metals in those censers have been hallowed for service to Me," God explained. "Save them so that they will be used in forming special plates with which to cover the altar of burnt offerings. Then let those plates be a reminder to the people that no one except the descendants of Aaron is to offer incense before Me. Anyone who does otherwise will be subject to the fate of Korah and those who followed him with their foolish ambitions." (Verses 36-40; II Chronicles 26:14-21; and Hebrews 5:4.)

Many of the Israelites who had fled from the scene of terror didn't stop until they had reached the bases of the mountains that were not far distant. Most of them gradually returned to their tents that same night, however, after it seemed evident that there probably wouldn't be another horrible opening of the ground. Nevertheless, there was little sleep that night for many who vividly remembered the terrible events of that day.

Next Morning ...

Next morning, however, the general attitude of the people began to swing back to that of their usual rebellion. There were still many who wanted to see Moses and Aaron lose leadership. They spread tales that the earthquake and the sky fire of the day before were brought about by some kind of terrible magic. They blamed Moses and Aaron for using the magic to kill all those who had died.

This foolish gossip caught on like fire in a windy field of dry grass. By afternoon a sullen and growing crowd was milling around close to Moses' tent. Moses was dismayed when he came out of his tent and the crowd began to shout.

"You have murdered the people who should have been put in God's service!" they chanted. (Numbers 16:41)

The attitude of the people in the crowd showed that at least part of them actually doubted that the events of the day before were entirely God's doing. Otherwise, they should have feared to make such a strong, untrue accusation. At first Moses thought that only those gathered before his tent were blaming him for what had happened. He was more distressed when his officers began bringing in reports of people talking accusingly from all parts of the camps.

Moses went back into his tent to confer with Aaron, leaving the shouting crowd to be handled, if it were possible, by loyal Israelite officers. As soon as Moses entered his tent the crowd quickly became silent.

"The cloud is covering the tabernacle!" someone outside shouted excitedly. "A bright light is glowing from inside the tabernacle!" (Verse 42)

Moses and Aaron knew that this meant that God wanted to talk to them. They hurried out of the tent, strode swiftly to the tabernacle and prostrated themselves before the piercing light.

"Get out of this vicinity at once!" God spoke to them. "I intend to snuff out the lives of all these people because of their sinful attitudes, their ugly disrespect!"

Moses and Aaron were very fearful for all Israel when they heard these words from God. On their knees, with their foreheads bowed all the way to the ground, they begged Him to be merciful and spare the people.

But even while they prayed, an officer rode in from an outlying part of one of the camps to announce that people were falling dead by the hundreds where he had just been. The news spread throughout the crowd, which then began to break up. Those who didn't hurriedly leave started to moan and groan so loudly that Moses and Aaron were roused from their praying.

When Moses heard what was happening, he was more fearful than ever. "God has already started to wipe out Israel with some kind of terrible plague!" he exclaimed to Aaron. "Perhaps God's wrath will subside if we humble ourselves by making a special atonement for the people. Take a censer, get hot coals from the altar and some incense and hurry out among the stricken people with it!"

Aaron quickly did as Moses commanded. He ran all the way to the camp where the deaths were taking place, and elbowed his way through knots of excited, shouting, moaning people who were hurrying in all directions.

"Don't go near them!" Aaron heard someone shout, and saw a man pointing a trembling hand at some figures gasping on the ground. "They have some awful disease that is causing them to suddenly choke to death! It's spreading to other people!" (Verses 43-46)

Aaron quickly scanned the scene of horror before him. People were strewn everywhere. Some were motionless. Others were tossing and struggling, clawing feverishly at their own throats. Most of those attempting to flee from the dying masses were stumbling to the ground, only minutes later to fall victims to the mysterious force that was causing people's throats to tighten shut.

Aaron's Prayer of Faith

Realizing that God was dealing with these people, Aaron stepped into the area between the dead and those who fled. He held his censer up and sprinkled incense on the glowing coals. As the perfumed smoke drifted upward, he uttered in deep sincerity a prayer for God to forgive the Israelites and stop the plague.

All around him people were stumbling down, overcome by the throat-clutching plague. But when Aaron finished praying and looked about, he saw that none of those fleeing were falling to the ground. They were leaving the dead far behind. It was plain to Aaron that God was allowing the people to escape, and that meant that the plague was stopped! (Verses 47-48)

As a result of the faith of Moses and Aaron, God decided to spare the people.

This is one of the outstanding examples of all time of how God can answer prayer. There have been many other times -- more than most people realize. God is always ready to listen to the appeals of those who faithfully obey Him.

However, God is not what some might term a soft-hearted push-over. There is more love and mercy in His character than human beings can understand, but that mercy is tempered by judgment and justice. God's mercy extends in much greater measure than we can imagine to those who are willing to let God rule them. But He does punish the wicked for their own ultimate good.

Once again a great number of Israelites were sobered by their close brush with death, though far from all of them realized just how near they had come to being completely wiped out.

It was no small task to remove the victims of the short-lived plague. 14,700 bodies were taken from the camp and buried at a distance in the wilderness sand. This figure did not

include any who were taken because of the rebellion of Korah and his supporters. (Verses 49-50)

All this loss of life had come about mostly because of the greedy desire of ambitious men to take over the high offices of the nation. Although God had performed astounding miracles to show that the wrong people wouldn't be allowed in the priesthood, there were still men who coveted those high positions, and many more who were yet to be convinced that the Levites weren't to be replaced by others outside their tribe.

One More Miracle

God wanted to settle this issue once and for all, by performing one more miracle in which a few leaders would have a part. He was now going to convince the last of the doubters.

Carrying out instructions from God, Moses commanded each of the twelve tribal princes to bring him the official staff or rod of his respective tribe. These rods had been in the various families a long time. They had been fashioned from straight tree limbs that had become hard, seasoned and polished. The rod for the tribe of Levi was the one used by Moses in Egypt to perform miracles. It was later presented to Aaron.

On each of the rods was inscribed the name of the prince of the tribe to which it belonged. Aaron's name was inscribed on his staff for the tribe of Levi. In the presence of the princes Moses took all the rods and placed them in the tabernacle close to the ark. (Numbers 17:1-7)

"Tomorrow I shall go back after the rods," Moses told the leaders and the crowd behind them. "One of those rods, even though they are actually nothing but hard, dry sticks, will tomorrow be budded out as though it were a green branch. The rod that is budded will indicate in which tribe the priesthood will exist from now on!"

There were smiles and expressions of doubt on all the faces except Aaron's. The tabernacle was guarded all that night. Next morning when Moses brought the rods out of the tabernacle for inspection, those expressions of doubt turned to that of amazement.

All the rods were the same as when they had been put in the tabernacle the day before; that is, except the staff with Aaron's name on it representing the tribe of Levi. It was studded with live limbs ending in tender buds, green leaves, reddish blossoms and even a few almonds ready to pick! (Verses 8-9)

"Now deny the evidence that God wants the priesthood to remain only in the tribe of Levi!" Moses told the astonished leaders. Heads nodded in silent agreement as the crowd broke up. At God's command, Moses put Aaron's rod back in the ark of the covenant as a stern reminder to would-be rebels. From that time on there were no more great efforts to take over the priesthood. (Verses 10-11 and Hebrews 9:4.)

The people were so impressed by this latest miracle that they told Moses they finally realized that they didn't dare go anywhere near the tabernacle in an effort to get the priesthood because God would slay them all if they did. (Numbers 17:12-13.)

Chapter 43

On to Canaan again!

GOD SPOKE to Aaron once again during those trying thirty-eight years of wandering. This time it was to remind him of several very important matters. One was the subject of tithing.

God Explains Tithing

A tithe is a tenth part of anything, especially the tenth of one's increase, whether it be in wage income, livestock or crops. A tenth part of anyone's increase belongs to God.

God uses it for His work. In Old Testament times the Levites did His physical work. So God paid them for their work by His tithes. This tithe, which is actually God's, became the only inheritance of the Levites, inasmuch as they were not to own farming land on which to earn an income. They were to live and carry on God's work with this tenth, and in turn were to tithe what they received from God by paying a tenth to Aaron's family, which held the high priesthood. (Numbers 18:8- 32)

This was the simple but effective system God gave to the Israelites for financing God's physical work and all things that had to do with the tabernacle. Today the tithe still belongs to God and He uses it for His work today -- the preaching of the gospel. This doesn't mean that present-day organizations falsely calling themselves Christian are to receive God's tithes. They are not connected with God or the true Church. God's spiritual work of preaching the gospel has replaced the physical duties of the Levites and tithes are to go only to those who represent it.

Ordinarily it would be a simple matter to figure what a tenth of money wages would be. But some might wonder how one whose increase was only a sheep would give a tenth of a sheep, or how one who had only a small garden would give a tenth of his crop. The answer is that today the value of the sheep is determined and a tithe or tenth of the value of the sheep is paid to God.

Tithing Is for Our Good

So often, when the subject of tithing is brought up in these times, the same remark is heard: "If I gave a tenth of my income, my family would starve!"

People who carelessly make this remark do not realize that just the opposite is true. Perhaps most people don't realize or appreciate that everything they think they possess is not really theirs. It is God's. God merely allows them to use or enjoy it for a while. When we stop to consider this fact, isn't it plain that the Creator is quite generous in requiring that we turn back only a tenth for financing His work?

The tithing law was not instituted for God's benefit. He owns the world and everything in it. (Psalms 24:1 and 50:10.) God gave the tithing law for our good. Our responsibility for handling some of God's money as His stewards helps us to learn to love others and enjoy GIVING. This develops in us God's type of character and trains us for eternal life's true riches. (Luke 16:1-11.)

To add to His generosity, God has made a sacred promise that He will increase our material wealth if only we are faithful in paying Him what we owe. (Malachi 3:10-11.) Can you imagine one person telling another that if he will pay what he owes that the creditor will see to it that the debtor will receive a large financial reward? That's what God has told us, in so many words. Where can one find a better deal than that?

What it all amounts to is that NO ONE CAN AFFORD NOT TO TITHE! God has told us that if we don't tithe we are robbing Him. If we are robbing God -- and millions of people are doing just that today -- we can have no part in the financial blessing that God has decreed for those who are faithful in tithes.

This doesn't mean that others may not temporarily prosper who want to have no part of God and His laws. God is allowing many of them to have the good things only in this life -- the only life some of them will ever have. Surely no wise person would want to be in the position of such people. It is far better to prosper in this life by God's special blessing -- PLUS living forever by the gift of eternal life in surroundings and circumstances that would show worldly millionaires' lives to be dull and miserable!

Have you ever noticed that some religious organizations that don't believe in obeying God are often in such desperate need that they are forced to promote the principle of tithing? They use all sorts of arguments and ideas as to why people should tithe' but why they don't have to keep the Ten Commandments. In most cases these arguments carefully avoid any mention of tithe as referred to in the Old Testament. There is seldom any reference to the reason why God established the tithe and when. That is because there is an increasing disbelief in the Old Testament. Yet they need money -- and that is why they claim to teach tithing.

God is the Author of tithing. It began long before the time of Moses. Abraham and Jacob paid tithes long before Moses' time. (Genesis 14:18-20; Hebrews 7:4-10; Genesis 28:20-22)

Many people who believe in giving a tenth of their increase make a practice of giving it to their favorite charities or needy families. Giving to those in need is good, but that first tenth is to go to no one except God. (Malachi 3:10.) The only way that is possible is to give it to the true representatives of God -- those who are in God's service in His work.

On to Canaan

The next thirty-eight years after the Exodus were spent by the Israelites in wandering aimlessly and often miserably from place to place in the desert regions of the Sinai Peninsula west of the Gulf of Aqaba. The Gulf of Aqaba is a finger of the Red Sea bordering the east side of the peninsula.

There is little record in the Bible pertaining to where they camped and what they did throughout most of this time until more than a generation later -- when they started back to the northeast on the same route they had taken right after they left Egypt.

During those thirty-eight years people died by thousands and thousands. A whole new nation had grown up. During these thirty-eight years God was causing the deaths of all those men who complained when the scouts returned from searching Canaan. Only their children would be permitted to cross over Jordan into the Promised Land. (Deuteronomy 1:35-39.) Several

generations of livestock had long since died. Not all the older people had died since the Israelites had set out in their aimless wanderings, however. Some still living were Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Caleb and Joshua.

Once more, after a lapse of nearly four decades, the tremendous caravan of millions moved up to the city of Kadesh from which the twelve scouts had been sent north to get a good look at Canaan. It must have been a sobering thought to the people that they were still no nearer Canaan after plodding about for over thirty-eight years and looping around and around over the same country for thousands of miles. But they couldn't rightly blame God for their misfortune. If they and those who had gone before had obeyed Him, they would have arrived in safety and prosperity in Canaan almost four decades sooner.

Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, died right after Israel encamped at Kadesh the second time. (Numbers 20:1) She was about one hundred and thirty years of age at her death.

When Israel had stayed at Kadesh the first time, there was plenty of water. Conditions changed in thirty-eight years, however. Some of the springs had dried up. Others couldn't produce enough water to continue to provide for the vast needs of the Israelites and their livestock.

Israelites Complain Again!

Shortly after Miriam's death the water shortage became so serious that a loud, complaining crowd gathered around the tents of Moses and Aaron.

"We want water! We want water! We want water!" they chanted over and over for hours. (Numbers 20:2)

Moses and Aaron were accustomed to this sort of childish mob treatment. They hoped that the noisy crowd would tire and break up, but the situation grew worse. Fearing that violence might result, Moses asked Aaron to appear with him before the crowd.

When the people saw the two leaders standing before Moses' tent, they broke into such a loud roar of discontent that Moses couldn't make himself heard when he tried to address them. The roar finally died down, only to give way to loud accusations from leaders of the mob.

"Why have you dragged us here to die along with our livestock?" one man screamed. "We would have been spared great misery if we had died with our brethren who died in God's plagues years ago!"

"What is your reason," someone else yelled, "for stopping in this rocky, sandy waste where no grass nor vines nor trees grow, and where there is only enough water to make death more painful and lingering?" (Verses 3-5)

The crowd was angrier than Moses had realized. Officers hovered around to quell any outbreak of violence, but it was plain that the officers wouldn't have been capable of managing the crowd if it were to break out in a rampage. There was only one thing to do. Moses seized Aaron's arm and accompanied by loud jeers and hoots from the crowd, the two of them hurried to the tabernacle.

As soon as they entered the sacred tent, a light came from the inner room. It became brighter and brighter as Moses and Aaron bowed with their faces to the ground and made their problem known to God. (Verse 6)

"Take the rod from here in the tabernacle and go with Aaron out to that high rock that is close to the camps," God told Moses. "Call for the people to gather there to witness what will happen. Then SPEAK to the rock, commanding it in My Name to give forth water. After you have done this, plenty of water will come out of the rock. There will be more than enough to take care of the needs of all the people and their animals." (Verses 7-8)

Moses took the rod -- the one that had budded out to show that Aaron's family should retain the priesthood -- and set out with Aaron. It wasn't difficult to attract a crowd. The murmuring mob was still milling about. It noisily followed Moses and Aaron, who were surrounded by a number of officers as they strode off to a certain tall rock that jutted up out of the sand close to the Israelites' camp.

"I have become weary of this mob foolishness over the years," Moses remarked to Aaron. "Again the people have gone too far with their threats and demonstrations. It is time we show them again what great power can come through us!"

"I agree," Aaron answered, glancing uneasily at the mob that was closing clamorously in on them. "It would be wise to use the power through the rod more often to cause these troublemakers to have more respect for us."

This was a wrong attitude on the part of Moses and Aaron. They should have been more concerned with showing GOD'S power and causing the crowd to respect HIM. Both men had been under more strain than usual because of the death of their sister and more complaints than usual from the people. As leaders, however, they were expected by God to exercise great control and wisdom under all circumstances.

This wrong attitude continued when Moses, standing with Aaron atop the rock God had indicated, looked down with disgust on the shouting crowd. He hoisted the famous rod as high as he could hold it until the people's shouting and shrieking died down.

Moses Loses His Temper

"Listen to me, you rebels!" Moses shouted. "You have been whining and complaining about a shortage of water. Why do you complain when you know we have the power to give you water? Don't you know that we can cause this rock to open up and spew out all the water you need?" (Verse 10)

The crowd became completely silent. Thousands upon thousands of eyes were focused on Moses as he stood there on the rock, plainly etched against the bright sky. The Israelite leader was in an increasingly bad mood as he thought of all the insolence and disobedience he had struggled with through the years. Now he harbored a strong desire to once and for all stop their complaining by proving to them that he could, with the rod, perform any kind of miracle.

God had told Moses this time to speak to the rock, commanding it, through the power of the Creator, to give forth water. But instead of speaking to the rock, Moses spoke unadvisedly and in anger to the people. (Psalm 106:32-33.)

"You are only a howling mob undeserving of water!" Moses cried out. "Nevertheless, you shall receive it, if only to remind you that your demonstrations are childish!"

God had not instructed Moses to use the rod to strike the rock. It was to be carried by Moses and Aaron as a symbol of their Levitical authority in using God's tremendous power. But Moses drew the rod back over his head and brought it down sharply on the rock. The crowd gazed in expectant silence as long moments passed.

No water came out of the rock.

Chapter 44

The Troublesome Road to Canaan

When Moses struck the rock at Kadesh and no water came out, painful moments passed.

Some of the people began to hoot and jeer. Moses and Aaron glanced nervously at each other. Vexed and impatient, Moses did the very next thing that came to his mind. He lifted the rod and again whacked it down on the rock with even greater force.

The crowd went silent, waiting for something to happen. Moses was almost crushed by a heavy feeling of embarrassment because no water was forthcoming from the rock.

In his strong feeling against the mob, he had either forgotten or ignored the instructions God had given him. He had chosen his own way, and now he seemed to be unable to make good his boast that he had power to supply water to all those Israelites.

God Brings Water

"If water doesn't come out of this rock after what you've promised," Aaron shakily remarked to Moses, "the people will be so angry that they'll probably go completely out of control. If a miracle doesn't occur within the next minute or two, there'll be plenty of trouble!"

Moses knew Aaron was right. In his unhappy situation all he could think to do was strike the rock a third time. Before, he could do so, however, the boulder shook as though an explosion had taken place within it. Moses, Aaron and the few officers standing farther back on the rock were all but thrown off their feet. When they recovered their balance, they realized that a strong stream of clear water was noisily gushing from the base of the boulder below them! (Numbers 20:7-11.)

A tremendous shout came from the crowd. People rushed toward the rock to dip into the cool water, but were forced back as it surged speedily forth to spread into a swift stream that coursed toward the camps of the Israelites. Even before the stream had flowed into a definite course and had- lost its muddiness, people and livestock thronged to it to get their fill. Then started the task of filling millions of pots, jars and goatskin bags with the precious fluid.

Moses and Aaron were greatly relieved to see the life-giving water flowing from the rock. Another crisis had passed. One more rough spot had been smoothed out.

Nevertheless, Moses knew that all was far from right. Now that water had come to the people, he had a gnawing feeling of guilt.

"We should return to the tabernacle to thank God," Moses muttered uneasily to Aaron.

At the tabernacle God's voice spoke out in such an angry tone that Moses and Aaron trembled as they bowed their heads to the ground.

God's Just Punishment

"You have failed to act with wisdom," God told them. "You, Moses, let your temper get the better of you in front of the people. Then, instead of SPEAKING to the rock as you were instructed, you struck it. In fact, you struck it TWICE, as though it were necessary to keep on flogging it in order for something to happen. You also gave the people the impression that it was through your power and not Mine, that a miracle would produce water. And you, Aaron, spoke and acted in agreement with your brother's wrong attitude.

"Because you have acted with such independence, and have tried to take credit for a miracle that only your Creator could perform, you have failed to honor Me before the people. Therefore neither of you shall be permitted to reach Canaan with your people!" (Numbers 20:12-13, 23-24 and Numbers 27:12-14)

Moses and Aaron remained kneeling in stunned, painful silence. This pronouncement from God felt like a sudden death sentence! It meant that they would not be allowed to enter the

Promised Land for which they had been striving for so many years. Moses and Aaron repented of what they had done. God forgave them. But that did not mean God would remove the penalty in this life. Some sins we still must suffer from even though God has forgiven us.

A few minutes later, when they were certain that God had nothing more to say on the matter, they got up and trudged off to their tents. It was plain to them that God had no favorites, and that He would punish the disobedient in high offices no less than He would punish the disobedient of the lowest rank.

A fact worth remembering is that the more one is educated and trained in God's service, the more God requires of that person.

Moses and Aaron Repent

Even though Moses and Aaron were denied the privilege of entering Canaan with their people, they repented and will undoubtedly reach a much richer promised land -- that of the future. When Christ comes to rule the world only a few years from the time this is written, those resurrected for service under Christ will surely include Moses and Aaron.

Whatever Moses and Aaron thought about their future, their duties still existed. Aaron faithfully continued as high priest. Moses had to make daily decisions as usual.

The greatest decision while the people were in Kadesh was how the Israelites should proceed toward Canaan from that point.

There was more than one route to Canaan from Kadesh. One way had been attempted almost four decades earlier by many of the Israelites when they had been set upon by Amalekites and Canaanites, and when so many Israelites had lost their lives. Another way was to cross eastward over the Mt. Seir range of mountains and then proceed north. Or the traveler could proceed north or south around Edom to the king's highway.

This great highway was a major road leading up east of the Dead Sea. It had been constructed across swamps and deserts and mountains hundred of years previously by local governments, and had since been used and kept in fair condition as a route for armies and merchant caravans.

Moses already knew God would not lead Israel by the way where so many had been slaughtered years before, even though it was the most direct route. Even though it was a longer route, Moses recognized it would be to the advantage of the Israelites to travel on the king's highway through the land of Edom. Once they were through Edom and Moab, they could enter Canaan by turning westward.

Opposition from Edom

Realizing that it was necessary to receive permission to pass through the nation, Moses sent messengers to the ruler of Edom. The letter carried by the messengers pointed out that the Israelites, as cousins of the people of the Arabian desert, had struggled through many years of hardships in their efforts to come out of Egypt, and that they would like to be regarded as friendly relatives passing through the territory of the Edomites.

"Please let us pass through your country," Moses continued in the letter. "We promise not to tramp through your fields or through your vineyards. We won't use even your water. Our desire is simply to reach the king's highway and proceed northward." (Numbers 20:14-17.)

The Israelite messengers returned only a few hours later with word from the ruler of Edom.

"The Edomite king told us to tell you," the messengers reported to Moses, "that if we go through his land his army will attack!" (Verse 18)

Moses was disappointed. He certainly hadn't expected such a hostile reply.

"Perhaps the Edomites don't believe that we won't use their water," Aaron suggested. "They might agree to our moving through their land if we would offer to pay for any water we should use."

"The idea is worth trying," Moses remarked after pondering a few moments.

Later, another set of Israelite messengers returned from Edom with an answer to Moses' second request.

"The king wants you to know," the men reported to Moses, "that our people can't come through his land under any circumstances. He said that while he is king six million strange people and their animals won't go stamping across Edom."

Moses was again disappointed. He had hoped that his second appeal to the ruler of Edom would result in success. Before he could express his thoughts, however, an officer arrived to excitedly announce that Edomite troops were approaching from the north. (Verses 19-20)

Right after the messengers returned, one of Moses' officers shouted to look back to the northeast. Moses and those about him turned to see a vast line of figures silhouetted against the sky atop the ridge in the area where the pass trail led into Edom and toward the king's highway. Sunlight reflected in strong glints from those distant figures indicated that they had swords, spears and armor.

The Edomite army had arrived!

A Narrow Escape

"Sound the signal to break camp!" Moses ordered. "Tell the people to be ready to leave in order within the hour. Warn the men to prepare themselves for a possible attack!"

There was sudden action among the Israelites. The same scene, strangely, had been enacted by them or their ancestors almost two generations before when a part of them had tried to get into Canaan against God's will. Now, however, they were not divided, and they worked faster than before to get ready to leave.

Once again the more than six million people and their flocks and herds moved on the trail that led into the desert valley called the Arabah.

Whether the Edomites planned to attack or whether they intended only to protect their borders is something we probably won't learn until God makes it known in the future when He will undoubtedly reveal all the facts of the past history of man. In any event, the tribes of Israel managed to leave the border in time to avoid any trouble with the army of the king of Edom.

The first stopping point was at Mt. Hor, a high peak of the Seir range. There God gave a special message to Moses and Aaron. He instructed them to come up to the top of the mountain. Aaron was to dress in his priestly robes and was to bring one of his sons, Eleazar. (Numbers 20:22-25.)

The people quickly sensed that some special event was to take place on the mountain, and many of them watched the three men ascend the sandstone mountain to its height of six thousand feet.

Aaron Dies on Mount Hor

After the three arrived atop Mt. Hor, Aaron gazed silently down on the Israelite camp he knew he would never join again. Looking upward, he could see to the west a part of the mountains and deserts through which the people had struggled. He turned his gaze to the northwest, but could not quite see the Promised Land just over a range of mountains. Regretfully he remembered God's pronouncement that he and Moses would not go into that Promised Land because of their wrong attitude when they sought to bring water to the people out of a rock. He realized that he had come to the end of his life.

According to God's instructions, Moses removed the priestly attire from Aaron and put it on Aaron's son Eleazar. As soon as this was done and Eleazar was anointed into Aaron's office, Aaron sat down, leaned back on a ledge and closed his eyes. It was at that moment that he drew his last breath. There was nothing to be done to prevent him from the peaceful and painless death that came to one of God's servants at the age of one hundred and twenty-three years. (Verses 27-28; Numbers 33:37-39.)

There was great mourning among the Israelites when they learned of Aaron's death and burial. The mourning continued for thirty days -- the length of time spent in expressing grief in those days -- because of the passing of a person of high rank. (Numbers 20:29)

Under Attack Again

Meanwhile, a Canaanite king whose small domain included an area of south Canaan heard that the Israelites were about to invade his territory to the northwest of the Mt. Hor region. This king felt that it was wiser to attack than to be attacked. Not to be outdone, he sent mounted troops to the south to rush in on the camps of the Israelites.

So swift was the attack that some of the Israelites were whisked away as prisoners before anything could be done. The Israelites were so upset by what had taken place that they made vows to God that they would wipe out the towns from which the attackers had come if only God would help them. God quickly answered their pleas and Israel proceeded safely northward in the Arabah. (Numbers 21:1-3)

After leaving the Mt. Hor area and defeating the Canaanites, the Israelites continued through the valley of the Arabah. This route was called the way of the Red Sea because it led to the gulf of Aqaba.

Traveling through this huge desert cradle was difficult because of the heat and the arid conditions. A number of people began to complain, especially because of the manna, which they disliked because of their bad attitude. Their state of mind was like a contagious disease. It spread so swiftly that it was only a matter of hours before a pounding wave of discontent disrupted the camps. (Verses 4-5)

As usual, the head complainers organized throngs to gather before Moses' tent with their loud and childish demonstrations. Their remarks were so profane against Moses and against God that God was angrily moved at once to punish the offenders.

Even as noisy crowds shouted against their Creator, screams of pain and terror began to rise from all parts of the camp. Thousands of snakes were suddenly wriggling into the tents, angrily biting the people on the feet and legs, injecting a death-dealing poison that would quickly mean the end of life for their victims! (Verse 6)

Chapter 45

War With the Amorites

IT WAS at Punon in the Arabah, south of the Dead Sea, that the invasion of snakes into the camps of the Israelites occurred. At first they caused more terror than pain. It wasn't long, however, before those who were bitten became very feverish and ill. Their bodies became inflamed and swollen. Agonizing death soon followed.

The number of victims grew swiftly as the hours passed, and Israel began to understand that it was possible that all the people could be wiped out by a horde of poisonous snakes! (Numbers 21:4-6.)

Israelites Repent

Frantic, worried Israelites gathered in a somber crowd before Moses' tent. This time they didn't yell and chant and scream insults at their leader. This time they came to humbly plead with Moses for his help.

"We are sorry about the wrong things we said about you and the complaints we made against manna," a spokesman from the crowd anxiously told Moses. "Would you please ask God to forgive us and take away these terrible snakes?"

Even as Moses was being addressed there was a loud and violent commotion in the crowd. Snakes had slithered in among the assembled people, and many of them were bitten.

Moses was convinced that most of those who had complained and had made spiteful remarks against God and against him were truly regretful of what they had done. He went at once to the tabernacle to entreat God to have mercy on the people and spare them from the poisonous bites of the serpents. (Verse 7)

"Instruct your best craftsmen to mold a brass serpent that looks like the type of serpent that is plaguing the people," God told Moses. "Have them mount it on a long pole, and erect the pole in the center of the camps as a sign of My healing power. Then tell the people that any who have been bitten will be healed and spared from death simply by gazing on the brazen serpent." (Verses 8-9)

Moses hastily obeyed, and very soon the metal snake was raised on a pole close to the tabernacle and the people told what it was for. Throngs of suffering victims gathered to peer at the brass serpent.

Before God's orders could be carried out, however, thousands more had been bitten by snakes in the surrounding dry, rocky areas. This resulted in an increasing crowd of frantic, sick and groaning people to gather within sight of the brass snake.

Thousands had died before it was made, but all those who lived long enough to view the snake on the pole were healed.

God caused the poisonous serpents to depart from the area in which the Israelites were camped. The plague was ended because the offenders regretted what they had done and because of Moses' prayer to God. The removal of the serpent plague was entirely a matter of repentance, prayer, obedience, and faith. The serpent on the pole represented the penalty of sin being taken away. It reminded the Israelites of a coming Savior who would be beaten and then crucified on a pole to pay for the sins of the world. (John 3:14-15.) However, in later times the people of Judah began to worship that serpent until righteous King Hezekiah destroyed it, reminding the people it was only a piece of brass with no power. (II Kings 18:4-5.)

After the serpent plague, the Israelites continued to move by the route called the Way of the Red Sea, finally passing around Mt. Seir to the northeast of Edom. They then proceeded along a small river called Zared or Zered. Here was plenty of fresh, clear water supplied by spring rains in the mountains to the east in Edom. The stream flowed westward into the south end of the Dead Sea.

Here Israel was at the northern border of Edom and the southern border of Moab, a nation extending about halfway up the east side of the Dead Sea.

After crossing the Zared River, the Israelites had no more to fear from the Edomites. Their next important campsite was just beyond another mountain stream about thirty miles to the north. Arnon River, like Zared River, was a small stream in the dry season. In fact, it was possible in extremely dry seasons for it to dry up almost entirely where it flowed into the Dead Sea, but in the area where Israel passed over there was sufficient water, fresh from the mountain springs that fed it, to take care of the Israelites' needs. The Arnon River was the north border of the land of the Moabites and the south border of people to the north called Amorites. (Numbers 21:10-13)

From there the Israelites continued northward. At one area, where they were short of water, God told Moses where the people could find water. They dug down a few feet and found plenty of water for the millions of people and their vast herds and flocks.

The people were so thankful for this needed supply of clear, cool water that they expressed their thanks to God through a great concert of voices and musical instruments. (Verses 14-18)

Moses felt that Israel shouldn't progress very far into Amorite country without permission. Already the caravan was headed along the edge of the high plain country just east of the Abarim mountains, and was running the risk of encountering Amorite soldiers.

Moses knew who the Amorite ruler was, and which city was the capital. He sent messengers to the king, whose name was Sihon, to ask for passage through his country. Moses assured him that no wells nor fields nor orchards would be touched by the Israelites, but that if the Amorites wished to sell them food or water, Israel would be pleased to pay whatever price was asked. (Verses 21-22; Deuteronomy 2:26-29.)

An Enemy Appears

When king Sihon learned that millions of people and animals were intending to pass through his little nation, he became quite excited. He sent the Israelite messengers back at once with

the blunt reply that Israel would not be allowed to pass through the land under any circumstances. (Numbers 21:23; Deuteronomy 2:30)

Moses was discouraged when he received the message. If the Amorite king could successfully block Israel from going farther north, it would mean that the giant caravan would almost certainly have to turn westward and somehow cross the Jordan River.

Moses realized that the Amorite king probably wouldn't be satisfied by merely refusing passage to Israel. It was more likely that he would take advantage of this opportunity to attack the Israelites for the purpose of taking their possessions.

"I shall help you win the battles to come in this land," God told Moses. "Furthermore, I shall wipe out the wicked nations occupying this territory, and Israel shall be the sword by which it will be done!" (Deuteronomy 2:24-25, 31-32.)

Within only a few hours after the Israelite messengers had returned from king Sihon, a heavy force of armed men appeared on the north. The hidden Israelite soldiers waited until the oncoming enemy was well up on the ridges behind which the Israelites waited. Then they leaped out and fell on the Amorites in wave after wave of men with such sudden and surprising force that all the attackers, including king Sihon, were either slaughtered or put to flight.

After this encounter, Moses was certain that the best of Sihon's army had been wiped out. Nevertheless, he directed the Israelites to quickly break camp and move swiftly toward the cities of the Amorites before their occupants could group themselves for defense. The Israelite soldiers reached the main Amorite city of Heshbon, only a few miles distant, to find that it was almost defenseless. They moved quickly in to slaughter all the people, including the family of king Sihon.

God Renders Justice

From then on the Israelites moved swiftly over the land to take over every city and town, slay the people and seize the animals and any other valuable things that could be taken with them. Within only a few days they became the conquerors and destroyers of this small nation. (Numbers 21:24-26; Deuteronomy 2:33-36.)

Many wonder why God had Israel wipe out certain nations. The reason is that they were so miserably sinful that they would be better off dead. In Abraham's time, their iniquity had not reached such a peak. (Genesis 15:16.) By the time the Israelites arrived, however, God said the Amorites should no longer live. This does not mean they are eternally lost. They, like the people of Nineveh, Sodom, Gomorrah, and all the world, will come up in a judgment period, at the second resurrection, after the 1,000 years, and will have an opportunity for salvation. (Matthew 12:41-42; Mark 6:11; Revelation 20:11-13.)

For a while, after conquering the Amorites, the Israelites rested in the conquered land, then continued to move northward.

In spite of the fact that they had gained a quick reputation for tremendous strength in battle, a king of the region northeast of the Dead Sea came out with his army to attack them. His name was Og, and he was a man of gigantic stature -- probably nearly twelve feet in height. The

Bible mentions that the bed in his palace was about eighteen feet long and eight feet wide. (Deuteronomy 3:11.)

Og was one of the last of the strain of giants of eastern Canaan. Some of his soldiers were also very large, and they presented a frightening sight as they charged against Israel.

"Tell your soldiers not to be afraid of these fierce-looking men," God had told Moses. "Remind them that the soldiers of Israel cannot fail because I am with them to help destroy their enemies." (Numbers 21:33-34; Deuteronomy 3:1-2.)

Victory Given by God

Og's forces were vicious, brutal, bloodthirsty men lusting for the opportunity to kill. The Israelite soldiers were almost the opposite, but when they closed with the enemy, a strange thing happened. The attacking giants suddenly seemed to lose their desire for battle. They cringed, ducked, dodged and attempted to turn and run. They suddenly seemed to sense that they were in for certain defeat.

This abrupt cowardice by the enemy made it possible for the Israelite soldiers to swarm over Og's soldiers in a crushing tide of death. Only minutes later Og and his blustering military men were things of the past.

Again Moses directed his soldiers to move swiftly about the nation to try to take Og's cities in the same manner of taking the cities of the Amorites. It turned out that most of Og's forces had gone into the attack. Every city was lightly guarded by small numbers of soldiers, but many of these cities were surrounded by high walls in which there were strong, heavily barred gates.

Using knotted ropes thrown up and looped over the wall spikes, the Israelite soldiers swarmed over the walls and overcame the few fighting men who resisted. Then they unbarred the gates and flooded into the cities to slay all the people that were there. Only flocks and herds were spared, and these were taken, along with food, gold, silver, jewelry and whatever wealth the Israelites found and wanted.

Sixty cities were taken. These centers of habitation weren't mere villages surrounded by thin, short walls. They were fairly large centers of population whose well-built stone buildings and streets were large and wide. Solid stone walls were as much as eighteen inches thick, and were constructed of rock of that region almost as hard as iron. (Numbers 21:35; Deuteronomy 3:3-11.)

So many well-equipped, strongly constructed places of living wouldn't ordinarily be found in a small country -- much of it semi-arid, though fertile -- so far from rivers or oceans or major highways. Some scholars used to think the Bible account of these cities was a work of some writer's imagination. Nevertheless, those cities did exist. Many of their ruins still clutter the plains of Moab and Ammon (ancient Moab and Ammon extended far to the north of what was Moab at that time) and the land east of the Jordan River up to the Mt. Hermon range.

Besides these sixty solidly fortified cities, Israel also took over many centers of habitation that weren't protected by walls. That region was far more populated than the Israelites had expected. Unless God had willed that Israel should have His aid in the task of taking over

these lands and their spoils, the Israelites would have been utterly wiped out by the military-minded occupants.

With God as their champion, it required only a few days for the Israelites to sweep over the land east of the Jordan. The soldiers of Israel were even more surprised at what they had done than were those who were their victims. Armed forces of the past had never dealt such swift and deadly destruction against such strong armies and so many well-fortified cities. It was a miracle that impressed at least a part of Israel more than certain miracles God had brought about at other times.

At this point a question will probably come up in the minds of some readers when they read of the Israelite soldiers slaying the women and children of enemy nations. It would be natural to conclude that all this slaughtering of human beings was nothing less than a mass disregard for the Sixth Commandment, which plainly states that we should not kill.

God is neither fiendish nor unjust. He has referred to Himself as the potter and human beings as the clay. The potter decides how to use the clay and what part of it is to be discarded.

God chose to get rid of the wicked, idol-worshipping nations east of the Jordan because they were so awfully sinful that they could not possibly live normal, happy lives. Besides, the land was not theirs anyway. He could have wiped them out with plagues or earthquakes. But since Israelites, too, had sinned, God chose to let Israel experience the consequence of sin. So He chose to do it through Israel as His instruments. Who should question why the One with infinite wisdom chooses to do something?

God has told us that we shouldn't murder. Many centuries after Israel entered Canaan, Christ explained that law in more detail by explaining that even the desire to murder meant breaking the intent of the Sixth Commandment.

In the case of the destruction of Israel's enemies, God told Israel to slay them. It was a matter of obedience, just as it was when the Levites slew worshippers of the golden calf. As Author of all spiritual and physical laws, God is the only One who has wisdom to decide when a person or nation is sinful enough that death is a blessing.

After conquering the Amorites, Israel's tribes gathered together and encamped for several weeks of peace in an area a few miles northwest of Heshbon, the former Amorite capital.

Moab Plots Against Israelites

Meanwhile, news of what had happened swiftly spread to the surrounding nations, whose rulers were somewhat shaken to learn that such a powerful army had suddenly emerged from the south. Probably the most worried ruler was Balak, king of Moab. He hadn't realized, when Israel had quietly passed along his nation's east border, that these people possessed such a great military force.

Balak feared that Israel would turn back southward and swallow up Moab as it had done to the land of the Amorites. After much meditation and scheming, he decided that there was only one way of certain security. That was to hire some professional wizard to pronounce a curse on Israel!

Chapter 46

King's Ransom Tempt a Prophet

TOWARD the ancient land of Mesopotamia, by the upper Euphrates valley, lived a prophet named Balaam. This man was known in many areas as one who had such a special gift of prophecy that he could pronounce wonderful blessings and great curses on people -- pronouncements that seemed to be amazingly inspired. He knew about God, but was a tool of the devil. He was a high priest of the pagan religion of that land. Balaam always wanted to see how far God would let him have his own way.

A King's Evil Design

Balak, the heathen king of Moab, had heard that Balaam had the power, through God, to bless people, and to curse them. Such a power, he thought, might be much greater than that of any wizard or enchanter who worked through spells and magic and strange mixtures.

"If this man Balaam could be hired to pronounce a curse on all of this upstart nation of Israel," Balak told his officers, "those trespassing people might be so crippled that we could drive them out or even destroy them. We must try every possible means to keep those Israelites away, and therefore I want Balaam to be brought here." (Numbers 22:1-6)

The king immediately sent several of his princes eastward into Midian, where they were joined by Midianite princes. The caravan then moved on northward to the city of Pethor where Balaam lived.

When Balaam was told by these men of high rank why they had come to him, he felt very honored but quite uneasy.

"I am a prophet of the most high God," Balaam slyly said. "If it pleases God to inspire me to pronounce curses and blessings, so be it. But I cannot curse whom He would bless."

"Perhaps you should make certain what you are allowed to do before you give us a final answer," one of the Moabite officers said. "We haven't come here to ask you to do something without a proper reward."

The officer clapped his hands, and in came two servants almost staggering under the weight of a metal-strapped box. The lid was lifted, disclosing a huge amount of pieces of silver and gold. Balaam's eyes widened at sight of this unexpected display of wealth. Nothing more was said, but Balaam knew that this fortune would be his if he would accompany the princes back to Moab and pronounce a curse on Israel. He began to hope that God would allow him to reap those riches. In his heart this wicked man began to covet the reward passionately.

"I certainly must consult God about this matter," Balaam finally spoke up after an awkward silence. "I should like to talk to you more about it tomorrow if you would be pleased to lodge here overnight in the spacious inn just down the street."

The Moabite and Midianite officers took this to mean that the sight of such a rich reward had speedily caused Balaam to give in to their wishes, and they departed with satisfaction for the inn which was one of Pethor's best. (Verses 7-8)

That night God spoke to Balaam, asking him the identity of the men who had come to visit him. God already knew, but He wanted to test Balaam's wicked heart. Balaam was afraid not to tell the truth.

"You must not go with these men to curse the Israelites, for they are blessed," God told him.

Next morning Balaam met with the princes, whose faces fell when they heard what he had to say.

Balaam Speaks Deceitfully

"God has refused to let me go with you to do what you ask," Balaam announced. "There is nothing more to be said or done about the matter except for you to return to your countries."

As Balaam later watched the caravan depart from Pethor, he couldn't help but regret that a fortune in precious metals was slipping through his fingers. He wasn't exactly certain that he had been wise in turning down this opportunity to become wealthy overnight, and he hoped Balak would send more messengers and persuade him so forcefully that he would have to go with them.

After the caravan departed, Balaam's mind often dwelled on that chest of gleaming gold and silver. Balaam felt that if only his fear of God wasn't so great, he could have become possessor of the chest. Instead of desiring a king's ransom, Balaam should have repented.

A few weeks passed. Then another caravan suddenly showed up at Pethor. It was made up of Moabite and Midianite princes of even higher rank than those who had come before. (Numbers 22:15) There were more servants and more animals. The people of Pethor were excited and honored to welcome another assemblage of men of high rank, and were proud that a resident of their city was famous enough to attract such a group of officers from other nations. Balaam's sudden increase in popularity made him even more desirous of the offered wealth.

He was quite impressed with the visitors, especially when some in the caravan turned out to be musicians and dancing girls who performed in the street in front of the prophet's home. He began to realize that if Balak made him rich, he could afford to have his own private musicians and dancing girls. Balaam's love of money was leading him into all sorts of evil desires. (I Timothy 6:10.)

Following the street performance, the head princes met with Balaam to inform him that the king of Moab had been greatly disappointed because his offer had been turned down, but that he was so needful of Balaam's services that he would give him great rank besides anything he asked if only he would come to Moab and call down a curse on Israel.

Playing With Temptation

This was a severe temptation to Balaam. All that he had to do to be wealthy the rest of his life was to go to Moab and utter a few words against Israel in the name of God. What bothered him was the question of just how long his life would last if he continued to disobey God's will. He hoped circumstances would work out so that he could please Balak without directly disobeying God.

"I can't do anything God tells me not to do," Balaam told the princes. "Even if your king were to give me a whole house full of gold and silver, I cannot do any more or less than God allows. However, I will contact God tonight to see just how far He will allow me to go in having my own way. If it pleases you to stay overnight in our city, there is good lodging in the adjoining place down the street. I shall be in touch with you tomorrow to report what I am allowed to do." (Numbers 2:16-19.) It was plain to see by the expression of the princes, as they filed out, that they were gravely disappointed in the answer they received.

Balaam wondered later if they would ever return. Then God again spoke to Balaam. "If these men from Moab and Midian come to you in the morning, I won't stop you from leaving with them," God said. "If it turns out that you do go with them, remember that I am warning you not to say anything to them except what I tell you to say." (Verse 20)

Balaam Disobeys

Balaam got up very early next morning to prepare for the possible return of the princes. When a little time dragged on, and no one showed up, it seemed like hours. Balaam was worried. He desperately wanted to go to Moab because of the rich reward that could be his, but he feared to displease God. Finally he reasoned around God's command by saying to himself, "God said if they came for me I should go with them; and they came for me yesterday." So he decided to go with the princes without waiting longer for them to come for him. After all, the princes may have given up the idea of hearing from him, and started preparing to return to their native lands. Balaam's decision was direct disobedience, because he was commanded originally not to go unless the princes came for him that next morning.

"Go quickly to the lodging place of the princes," Balaam instructed a servant. "If they are yet there, tell them that they need wait no longer for word from me. If they have already gone, overtake them and tell them that I shall join them."

A little while later the servant returned to report that the caravan was about to leave Pethor, and that the princes were surprised, but looking forward eagerly to Balaam joining them on the trail.

Balaam instructed his servants to prepare a burro for him and provisions for a long journey for three people -- himself and two servants. (Verse 21) A short time later Balaam's group joined the caravan on its way to Moab and Midian.

Suddenly Balaam's burro lunged off the trail and into a field, almost throwing its rider. Angered by the animal's unusual action, Balaam lifted the rod he was carrying, and violently struck the burro on one of its flanks to force it back onto the trail. The animal, however, kept on heading out into the field. Balaam was furious.

His fury would have swiftly melted away if he could have been aware of what had startled the burro. An angel bearing a sharp sword was standing in the road! He had made himself

visible only to the burro, which finally, because of Balaam's angry shouts and gouging heels, started back toward the road. The angel swiftly moved and stationed himself before the donkey between two vineyard walls bordering a pathway leading back to the road. (Verses 22-24)

To bypass the angel, the burro lunged to the side, this time painfully jamming her master's foot and crushing it against the wall. Balaam vengefully struck the burro on the neck with his staff, as the animal staggered fearfully forward. The angel again stationed himself further down the narrowing path. When the burro saw it could not get by the angel, it collapsed with fright and nervousness at being so close to the ominous figure of an angel of God. What little patience Balaam had left came to an abrupt end. He leaped up and brought the staff down on the animal's back with all his strength.

The Burro Speaks!

With God all things are possible. (Mark 10:27.) The burro opened her mouth and spoke her thoughts as though with a human voice!

"What harm have I done to you to cause you to strike me so violently these three times?" the animal asked Balaam.

Balaam stepped back, his mouth falling open in astonishment. It was too much for him to believe that this animal had actually spoken, yet he somehow felt obliged to reply.

"I -- I struck you because -- because you have made me look ridiculous by tossing me around and shoving me against that wall. Besides, you are delaying me in an important trip," Balaam nervously but angrily answered. "If this staff of mine were a sword, I would jab it through you!" (Numbers 22:25-29.)

Balaam stared at the burro, wondering if he had been wrong in thinking that she had spoken in the first place. Then the animal's mouth quivered again and Balaam was unhappily certain that it was actually the burro that was talking.

"Years ago you chose me as your favorite animal for riding," the burro said. "I have served you faithfully all this time. Have I ever treated you so badly as you have treated me just now?"

Balaam was still a little stunned because of the human voice that came from the mouth of his burro.

"-- uh -- no!" he finally managed to mutter. (Verse 30)

God gave Balaam the ability to suddenly see the angel. The prophet staggered back, his eyes popping in amazement. In dreams and visions he had heard and seen angels, but this was the first time he had ever seen one while awake. Because of his feeling of guilt, he fell forward to prostrate himself before the powerful being from God.

"What good did it do to beat your donkey?" the angel asked Balaam. "I was standing in your path, and when the animal saw me there, she tried three times to dodge around me. Were it not so, I would have used this sword to kill you -- though not your donkey -- because of your

disobeying God by joining the caravan returning to Moab!" (Verses 31-33) Groveling with his face in the soil, Balaam realized how wrong he had been in coveting the fortune offered him to curse Israel. How unwise he had been in not fearing God enough to refuse to disobey. He realized he should have stayed at home, since the princes did not come for him in the morning after God instructed him.

"I have sinned!" he cried out. "I didn't know that God would go so far as to send one of His angels to slay me. Please spare me! If you don't want me to continue, allow me to return to my home!"

"I shall spare you," the angel told Balaam, "but not to return to your home. Now that you have begun this journey, God permits you to rejoin Balak's caravan. However, when you arrive in Moab, you are to declare only the things I tell you to speak."

God was giving Balaam another opportunity to refuse wealth and choose to obey Him. If God had sent him back home, Balaam would not have had another such test of character. Balaam was greatly relieved not to be punished. He gladly agreed to God's terms, remembering the wealth of Balak. Accompanied by his two servants, who had excitedly watched and heard his strange experience from only a short distance, he hastily rejoined the caravan of princes headed back toward Moab. (Verses 34-35)

After the caravan was well under way, a messenger using the swiftest beast in the caravan was sent ahead to inform king Balak that Balaam was already on the way with the caravan.

Balaam Continues Lusting

"Why didn't you come to Moab the first time I sent for you?" king Balak asked a little impatiently, on meeting Balaam. "Didn't you realize that I am able to give you a high and honorable position in my government, as well as the treasure my men offered you?" Balaam was happy to hear the treasure mentioned again. He had again begun to think more about it and less about the warning God gave through His angel.

"It was difficult for me to leave Pethor when your first caravan arrived," Balaam replied. "Here I am at last, but I want you to know that I have no power to curse or to bless any nation unless God gives me that power. I can speak only what I am told to speak." (Verses 37-38) Balaam was careful to speak in such a way that king Balak would not give up, but would keep trying harder to buy his services. He had become greedy for the reward Balak promised. (II Peter 2:15-16; Jude 11.)

As Balaam hoped, his statement didn't discourage Balak. The king was convinced that the prophet somehow could manage to bring down God's wrath on Israel. He correctly believed that Balaam's statement perhaps meant that the price would be higher than anything Balak had already offered. Whatever the price, the king was willing to pay and was pleased to take Balaam with him farther into Moab, to the town of "Kirjath-huzoth", which means "a city of streets."

Because the king and princes of Moab and Midian were present, there was a great celebration that night. Pleasure-seeking shepherders and cattledrivers whooped and yelled as they moved in and out of the various establishments of the town.

The festive feeling was further promoted when the king ordered his musicians, entertainers and dancing girls to perform their best and loudest in the streets and market place. Although Balaam realized that this festivity was at least partly in his honor, he was uncomfortable. He reasoned he was better than those boisterous Moabites. He was even less at ease when he noticed a huge fire being built at a street intersection, and was told that the Moabites were about to sacrifice oxen and sheep to their gods, and that generous portions were being brought to him and the Midianite princes with him. (Verse 40)

"We seek protection from our enemies by pleasing our gods with sacrifices," Balak explained to Balaam. "If you wish to offer sacrifices to yours at the same time on this altar, I shall see that you are supplied with any kinds of carcasses you need. Of course I hope that you will at the same time implore God to curse Israel."

"I am sorry to disappoint you," Balaam answered, "but God has forbidden me to do what I would like to. So I can't join you in this ceremony."

So Balak was again disappointed.

Chapter 47

Balaam's Four Prophecies

NEXT morning after the feast king Balak of Moab sent his entertainers back to their homes. But he continued onward to the west with Balaam, Balaam's two servants and the Moabite officers and servants. The caravan journeyed on to a mountain overlooking the site where the hosts of Israel were camped. (Numbers 22:39-41.)

Balak Is Jealous

"There you see all those powerful people who have swept up from the south to swallow up our nations," Balak said to Balaam. "Camped there as they are, they appear peaceful. When they move, however, they seem to sweep up and devour everything in their path like locusts. They must be stopped. Otherwise every nation including mine, could fall before them."

Balak knew that what he said was not true. God had forbade Israel to attack Moab. (Deuteronomy 2:5, 9, 19) Balak was jealous of Israel.

Balaam knew of this strange nation that had come out of Egypt, and he knew that the God of the Israelites was the only true God -- the One he was afraid of. He realized that he had run into a very serious situation. If he were to ask God to curse Israel, he would be asking God to crush the nation the Creator had chosen for a very definite reason. Balaam didn't completely understand why God was with Israel, but before he went any further for Balak, he decided to try to get in touch with God.

"Have your men build seven altars on this mountain," Balaam told Balak. "Have them bring seven oxen and seven rams to sacrifice as burnt offerings."

King Balak was willing to do whatever Balaam asked. The altars were quickly set up and the sacrifices were made. While ceremonies were in progress, Balaam slipped away to a higher part of the mountain, hoping that he could get in touch with God.

Because God was using Balaam for a purpose -- and not because of the sacrifices Balaam had asked Balak to make -- God spoke to Balaam from the rocks of the highest part of the mountain, instructing him just what to say to Balak when he returned. When Balaam finally arrived back at the site of the seven altars, Balak and the high officers of Moab stood by the sacrifices and anxiously awaited what he would have to say. They hoped that he would at last utter a curse on Israel.

Balaam hesitated a little before saying anything, because he suddenly realized that what he was about to speak would startle the Moabites. (Numbers 23:1-6)

Balaam Prophecies

"As all of you before me are aware," Balaam began, "I was summoned all the way from my home in Aram in the mountains of the East by king Balak. The king's wish has been that I call down the wrath of God on Israel, the nation that has recently come up out of Egypt to destroy the Amorites. If God's wrath would suddenly come on Israel for sin, then how much more would it fall on the nation of Moab? God is the God of Israel. It would be impossible for me to bring a curse by God on a nation that He has already blessed. It would be most foolish, in fact, for any one or any nation to try to go against any nation that God is not against and is protecting.

"Even now we are able to look out and see these people God has chosen for some great purpose. Israel shall always stand out above other nations, and it shall be one whose numbers can be compared to the numbers of specks of dust in the ground. I trust that when I die, my death shall be as honorable as that of those people we see below who have been chosen for some high purpose!" (Verses 7-10)

Balak was surprised and irritated by the unexpected speech from Balaam. He had hoped for a curse, but Balaam's words, which God required him to speak, amounted to a magnificent blessing rather than a curse.

Balak strode up to Balaam, planted his fists on his hips, and frowningly regarded the prophet.

"Why have you spoken these good things about Israel instead of what I expected?" the king angrily asked. "I didn't bring you here for this sort of thing. How could you do the opposite of

what I have counted on your doing -- especially when you consider the rich rewards that could be yours?" (Verse 11)

Balaam Speaks Dishonestly

"Don't I have to say what God told me to say?" Balaam asked. "What else could I do?" (Verse 12) Balaam intended these words to soften the blow of God's prophecy and encourage Balak to keep trying to bribe Balaam with bigger sums of money.

Balak was discouraged by this answer, but, as Balaam hoped, he didn't intend to give up. He reasoned that Balaam had been so awed by the vast spread of Israelites that he feared to utter a curse on them.

The Moabite king quickly decided to take Balaam to another mountain from where only a part of Israel could be viewed. Balak was well aware of how the camping Israelites appeared from all directions, what with his spies having carefully watched them ever since they had come out of the south.

Regardless of God's instructions that Balaam should speak only good things concerning Israel, the prophet went with Balak to a flat section of a high ridge known as Mt. Pisgah. (Verses 13- 14)

"There you again see those intruders," Balak said to Balaam. "Why not implore your powerful God to punish them?"

"I still must obey what God tells me to do," Balaam answered. "To approach Him again, we must once more build seven altars and offer a ram and a bullock on each altar. Then I'll seek another meeting with God to inquire if He will allow me to curse Israel."

At a command from Balak, seven altars were set up on Mt. Pisgah, and a bullock and a ram were sacrificed on each of the altars. Meanwhile, Balaam again went into a remote section of the mountain to try to contact God. Once more he was successful, but only because God purposed to contact him. Even though Balaam was still greedy for Balak's reward, God was very patiently waiting to see if Balaam would finally repent and quit serving himself and the devil. Though he was afraid of God he did not repent.

"Tell Balak what I am about to tell you," God said to Balaam, and Balaam, out of dread of punishment, memorized what God had to say.

For the second time Balaam returned from a mountain visit with God to report to king Balak.

"I have been in touch with God," Balaam called to Balak, "and He has told me more things to tell you."

"What has God spoken?" Balak calmly asked, though anxiously hoping that either God or Balaam had undergone a change of mind. (Verses 15-17)

More Inspired Prophecy

"He has said that you, Balak, should listen to Him," Balaam replied. "He has said that you should learn that He does not lie, as does a mortal man, and that He will surely carry out any purpose or promise He had made. God has blessed Israel, and I have been instructed to carry on according to that blessing. It would be impossible for me to change God's blessing into a curse.

"You should know that God has not regarded the shortcomings of Jacob, the forefather of Israel, as something so evil that all of Jacob's descendants should be cursed into oblivion. God brought Israel out of Egypt, and gave that nation the strength of the giant wild bull. No prayer, no art, no craft nor enchantment from outsiders can affect Israel. In time to come people will marvel at how this nation was kept alive under God's protection. In fact, Israel shall become known as a strong young lion that doesn't rest until he has eaten well of his prey, and that prey will be nations that can be compared to gazelles, deer and other animals much weaker than the lion." (Verses 18-24)

Balak stared in shock at the prophet. Balaam was wearing the king's patience to an end. If he hadn't been so desperate for help against Israel, he would have ordered the prophet out of his presence.

"If you won't curse the Israelites now," Balak muttered wearily, "then at least you can refrain from pronouncing a blessing on them!"

"Didn't I tell you," Balaam replied, "that I would have to speak whatever God would tell me to say?" Balaam should have flatly refused to help Balak, but he didn't. He still hoped he could please Balak, without being punished by God.

If Balaam hadn't been afraid of God's great power, he never would have spoken or acted in such a manner. But he still had a desire for the reward that Balak was willing to give him, if he could only influence God to change His mind.

Balak refused to give up what he had set out to do through the prophet. Immediately he suggested that they go to Mt. Peor, which was a high point of the Abarim range. From there all of the camp of Israel could be seen. Balak hoped that there was a chance that Balaam might break down and pronounce a curse on Israel if he could be convinced that such a large and powerful nation might well move eastward and destroy Balaam's home town.

Later, when the Moabite caravan and those with it viewed the Israelites from Mt. Peor, Balak was dismayed to hear Balaam ask for the third time that seven altars should be built for sacrificing animals. Balaam was fearfully aware that invisible angels were listening to all his words and watching everything he did. But he again thought he could influence God to let him curse Israel so he could obtain Balak's reward. Balak gave orders to carry out Balaam's wish. The Moabite king didn't want to do it, but he was still interested in getting Balaam to curse Israel. (Verses 25-30)

In spite of his hopes to earn favor and fortune from the Moabite king, Balaam realized it would be useless to continue hoping God might curse Israel for Balak. His recent contacts with God made it quite clear that it was impossible to tempt God to change His mind.

For this reason, Balaam did not even go to seek another vision as he had previously done. As the prophet looked down from Mt. Peor on the Israelites camped in their orderly manner on

the plains of Moab, he was suddenly required by God to speak another clear and vivid prophecy to Balak and those about him.

Moabites, Midianites and even Balaam's two servants gathered around in curiosity as the prophet's voice rang out from the mountain top to tell them marvelous things they hadn't expected to hear.

"I, Balaam, the son of Beor, have been given understanding by God in matters I am about to relate," Balaam declared.

He then went on, to the growing discomfort of most of his audience, to speak of Israel and what would happen to that nation.

Israel's Future Unfolded

"How fine is the array of colorful tents and tabernacles of Israel on the plain below!" Balaam exclaimed. "They are spread out as watercourses from the mountains, as gardens by a river, as sandal trees and cedars of Lebanon growing naturally in rows beside the streams.

"Israel shall have plenty of prosperity. His descendants shall be uncountable. His king shall have more power than any other king, and the kingdom of Israel shall become the strongest one in the world. God brought this nation out of Egypt and gave it the strength of the giant wild bull. This people will swallow up its enemies after breaking their bones and piercing them with deadly weapons!

"Israel is like a great lion that people fear to bother. Those who bless Israel shall be blessed. Those who curse Israel shall be cursed!" (Numbers 24:1 -9)

This was exactly the opposite of what the king of Moab hoped to hear. He felt that Balaam had betrayed him, and he violently struck his hands together, an action in those times that indicated great anger.

"I offered you handsome rewards to come here to curse my enemies!" Balak shouted as he strode up to Balaam. "Instead, you blessed them! Now take your servants and get out of here without the reward God has prevented you from receiving!" (Verses 10-11)

"Perhaps you have forgotten," Balaam calmly reminded the king, "that when your messengers first came to me I told them that a whole house full of gold from you would not cause me to do anything in this matter but what God allows me to do. Didn't I say then that I had to say exactly what God requires me to say?" (Verses 12-13)

Then God ordered Balaam to utter another astonishing prophecy: "Now, before I leave, I should tell you what God says Israel will do to your people in the future. An Israelite king will come into power who will strike your nation with such force that it will be smashed at once. Those Moabites who remain alive will be taken as servants of Israel!"

The king of Moab sensed that Balaam spoke the truth, and his haughty expression quickly turned to one of uneasiness.

"When -- when is this supposed to happen?" Balak asked, forcing a tone of command into his voice.

"You will not live to see that day," Balaam answered. "But it will happen as surely as the sun is in the sky. As for Edom and Seir, those countries shall also fall to Israel. Even the powerful Amalekites shall go down before Israel, and shall disappear forever as a nation. The Kenites shall also be taken captive, though they live in the rocky strongholds of the mountains.

"The climax will bring frightening changes in many parts of the world. Nations from across the seas will attack and be attacked. There will be great trouble in time to come. Israel, the nation God has chosen for carrying on His purpose in the world, will end the most glorious nation!"

There were only low murmurs from the Moabites and Midianites as Balaam and his two servants mounted their animals and rode away on the trail that led down Mt. Peor. (Verses 14-25)

Balak was sobered by what Balaam had said, but, lest those about him should notice his fear, he shrugged his shoulders and managed a smirk of derision that would have faded quickly if he could have foreseen his nation being overcome by a future Israelite king by the name of David. (II Samuel 8:1-2)

Most of the prophecies made by Balaam were for Old Testament times. Some are yet to come true in these latter days because God always does what He promises to do!

Balak returned to the city from which he ruled Moab, but Balaam never got back to his home town. He continued to lust after the reward he had missed. He began to devise a plan he thought might get him a part of it. So he stopped in the land of Midian.

Knowing that the Midianites as well as the Moabites wished to see Israel destroyed, Balaam sold to their leaders an evil scheme. His plan was to promote sin between Israelite men and the pagan women of Midian and Moab. He reasoned that this sin would bring down God's curse on all Israel.

The Israelites continued to stay on the verdant plain that was partly shaded by many acacia trees. It was a pleasant, fruitful area in which to camp and the Israelites were in the midst of plenty. But an exceedingly unpleasant matter soon began to develop.

Some of the men of Israel were attracted to some of the Moabite, Ammonite, and Midianite women. This situation swiftly grew into a mountainous problem. More and more Israelite men married these pagan women, something forbidden by God. Israel was not to intermarry with outsiders -- especially those who were heathen. Besides, due to Balaam's teaching, many Moabite women and Israelite men were taking the physical privileges of married persons, although unmarried. This meant they were breaking the seventh and tenth commandments. (Revelation 2:14)

What was more, the Moabite women were leading their Israelite husbands and lovers into Sabbath-breaking and worshiping pagan gods. (Numbers 25:1-6) These gods included Astarte or Ishtar, a deity giving her name to "Easter" eggs. This idolatry was later brought into so-

called Christian churches, by the modern successors of Balaam, and came to be known as Easter. One sin led to another then just as it does today.

God's fierce anger was aroused when He noticed these things continuing and growing. He was angry because so many Israelite men were mixing with Moabite and Midianite women. The men were allowing themselves to be drawn by these foreign women into taking part in worshiping pagan gods and into mixed marriages.

Today, the same sins are being repeated.

"Seek out and punish by death the individuals who have committed these sins before it spreads further," God told Moses. "If you don't, I will curse the whole nation of Israel!" (Numbers 25:1-4)

Balaam's wicked project was beginning to pay off for Midian and Moab.

"This is the kind of sin that can destroy a whole nation if allowed to continue. Tell the heads of the twelve tribes to seize the lesser tribal leaders and the better-known men who have so heedlessly gone against My warnings not to mingle with strange nations," God told Moses.

"The leading tribal chiefs must themselves stone the law-breakers and have them hung on poles for a whole day to show what can happen to those who follow evil leaders and ignore My rules! This matter, however, isn't going to end with merely a warning. I am going to bring a plague on all the other offenders," said the Eternal to Moses, "and unless this taking of foreign women stops at once, the plague will spread to all of Israel!" (Verses 4-5)

Instantly Moses Acted.

The order was carried out, and within only a few hours the corpses were hanging on poles erected close to the center of the Israelite camps. These gruesome reminders and Moses' stern rebuke shocked the people. There was much loud wailing and moaning, a habit acquired from the Egyptians. Most of the Israelites truly regretted what had happened, and from them there were genuine groans and weeping of shame and repentance. (Verse 6)

Last Wilderness Plague

At the same time an amazingly dreadful thing began to happen to thousands of Israelite men who were guilty of being involved with Moabite and Midianite women and their pagan sacrifices. In all the camps offenders were abruptly overcome by terrible pains in their chests. They thudded to the ground as though they had been stoned with invisible stones. It was as though angels had stoned the offenders that the tribal chiefs of Israel had failed to stone. The victims were able to gasp only a few tormented breaths before dying.

When news of this reached the mourners near the tabernacle, the groaning and shrieking reached higher peaks, and there was growing sorrow and shame in the homes of the men who were stricken, because everyone knew they died for their shameful conduct. Some of these men were sons of respectable parents and tribal leaders. Others were fathers whose wives and children had no idea -- until their sudden deaths -- that foreign women had drawn these men into trouble.

All this heartache and grief came because Balak was jealous of Israel and because Balaam lusted so much after the wages promised by Balak that he taught the pagans how to lead rebellious Israelite men into sin. (II Peter 2:16; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14)

Even in the face of these abrupt and terrible developments there were those who were so scornful of God that they refused to put aside the women of these pagan nations.

A Rebel Prince

Such a one was Zimri, a prince of the tribe of Simeon. Even at the height of the time of mourning and repentance, Zimri came into the tabernacle area with a Midianite princess named Cozbi. The couple brazenly passed through the mourning Israelites and on to a private tent in the camp of Simeon.

Zimri was plainly recognized by many, including Moses, who assumed that officers would quickly go to Zimri and find out from him the identity of the strange woman. Because of Zimri's high rank, however, officers who should have detained him allowed him and his Midianite princess to go their way without bothering them. (Numbers 25:6)

Phinehas, one of Aaron's grandsons, took particular notice of where Zimri and Cozbi went and noticed the officers' hesitancy in punishing them. Acting according to God's special order that offenders in this matter should be slain, Phinehas seized a spear that had been put down by an Israelite soldier, and followed the couple to the tent they had entered. Phinehas jerked the tent flap open, then hurled the spear with such force that it pierced the bodies of both Zimri and Cozbi.

From that moment on no one else died of the mysterious lung-crushing plague that had come on Israel. Till that time, however, twenty-four thousand Israelite men lost their lives -- twenty-three thousand in one day -- including about a thousand who were stoned as examples to warn Israel of the heavy penalty of mixing with foreign nations. (Verses 7-9, 14-15) God had this shameful and tragic episode recorded to teach us that we should not lust after dishonest money and should not marry or follow the practices of evil women, and that we should worship only God.

(I Corinthians 10:6-11)

"Phinehas, by his loyal action, has proved that there are those who stand for justice," God told Moses. "Because of his zeal to punish offenders and atone for the sins of his people, others will now fear to disobey. Therefore, My wrath against Israel has been stopped. Furthermore, I extend to this man an agreement of peace. I assure him that I shall spare him from any Midianites who would try to avenge the Midianite princess, and that those after him shall remain in the priesthood forever!" (Numbers 25:10-13.)

The next few days were ones of misery, shame and sorrow in Israel. At the same time, though most people weren't aware of it to the full extent, they had reason to rejoice and be thankful because of God's anger having been turned from them.

This didn't mean that God was satisfied with the way matters turned out. He was well aware that the Midianites and Moabites -- especially the Midianites -- had plotted to use their women to wrongly influence men of Israel. He planned to punish Midian, but not until He had accomplished some other things. (Verses 16-18)

One of those things was the taking of a census. It had been over thirty-eight years since the people had been numbered. During that time there had been changes in the tribes. Now that Israel was obviously about to take over Canaan, it was necessary to know the number of people in every tribe so that the leaders would know the size of the army and so the land could be divided in a manner that would be fair to all. (Numbers 26:52-54)

Only the males from twenty years of age and up were numbered. The men of the tribe of Levi were counted separately and in a different way because they were not in the army and they had no inheritance as did the men of the other tribes. (Numbers 1:47-49; Numbers 2:33.)

At the time of this second census, not one man remained to enter the Promised Land who was numbered in the first numbering, except Caleb and Joshua, who were faithful to God. (Numbers 14:29-30; Deuteronomy 1:34-35.) However, Moses, Eleazar and Ithamar (Aaron's sons) and some other Levites who were alive at the time of the first census remained alive because the Levites were not condemned to die in the wilderness with the over 600,000 soldiers who complained when God told them to go in and occupy the Promised Land. The Levites had remained faithful to God even when all the rest of Israel worshipped the golden calf. (Exodus 32:25-29.) Because of their faithfulness, the Levites were given special blessings. (Deuteronomy 33:8-11.)

This miracle of destroying the older generation of murmurers was one of the many great wonders and miracles by which God proved His power to Israel while they wandered forty years in the wilderness. (Acts 7:35-36.) But God had been faithful to the other half of His promise and had saved alive those who had been under twenty years of age when Israel murmured against Him. (Numbers 14:31; Numbers 26:11.) The Promised Land was now in sight as God finished wiping out the older generation of condemned rebels, leaving a new generation of men who were under sixty years old.

When the figures of the second census had been totalled, they showed that some of the tribes had increased and some had decreased. Not including the Levites, who had increased by only a thousand, there were 1,820 less men (over twenty years of age) than the first census showed. If Israel had been obedient in the past, the census would have shown an increase of thousands and thousands in all the tribes. Besides, they would have been dwelling safely and in good health in Canaan.

Inheritance Law Explained

Right after the census was taken, five sisters brought a problem to Moses and Eleazar. They explained that because their father was dead and because they had no brothers, their father's inheritance and name would be lost if they were not permitted to inherit in the place of sons. (Numbers 27:1-5) This was due to the fact that property that was passed on to following generations could be claimed only by those registered in the census. Those didn't include women.

Moses and Eleazar realized that there could be many such cases among the millions of Israelites. They felt that the matter was important enough to bring to God, especially at this time when Canaan was obviously about to be divided up as an inheritance among the tribes of Israel.

When Moses brought the cause before God, the Creator told him that the five daughters had done well in speaking out, and that His law concerning this situation should be made known to the people.

"Let it be recorded," God informed Moses, "that if a man dies who has no sons, his property shall pass on to his daughters. If he has no daughters, what he owns shall go to his brothers. If he has no brothers, his estate shall go to his father's brothers. If his father has no brothers, his property shall go to those who are of the closest relationship." (Verses 6-11)

Shortly after this new law was established, God told Moses that he should climb to the top of one of the nearby Abarim mountains so that he could view the land the Israelites were to possess.

"After you have seen Canaan from afar, your life shall end on that mountain," God said. "You are not to enter into the Promised Land because of your disobedient attitude in getting water out of the rock at Kadesh." (Verses 12-14) This decree was no surprise to Moses, since God had refused his request to enter Canaan just after conquering Gilead and Bashan. (Deuteronomy 3:4, 10, 23-27.)

Although Moses had expected this, it shocked him to learn that he would die so soon. He realized that God meant what He said, and that it would be futile to beg to have his life spared. What mattered most was how Moses would be replaced. When Moses finally spoke, that was foremost in his mind.

Joshua to Take Moses' Place

"Your will be done," Moses said. "But before I come to the end of my days, I should like to know that you have set a man in my place so that your people will not be as sheep without a shepherd." (Numbers 27:16-17)

By this request Moses didn't mean that he felt that God couldn't get along without him or someone to take his place. But Moses understood that God had always worked to a great extent through human beings. It was only natural that he would want to know through whom God would next lead Israel, and to have that man established in office.

"Joshua shall succeed you," God told Moses. "Call the congregation together to witness the transferring of some of your honor on Joshua before Eleazar the priest. From the time that Joshua takes your place, he must consult Eleazar, who will come to me in the tabernacle. I have spoken to you directly, but this is the way in which Joshua shall receive instruction on how to lead Israel." (Verses 18-21)

Later, before Eleazar and a huge crowd of Israelites, Moses put his hands on Joshua's head and lifted his voice to God.

"As a chosen servant of You, the God of Israel," Moses prayed, "I am willing to give up the power and honor of my office whenever I am taken from this life. I pray that even greater power and honor will go to Joshua, the man You have chosen to follow me. Thank You for giving me this wonderful opportunity to be of service. Now I ask your very special blessing on this man, that he would be inspired with the strength and character and wisdom to rightly lead your people. By your authority I now charge him with the responsibility of the office that has been mine." (Numbers 27:22-23; Deuteronomy 3:21-22, 28; Deuteronomy 31:14-15, 23.)

Although Moses' office had in a sense been transferred to Joshua, full authority was not to go to Joshua as long as Moses lived. Moses was busy for some time afterward receiving instruction from God having to do with offerings, holy days and civil laws. All these things were recorded and passed on to the people to preserve for us today. (Numbers 28, 29, 30) It was during these trying times that the first four books of the Bible were completed by Moses.

Chapter 48

Victory East of the Jordan

THIRTY-NINE years had passed since 6 million Israelites had fled from Egypt to escape their oppressors. (Numbers 1:1; Numbers 13:1-3, 26; Deuteronomy 2:14.) Because they usually chose the way of sin, thousands upon thousands had died of war and sickness. Only a few of the many adult men who had started from Egypt were still alive after wandering for so many years through the deserts and mountains. (Numbers 26:63-65.)

But death and misery hadn't prevailed all the time. Whenever the people chose to repent of their wrong ways and had the good sense to live as God had instructed them to live, they enjoyed good health, a happy state of mind and God's protection. (Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Deuteronomy 30:15-20.) And through all the years God gave them nourishing manna and miraculously prevented their clothes and shoes from wearing out. (Deuteronomy 8:4.)

Knowing only the rigors of desert living, they greatly enjoyed a few months of camping on a verdant, spring-fed, tree-studded plain a few miles east of the Jordan River. (Numbers 22:1)

About this time Moses was called to the tabernacle to receive special instruction.

"Do The Impossible!"

"The time has come for my people to strike against the Midianites," the Creator said to Moses. "They must be punished because of their evil plan to influence Israelite men to go over to pagan ways through the wiles of the Midianite women. The Midianite leaders hoped that if enough Israelites fell in with worshipping their gods, I would be displeased and withdraw my protection from Israel. Then they intended to attack. I was indeed displeased, but I did not abandon Israel.

"Now follow my orders and avenge your God as well as yourselves because of the harm idolatrous Midian has brought to the people. Although the Midianites hoped to destroy all Israel, I will use one-fiftieth of the Israelite army to destroy the army of Midian. I will prove that mortal men cannot hinder my plans or destroy the nation I protect." (Numbers 25:16-18; Numbers 31:1- 2.)

Moses spoke at once to his officers, instructing them to choose a thousand fighting men from each tribe. (Verses 3-5) This total of twelve thousand trained and armed men was only a small part of the total Israelite army. Moses felt certain that the Midianites had many more soldiers than twelve thousand, but he knew better than to add to the number God had chosen.

The Israelites would have feared to go against the Midianite army with such a small force if God had not promised this new generation that they would live to cross over Jordan into the Promised Land. They had at last learned to trust God and they knew that through His power this task would be possible.

Led by Joshua, the twelve thousand set out bravely across the plains to the southeast to do what they knew was humanly impossible. The high priest's son, Phinehas, was in charge of the few Levites who accompanied the army. These men were to preside at sacred services and to carry the two silver trumpets that were to be blown by the priest, at God's command, as battle alarms. (Numbers 10:1-3, 8-9; Numbers 31:6.)

The movement of Israelite troops didn't go unnoticed. When Midianite spies noted what direction was taken by the twelve thousand troops, swift-riding Midianite messengers carried the news to all five rulers of Midian. The five kings preferred to meet their attackers in the desert, what with the Midianites having specialized in desert fighting for centuries. They agreed that their full forces should go against the Israelite army, which, from the reports, was only a fraction as large as it was imagined to be.

The Midianites realized that more Israelite troops could follow, but their spies reported seeing no further preparation in the camps of the Israelites. This convinced the Midianites that their women had succeeded in demoralizing the Israelite men to such an extent that they were no longer a strongly united fighting force. They believed they could easily defeat Israel.

Almost two days after he had started out with the soldiers, Joshua received a discouraging report from a scout who had hurriedly returned from observation duty far ahead.

Numbers Meant Nothing to Joshua!

"The desert is dark with approaching thousands of soldiers!" the scout panted. "If we hold our present course, we will meet that army head-on! From what I could see, it's much larger than our army, and could surround us!"

Joshua had no intention of trying to evade the enemy, which then might march right on to the camps of the Israelites. He knew that since God had sent the Israelites on this mission as His executioners, He would supply them with enough skill and power to wipe out these idolaters. The troops continued their rather slow tramping across the sands and rocks, and it wasn't long before they were able to make out the Midianites in the distance.

When the miles between the two armies had shrunk to only a few hundred yards, it was plain to the Midianites that their numbers were indeed much superior to those of the Israelites.

Suddenly the Midianites split into three sections! The middle portion came directly at the Israelites!

The other two parts swung out to right and left to surround the Israelite troops in a gigantic viselike movement! The battle was set in array.

When the twelve thousand soldiers of Israel realized that they were marching into the vast jaws of superior numbers of oncoming Midianites, many of them momentarily may have felt like wheeling about and fleeing in the opposite direction. In those first frightful moments they felt what it would mean never to return to their camps and families.

The Signal to Attack

Then came the shrill, piercing sounds of the silver trumpets of the Israelites. It was an instant and powerful reminder to the soldiers that their God was with them, and that He would protect and strengthen them -- and take them all safely into Canaan as He had promised. (Numbers 14:29- 31)

Spurred to action and confidence, it was the Israelites' turn to make a surprise move. At a signal passed backward from Joshua, the rear flanks of the Israelites suddenly divided and curved out in opposite directions to swiftly get outside the flanking troops of the Midianites, even though many of them were mounted!

Thus the enemy soldiers, attempting to surround the Israelites, found themselves bottled up except for their rear troops. But even those, within minutes, were hemmed in by the nimble Israelites.

Then the fighting broke out in fierce, bloody fury. Considering the many thousands of soldiers involved, the battle could have been expected to last for hours. However, it went on only for a very short time, and then the awful sounds of slaughter suddenly died down.

Weary men grouped together to stare in silence at the thousands of corpses strewn over the rocky ground. It was hard to believe at first, but the Israelites soon realized that they had slain every soldier who had come out to war against them, and that included all five kings of the Midianites! They also found Balaam the prophet, who had taught the Midianites how to lead Israel astray, and killed him because of his evil deeds. (Numbers 31:1-8) Because Balaam had set his affections on the gold Balak offered instead of eternal life which God offered, everything went wrong for him. He got neither gold nor eternal life, but was executed by God's servants.

What was even more amazing was that not even one dead or critically wounded Israelite could be found.

True to His word, God had protected all of them.

Through Moses, God had instructed Joshua to proceed to the Midianite cities and capture everything of value. After stripping the dead Midianites of their possessions, the Israelites marched on to the nearby Midianite centers of civilization.

Having wiped out the Midianite army, the Israelite forces split into small groups and took over the Midianite towns and unprotected strongholds as soon as the soldiers could reach them. All Midianite men were slain, and the towns and strongholds burned. Women and children were captured. Flocks, herds and valuables were seized. (Numbers 31:9-12.)

Mounted messengers raced back to the Israelite camp to excitedly inform Moses of the overwhelming victory. Moses was not surprised, but he was pleased and thankful. He called the tribal heads together, and with them and Eleazar, rode out east of the camp to meet and welcome the returning victors. (Verse 13)

Don't Give Idolatry a Foothold

After congratulating Joshua and other officers, Moses noticed that the prisoners consisted of many thousands of boys, girls and women.

"Why have you brought back these boys?" Moses asked Joshua. "And why have you spared these many thousands of women? Have you forgotten that these Midianite women recently drew our men into idolatry? God put a plague on us because of them, and also decreed that they should not live! Besides, they would have slain all our women and children had they won the battle."

"Our soldiers didn't have the heart to kill the youngsters," Joshua replied. "As for the women, we couldn't know which were the offenders. Therefore we brought back all except those who fell before us by accident."

"God sent us to destroy the Midianites," Moses told Joshua. "Tell your officers to instruct their men to slay all the male youngsters you have brought with you. Then determine as far as possible, which females have never had personal relations with men. Set them aside to spare, and slay all the other women!" (Verses 14:18)

Within a few hours thousands of Midianite women and male children lost their lives. The only Midianites who were spared were girl babies, young girls and any females who could prove to the Israelite officers that they had not taken part in the evil practices by which other Midianite women had led many Israelite men astray. These young Midianite women and girls could live among the Israelites as servants without any danger of their leading the Israelites into idolatry.

Some who read this account will wag their heads in doubt, believing that God would never allow such slaughter, regardless of what the inspired scriptures tell us. However, the slaying of the Midianite women and children was an act of mercy. The Israelites who carried out the task of executing these idolaters had no appetite for such grisly business. They acted under orders from God, who had good reasons for using the Israelites to wipe out an idolatrous nation. These people were so evil, warlike, and lewd that they and their children were better off dead. When they are resurrected in the judgment, along with other evil nations of past ages, they will live under God's government, not their own. And they will be taught how to live in righteousness and happiness. (Matthew 12:41-42; 11:20-24; Isaiah 65:19-25.)

Is it sensible that people should consider God harsh for what He ordered done to the Midianites, while at the same time they want to believe the pagan lie (still voiced from so-called Christian pulpits all around the world) that God has allowed billions of souls to be dumped into everlasting, blistering torment in some fiery place -- some suppose in the center of the Earth -- just because they never heard of God?

Contrary to this unscriptural teaching, God justly gives every human being, at one time or another, the opportunity to learn right from wrong and choose to serve God. For most people, that opportunity doesn't come in this life. If it doesn't, it will come when all those Midianites and others who have died without an opportunity for salvation will be resurrected after the Millennium. At that time people will live together in peace and prosperity while they are privileged to learn the way that leads to salvation. (Ezekiel 37:1-14; Isaiah 65:19-25.)

Quarantine Enforced

Because of being well outside the camps of the Israelites, it was an appropriate place for Moses to advise the soldiers who had any part in killing the Midianites or touching their bodies.

"All of you who have touched a dead body must stay outside of camp for seven days. On the third and the seventh days you and your captives must bathe yourselves, and wash your clothes and anything you have that has touched a corpse if those things are made of skins, goats' hair or wood." (Numbers 31:19-20.)

Eleazar, the priest, added to these directions by telling the soldiers that while they were waiting out those seven days, they should purify all battle equipment and booty made of gold, silver, brass, iron, tin or lead. This meant that objects made of these metals were to pass through flames of a hot fire to kill vermin and germs, and in some cases even to be melted down. Also they were to be washed in a specially prepared purifying water. Nothing could be taken back to the camps of the Israelites unless it was purified. (Verses 21:24) If all people today would obey such strict rules of sanitation and quarantine, contagious diseases would not spread as they do.

There was great celebration in the Israelite camps when at last the victorious soldiers were prepared to return to their homes and families. But now there was the problem of how to fairly distribute the captured property. Happily, it didn't remain a problem, because God spoke to Moses of this matter. The people did not use their own human reason.

Dividing the Spoils

"Divide what has been taken into two equal parts," God told Moses. "One part shall go to the soldiers who brought it back. The other half shall be distributed among the people. From the first part, for the soldiers, one part in five hundred shall go to Eleazar the high priest for offerings and to supply household needs. From the second half, for the people, one part in fifty shall go to the Levites."

Joshua and his officers made an immediate count of the captives and livestock that had come from the campaign against Midian. It turned out that the soldiers had brought in 32,000 female Midianites, 675,000 sheep and goats, 72,000 cattle and 61,000 donkeys.

Of the female Midianites, 32 (one out of every 500 of the soldiers' half) went to Eleazar and his assistants. They were to be used as household servants and helpers to the wives of Eleazar and of the priests. At the same time, 320 Midianites (one out of every 50 in the congregation's half) went to the Levites to be household servants for their families.

As for the sheep and goats, 675 of them went to the priests, and 6,750 went to the Levites. In the matter of cattle, 72 went to the priests, and 720 went to the Levites. Of the donkeys, 61 of them went to the priests, and 610 went to the Levites for service as beasts of burden. (Numbers 31:25- 47)

As soon as these matters were worked out, officers in charge of soldiers in the campaign against Midian came to Moses to remind him that a careful check of their men had proved what seemed evident right after the battle -- that not a one of them had been lost! God had proved that He was able to protect every individual of those whom He had promised to take over the Jordan River into the Promised Land. (Verses 48-49)

"We took much spoil that wasn't included in the count of prisoners and livestock," a spokesman explained. "Among the things was jewelry of all kinds fashioned from precious stones, gold and silver. To show our thanks to God for sparing us, we now bring you a part of these valuables."

Moses and Eleazar gratefully accepted the offering -- the gold alone of which was worth hundreds of thousands of our dollars or pounds -- and they had it taken to the tabernacle as a memorial before God. (Verses 50-54)

Having conquered the nations bordering Canaan on the east side of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, the Israelites were well aware of the condition of all parts of that territory. Much of the land to the east was arid, but there were regions like Jazer and Gilead where the grass grew thick and green, and where there were many shade trees, especially oaks.

A Shocking Request!

The tribes of Reuben and Gad, having long specialized in raising sheep and cattle, were greatly impressed by these fine grazing lands. They felt that there couldn't be greener and broader pastures on the west side of the Jordan. Therefore their chieftains came to Moses and Eleazar to ask if they could remain east of the Jordan to raise their flocks and herds. (Numbers 32:1-5)

Moses was upset at this request. He believed that these two tribes could be using this as an excuse to get out of going with the other tribes to drive their enemies out of the land west of the Jordan. And he wondered if they weren't showing a lack of gratitude to God for the land He promised them on the west side of the Jordan River.

"Your wanting to stay here reminds me of what your fathers said forty years ago," Moses answered, "when they refused to go into Canaan because they feared that the inhabitants might slay them. Then God sent them into the desert to wander and die! This request of yours is a bad example to the other tribes and might make them fear to cross the Jordan. If they, too, should choose not to cross the river, God might again be so angered that He might destroy all of us!" (Verses 6-15)

The leaders of Reuben and Gad recognized the wisdom of Moses' statements, but since this was such fine pasture land, they had more to say before giving up. After a hasty meeting among themselves, they again approached Moses and Eleazar.

"We aren't being rebellious," they explained, "and we would not want to discourage our brethren or bring disunity to Israel. We can quickly take over the vacant cities from which we recently drove the Amorites, then build them into fortresses for our women and children, and build folds for our livestock. Knowing that our people and livestock would be safe, our soldiers could then return here and cross Jordan at the front of the other tribes to spearhead the attack and help overcome our enemies. We will not return to our homes until the other tribes are safely settled on the other side of Jordan. We will not ask for land on the other side, but will be satisfied with the grazing land here." (Verses 16-19)

This explanation put a different light on the matter in Moses' thinking. After all, if these tribes preferred this land God had given to Israel, Moses could think of no good reason not to give it to them as long as the whole Israelite army went westward to take Canaan.

"If you will do as you say," Moses told them, "then these regions you desire shall become your inheritances. But be warned that if you fail to go with the rest of the people and fight until the inhabitants of Canaan are entirely driven out, then you will have to pay for such a great sin!" (Numbers 32:20-24; Deuteronomy 3:18-20.)

"We will not fail to go," the chieftains promised Moses. "Do we have your permission to leave for Jazer and Gilead?"

"Whenever you wish," Moses replied. Because he realized that he wouldn't live to cross the Jordan, Moses instructed Eleazar, Joshua and the chiefs of the other tribes to make certain that when the time came, they should see to it that these tribes who had taken eastern territory should live up to their promises. Otherwise, they were to give up the land they desired, and would have to get their inheritance west of the Jordan. (Numbers 32:25-30.)

Thus Reuben and Gad were the first families of Israel to be allotted their possession from God, though half the tribe of Manasseh also promptly received permission to settle north of the area taken by Gad. The two and a half tribes were so anxious to get to their lands that they set out as soon as possible. The people of Reuben turned to the east and south. The people of Gad and Manasseh went northward. (Numbers 32:31-33; Deuteronomy 3:1-17.)

They worked hard to rebuild swiftly the broken buildings of the ravaged towns and turn them back into walled strongholds. And as they had promised, they set up shelters and corrals for their vast numbers of stock. (Numbers 32:34-42.)

With their families and livestock in secure strongholds, the two and one-half tribes would not need to leave many men behind to care for them.

Meanwhile, back on the plains of Moab, God was in the process of giving more instructions to Israel through Moses, whose life was soon to be taken. (Numbers 33:50-56.)

Chapter 49

The Constitution of Israel

THE Israelites continued to camp on the plains east of the Jordan River for many days. Water was plentiful. There was an abundance of grass for the animals. Living was also a little more pleasant for the people because of the shade trees in that area.

Meanwhile, the people didn't sit around doing nothing. Besides their regular duties, it was somewhat of a task to adjust to the thousands of Midianite captives, take care of the added livestock, purify the booty of war and re-fashion much of it, sharpen and repair the worn or broken tools of war.

Time was required to do all this, but God's main purpose in allowing the people to stay so long in that place was to give them many instructions, through Moses, for their guidance and benefit. It was made known to them that when they crossed over the Jordan into Canaan on the west, it was their duty to execute the inhabitants there and to destroy all their idols, pagan altars, towers and groves where they burned some of their children in the fire and otherwise worshipped their heathen gods. (Numbers 33:50-53. Leviticus 18:21, 24-29; Deuteronomy 7:1-5; 9:4; 12:29-32; 18:9-14.)

Then the land was to be divided fairly among the nine and a half tribes, according to their numbers. However, if the Israelites failed to overcome the inhabitants of Canaan, God warned that Israel would suffer.

"If you spare any Canaanites," God said, "they will give you much trouble as long as they remain. Furthermore, I shall deal with you as I plan to deal with them. That means that you could lose your lives as well as the land!" (Numbers 33:54-56.)

God then defined the boundaries of the Promised Land and appointed a committee to supervise the distribution of the land. (Numbers 34) God also instructed Moses to tell the people that they should give 48 towns to the Levites, who were not to receive any land by inheritance. These were not necessarily to be large towns, but each one was to be surrounded by an area over a mile across, reaching out 1000 cubits (about 2000 feet) from the wall in all directions. In these suburbs the Levites could plant gardens, orchards and vineyards and have room to keep their flocks and herds. (Numbers 35:15)

Six of these towns -- three on each side of the Jordan -- were soon to be appointed as "cities of refuge." As well as being centers of Levite habitation, these six towns were to be for the protection of anyone who accidentally killed a person. This was necessary because angered relatives or close friends of the dead man might try to kill the man who caused his death. For example, if two men were building a shed, and one man unexpectedly moved a heavy beam so that it fell and killed the other man, the man who moved the beam was to flee at once to the closest of the six towns, where he would be protected from anyone who might seek his life as a matter of vengeance.

On the other hand, if the man maliciously moved the beam with the purpose of killing his working partner, he was still entitled to the temporary protection of any of the six towns so that he could be assured a fair trial.

Violence Condemned

Whatever the case, the man would be tried by authorities. If he were found guilty, he was either slain or allowed to fall into the hands of those who had set out to avenge the dead person. If he were found innocent, he still was to stay in the town for his own protection, until the death of the high priest. Meanwhile, if he ventured out of his protective town, and was found by any avenger, that was the end of his protection. There were to be no jails in Israel.

Moses now assigned three towns for refuge purposes east of the Jordan River. They included Bezer in the plain country of the Reubenites. Then there was the town of Ramoth for the Gadites and Golan for the Manassites. The other three cities of refuge were to be set aside later by Joshua. (Numbers 35:6-34; Deuteronomy 4:41-43; Deuteronomy 19:113; Joshua 20.)

At this time Moses received many instructions and rules and reminders from God. He faithfully passed them on to the people as they came to him. So that they would better understand matters, Moses gave them a detailed account of what had happened since they had left Mt. Sinai four decades previously. The book of Deuteronomy is a record of those proceedings.

During the lengthy account, Moses revealed to the people that God wouldn't allow him to go over into Canaan with them because of Moses' wrong conduct when he had struck the rock to obtain water.

"Later," Moses told them, "I asked God to forgive me and let me go into Canaan. He refused to allow me to go, but told me I could view much of the land from a high mountain, and that there I would die!" (Deuteronomy 3:23-28.)

The people were saddened to hear this. At the same time, they felt a greater fear of God. Many of them reasoned that if God would take the life of their leader, then their lives could be taken at any time because of their disobedience.

Sabbaths Must Be Observed

Moses added to their serious thinking by warning them that God would never tolerate lawbreaking without punishment. He reminded them also that God was more merciful than they could imagine, and that He would never forsake them or destroy them as long as they kept their agreement to observe His laws. (Deuteronomy 4:30-31.)

Among the matters mentioned through Moses for Israel's benefit was the strict reminder to observe the yearly Sabbaths. These holy days began in Egypt with the Passover. They were later more fully explained to the people at Mt. Sinai. The keeping of these holy days was to be a perpetual sign between God and Israel, just as the observance of the weekly Sabbath was to be an everlasting agreement. (Deuteronomy 12:114; 16:1-17; Exodus 31:17.)

Today more than 700 church denominations claim to be Christian, but almost all of them refuse to have anything to do with God's Sabbaths. Many weak excuses are given for not observing them, including the old, standard, groundless line that the days instituted by God were only Jewish days, and that they were done away with at Christ's death. The fact that most churches fail to observe them simply proves that most churches are not God's churches.

This can be a shocking and perhaps unbelievable statement to many people, but it is a true one, completely backed up by the Bible. Scoffing at this Bible truth is the same as scoffing at God, the author of it. The Apostle Paul taught Christians to keep the weekly and yearly Sabbaths many years after Christ ascended to heaven. (Acts 16:13; 17:2; 18:21; 20:16; 24:14.)

God also made it clear that besides the first tithe (that tenth of one's increase that is to pay the expense of the work of God) the Israelites should save a second tithe to be used in observing the holy days. This was mostly for the Festival of Tabernacles, which was to be held apart from the usual habitations of the people at a place chosen by God. (Deuteronomy 12:17-19; 14:22-27.)

Today, as then, the people of God's church use this second tenth of their income for observing the holy days -- especially the fall festival -- at the place or places God indicates. Jerusalem was the main place in ancient Israel, and will be again when Christ returns not very many years from now. (Zechariah 14:16-19.)

God ordained the Festival of Tabernacles as a time when His people should worship Him with special joy, reverence, mirth and thankfulness. It was not to be a noisy "camp meeting" or what is so often referred to as a "revival" at some date set by man. Instead, it was and still is a time of joyfully worshipping God while taking in spiritual food (preaching) that is corrective, inspiring and character-building. It was and still is a time of dining, visiting, dancing, and enjoying sports that stimulate the body and knit the people of God together in spiritual harmony. (Jeremiah 31:12-13.)

Faithful saving of the second tithe makes it possible for God's people to enjoy this autumn vacation and return to their homes and to their work better prepared to live happier and closer to their Creator.

At this same time God also commanded that the people should rest their crop land every seventh year so the physical laws in nature can improve the soil's health-giving natural balance. (Leviticus 25:1-7, 20-22; Leviticus 26:14-16, 32-35.)

Then God commanded that a third tenth should be saved for a very special use. This was to be taken out only every third and sixth year in a seven-year cycle. It was to go to the poor among the Levites, widows, fatherless children and poor strangers. (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12.)

In these days the obedient Christian puts aside his tithes plus what is required in taxes and such. God makes it possible. Many are the families that have enjoyed better incomes and other financial benefits since beginning to tithe.

Good Civil Government

Many other matters were brought to the people at that time, among which were these:

When the seventh-year land rest came to a conclusion, any debt should be canceled unless the debtor happened to be a foreigner. (Deuteronomy 15:1-11.)

A servant should be freed after seven years of service. (Deuteronomy 15:12-15.)

Israel was to make no agreements of any kind with the nations that were to be driven out. (Deuteronomy 7:1-5; 20:16-18.)

No more than forty lashes of a whip were to be applied in punishment. (Deuteronomy 25:1-3.)

No fruit trees were to be cut down in times of war in the land Israel invaded. (Deuteronomy 20:19-20.) The food they produced was worth more than timber.

The Israelites should consider themselves a holy nation, not because of their righteousness, but because God chose them as His people. (Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:1-2.)

Any prophet or priest who falsely led the people into any wrong kind of worship was to be put to death. (Deuteronomy 18:20-22.)

Toward the end of the period of instruction, Moses repeated these solemn words from God:

"You, Israel, must choose between blessings and cursings from your Creator. Obedience to my laws shall bring wonderful blessings of prosperity, freedom from diseases, success in all you undertake, an abundance of healthy children and livestock, plenty of rain and water, good crops without blemish or pestilence, comfortable homes and protection from accident and from your enemies. I shall make you the head of all nations, and they shall fear and respect you. You shall lead long, happy lives, and so shall your offspring also be happy, healthy and prosperous into the far future!

"On the other hand, if you refuse to live according to the laws I have made plain to you, I shall heap grievous curses on you. You shall cease to prosper. All kinds of diseases shall come on you, and you shall fail in all you set out to do. Your children shall be sickly, but famine shall drive you to eat them. Your livestock shall sicken and die of disease or for lack of water and grass. The soil shall turn hard, and your crops shall be consumed by blight and pestilence. You shall be sick, frightened and miserable wherever you go. You shall become as depraved as animals and lunatics, and fatal accidents shall overtake you wherever you are. Your homes shall become filthy, miserable hovels. You shall become the least and weakest of all nations, and cruel enemies shall slay you. Those of you who aren't slain shall be taken captive and scattered among the nations as wretched slaves!" (Deuteronomy 28 and 30:15-20.)

God's Laws Must Be Preserved

All the laws God had recently given to Moses to pass on to the people were written down at another time by Moses and presented to the priests to place beside the Ark of the Covenant. Copies also were given to the elders. Moses commanded them to read the whole book of the law to the people every seven years when Israel assembled at the Festival of Tabernacles during the year of release. (Deuteronomy 31:9-13, 24-29.) The priests and Levites were also commanded to teach the people portions of the law yearly at the festivals and throughout the year in all their cities. (Deuteronomy 33:8-10; II Chronicles 17:7-9; 35:1-3; Nehemiah 8:1-8; Acts 15:21.)

God then called Moses and Joshua to the tabernacle. As soon as they entered, the Creator descended to the tabernacle inside a glorious, radiant cloud. (Deuteronomy 31:14-15.)

"Before your life ends," God told Moses, "there are more things for you to do. One is to write a song to teach to the people. I know they shall go after other gods and shall forget my laws. They shall break my covenant. Then evil days shall fall on them, and though they shall seek my help, I shall let them suffer. The verses I give you must become a national song to be taught from generation to generation. The people shall remember it, and it shall become a witness against them because of their sins." (Verses 16-21)

Chapter 50

Joshua Now Leads Israel

As SOON as Moses and Joshua left the tabernacle, where God had instructed them concerning things to come, Moses hurried to his tent. He was to write down the matters that were to be made into a song to teach to Israel. (Deuteronomy 31:22.)

The Way to Happiness

Later, Moses went before the people to give them the verses that were to become a sort of national anthem to remind the Israelites of their faults, their obligations and the matters that would come up in the future. The verses mentioned God's perfect justice, mercy and great works, and showed how sinful Israel had become in spite of God's wonderful ways. The people were reminded of how patiently God had dealt with them during their travels in the desert, and of the terrible warnings that had repeatedly been given them. The verses pointed out that if Israel were wise enough to obey, all enemies would be overcome, but that lack of wisdom would result in great calamity for Israel. It was shown that Israel would have great reason to rejoice in the far future, but only after the people would have undergone a time of terrible tribulation and finally would have repented. (Deuteronomy 32:1-43.)

"Don't do what is right in your own eyes," Moses told the people. "Your conscience will deceive you. Let it be your ambition, above all things, to observe God's laws and teach your children to do the same. If you fail in this, your lives will become miserable and come to an untimely end. On the other hand, obedience will mean long, happy lives with prosperity, and wonderful futures for your children!" (Deuteronomy 12:8; 6:1-12; 4:30-31; 11:8-9; 31:6.)

Moses then pronounced a lengthy blessing on the various tribes of Israel, at the same time telling some of the things they would accomplish in the far future. (Deuteronomy 33)

Moses' Departure

Moses ruefully ended talking to the people. He realized that the time had come for him to go to Mt. Pisgah to look across the Jordan and view the land of Canaan, which he would never enter. Accompanied probably by Eleazar, Joshua, the elders of Israel and some aides, Moses started out for the mountain, which was not far distant. When the congregation became aware that he was leaving forever, the people gradually broke into tearful moans and wailing. Moses was greatly moved by the loud demonstration, but there was nothing for him to do but go on.

A little later he noted that the great mass of people, still wailing, was following him toward the mountain. Moses knew that if the people weren't stopped, many of them would follow him right up the mountain. He hastily took advantage of a small rise, from which he could more easily be seen and heard, to firmly tell as many as could hear him that they should not follow any farther.

The wailing people obeyed. Moses and those who accompanied him continued on toward Mt. Pisgah, a point from which Balak, king of Moab, had asked the since-destroyed prophet Balaam to pronounce a curse on Israel.

Silently the group progressed up the mountain, while the sad wailing of the people drifted up strongly from the plains below. It was a strange fact that while the people were feeling sorry for Moses, Moses was feeling sorry for the people. The people were sorry to see Moses depart from them, and at the same time Moses felt concern for Israel because his close contact with God had resulted in his knowing Israel's fate even into the far future. He knew the people still had many bitter lessons to learn.

When at last Moses and the elders and officers arrived close to the peak of Mt. Pisgah, Moses turned to the people who had come with him and said a few last words of farewell. There were no dry eyes, even among those who were hardened soldiers and officers who had long served Moses. Moses said good-bye to them, and then walked alone up to the highest point of the mountain. From there, through the clear atmosphere of that high mountain country, Moses looked across the Jordan and into nearby territory to clearly view the land where most of the tribes of Israel would settle.

Moses Views the Promised Land

From that elevation of several thousand feet, one of the highest points in the land, Moses carefully drank in the magnificent sight. He looked southwest and west across the area where the tribes of Simeon, Judah, Dan and Benjamin were to settle from the Dead Sea to the Mediterranean. To the northwest he could see the region that was to be occupied by Ephraim, Issachar and half of Manasseh. To the north he viewed the lands to be taken over by Zebulun, Asher and Naphtali. Swinging his gaze to the east side of the Jordan, Moses saw the land already allotted to the other half of Manasseh, to Gad and Reuben.

Below him, stretching from the Dead Sea far to the north, was the beautiful Jordan valley with its lush bottom lands filled with fields, vineyards, groves of palm trees and other fruit.

"This is the land," the voice of God came to Moses, "that I promised to give to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Here it is for you to see, but it is not for you to enter. However, you will enter a better land in the resurrection to come. Now walk down the side of the mountain opposite the way you came up!" (Deuteronomy 34:1-4; Hebrews 11:1-15, 24-29, 39-40.)

A Final Farewell

Having feasted his eyes on the scene around him, Moses switched his gaze back on the mourning elders and officers who sadly gazed up at him. He waved, then turned and strode slowly out of their sight.

This was the last that was seen of Moses by human beings. He started down the other side of the mountain, but just how far he went, no one knows. Possibly God caused him to fall into a deep sleep, and then took his life. God then buried him in a nearby mountain valley in Moab. (Deuteronomy 34:5-6.) Satan attempted to obtain possession of Moses' body (Jude 9), probably with the purpose of bringing it to the attention of the Israelites so that they would make it an object of worship. However, God carefully hid the burial place from man, so that no one would ever be tempted to regard the body as something sacred that should be worshipped.

Some readers might think that it would be a very extreme thing to worship a dead body. But even today, when we are supposed to be enlightened and intelligent, millions of people in the professing Christian world regard the relics -- dried bones and shriveled flesh -- of certain long-dead individuals as something to be revered and considered holy.

Thus Moses' death ended, at one hundred and twenty years, the life of one of God's most outstanding servants of all time. Just before he died, Moses was as healthy and strong as when he was eighty years of age. Even his eyes were as keen as they had been in his youth. (Deuteronomy 34:7.)

No other leader of Israel accomplished such great deeds as did Moses. (Verses 10-12) Because he was so close to God, he enjoyed the great privilege of leading millions of his people out of slavery, bringing God's wonderful laws to them, and leading them to the entrance of a bountiful garden spot that was to be their home.

Although there were too many times when they ignored God by ignoring Moses, all Israel was very sad to lose such a wonderful leader. For the next thirty days matters came almost to a standstill in the camps while the people mourned Moses' death. (Verse 8)

In these days many people, including a host of outstanding religious leaders, consider the vitally important times and events of ancient Israel only as an old tale having to do with the Jews. They think of Moses simply as one who, not too successfully, may have led a few Jews out of Egypt and into Canaan, and who started the present Jewish religion.

Such shallow beliefs are spawned by the refusal to completely believe Jesus and the Old Testament, and the inability to understand who Israel is today. Moses didn't start the Jewish religion. The word "Jews" is not even mentioned in the Bible until long after Moses' time. Then the Jews were referred to (II Kings 16:6) as being at war with Israel! Those who assume that the words "Jew" and "Israelite" always mean the same thing find it impossible to understand some of the most important parts of the Bible -- especially prophecy.

It is tragic that innumerable people who sincerely want to learn how best to live are taught by such blinded or stubborn leaders that the sacred, living laws of God, brought to Israel through Moses, were only "Jewish" rules blotted out by Christ's death. They are misled to believe we are now "freed" to do as our conscience pleases.

Happily, according to prophecy for these last days, God is gradually opening the understanding of more and more people to the startling fact that those who defiantly teach that God's laws are no longer in force are as guilty in God's sight as the most villainous men mentioned throughout the scriptures. Unless they repent, the fate of such people, referred to as false shepherds, will be most horrible -- because of their deceitful posing as true ministers of God. (Ezekiel 34:2, 7-10; II Peter 2:12.)

God Speaks to Joshua

After Moses' death, God contacted Joshua to remind him that now that he was Israel's leader he should direct himself and the nation to live by all the book of the law of God. He was reminded that trust in the Eternal and obedience and courage, would mean success in battle over Israel's enemies and in taking over the land from the Great Sea (Mediterranean) east to

the Euphrates River, and from the desert south of the Dead Sea to Mt. Lebanon on the north. (Deuteronomy 34:9; Joshua 1:1-4)

"I will not fail you nor forsake you as long as you carry on in accord with the laws that came to you through my servant Moses," God instructed Joshua. (Deuteronomy 4:30-31; Joshua 1:5-7.) "Meditate on those laws so that they will become so familiar to you that you can't forget them. Be strong in this office that has been given to you. Be of great courage. Don't be afraid. Don't be dismayed. Remember that your God is with you wherever you go." (Verses 8-9; Deuteronomy 31:6.)

This was one of the greatest "pep" talks ever given to one of the most responsible leaders in all history. If Joshua hadn't previously realized how much he should rely on God, he surely was completely reminded at that time.

"Prepare to Break Camp!"

As soon as the mourning period of thirty days for Moses was over, Joshua gave orders to his officers to make an announcement to the people. "Be prepared on notice to break camp within three days," the officers told the surprised people. "Prepare extra food and supplies for a sudden trip over the Jordan and into the land promised to us by God." (Verses 10-11)

Although manna was still the main food of the Israelites, it wasn't something that could be gathered during a sudden movement of the people or a food that could be kept overnight except over the Sabbath. At this time when Israel was going to be on the move for a few days, it was necessary to prepare meat, fruit and grains, taken in their conquests, that could be carried and consumed at any time.

Joshua then spoke to the heads of the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh -- who had by this time returned from settling their families east of the Jordan -- to remind them of their obligation to their brethren in the other tribes.

"I want to remind you of your promise to send the best soldiers of your tribes to help take over all of Canaan," Joshua told them. "We'll be moving across the Jordan very soon, and your picked soldiers should lead the way, since they will not have their families with them. After we've taken the land, your warriors shall be free to return to their towns and families on this side of the river." (Joshua 1:12-15.)

"We are sending the best of our soldiers to fight in God's battles," the leaders replied. "We shall carry out our promise. Our soldiers will go wherever you send them and obey every command. Every soldier that we send will know that if he fails to obey you, he will be put to death!" (Verses 16-18)

Just west of Israel's camp was the Jordan River. It was exceedingly deep, as the flood season had begun. Only about six miles farther to the west was a walled and fortified city called Jericho. Joshua knew that it would be necessary to attack that city before progressing further into Canaan, because it was situated by the pass that led through the mountains. It was also one of the Canaanite cities God had commanded Israel to destroy because of its extremely evil practices.

Scouts Sent to Jericho!

Joshua realized that God wasn't necessarily going to protect Israel if any foolish moves were made. He knew that he was to use sound judgment and strategy. Because of this, he had already sent two men to Jericho to try to find out how well the city was armed, the condition of the walls and the gates, what forces were close to Jericho and the morale of the people within the city.

These two men quickly found how difficult it was to cross the Jordan at that time of year. It was spring, and showers had swollen the stream into a muddy torrent. Very few swimmers could cross a raging, turbulent river in flood stage. But these men had been chosen for their many outstanding abilities, including great skill in swimming, and they managed to struggle across the violent current to the west bank.

After drying their clothes, which were chosen to appear as those of roving Canaanites, they trudged the several miles from the river to the city. Jericho was surrounded by groves of palm trees, and well-traveled roads led to its several gates. The Israelites met several people on the first road they came to. No one seemed particularly friendly; some were even a little suspicious of their identity.

There was no problem in getting into Jericho. Its huge gates were open to traffic till sunset. The Israelites mixed in with a caravan that was entering the nearest gate, and boldly walked about to view the life and activity of this habitation of their enemies.

Jericho wasn't a tremendous city; it covered only about seven acres. But it was compact and had room for thousands of people. Within its four strong walls were many busy streets crammed with stables, shops, public buildings, homes and inns. Many shops, homes and inns were built on top of the double walls. People milled about everywhere. From their expressions and actions, it wasn't difficult to see that most of them were in a state of excited anxiety.

A few soldiers huddled in groups in the streets, but most of them were on the walls. The Israelite scouts noted that they were gazing mostly to the east toward the camp of Israel.

Trapped!

Hoping to get on the wall, the Israelites walked up a long flight of steps to one of the inns built there. The proprietress greeted them cordially and saw to it that they were well fed. While eating, they were startled by a loud clanging. The proprietress -- her name was Rahab -- explained that it was sundown, and that the huge gates of the city were being closed for the night to keep anyone from going out or coming in. The two Israelites suddenly realized that they were trapped -- at least until sunrise.

A little later officers sent by the king arrived at the inn and demanded of the servant to speak with the proprietress. The Israelites were just finishing their meal in another room, and didn't see the officers. However, they could hear all that was said. So could Rahab, the proprietress. (Joshua 2:1-3.)

"We have been sent here by the ruler of Jericho," the officers announced to a servant at the door. "He has received information that two Israelite spies were seen entering this inn. We are here to arrest them!"

Chapter 51

The Promised Land

THE TWO Israelite scouts sent to the city of Jericho were eating at Rahab's inn when officers banged loudly on the door.

"Two officers have come from the king of Jericho to arrest you!" Rahab whispered to them. "They're impatient and I must go to the door at once. I know who you are, and I have my reasons to help you. Hurry up this back stairway and hide yourselves under the flax you'll find drying on the roof!" (Joshua 2:1-4.)

The Israelites didn't waste time asking questions or waiting for more explanation. They dashed for the stairway, and Rahab turned to go to the officers.

Rahab Outwits the Soldiers

"If you're stalling us, woman, we'll have to take you along, too!" one of them snapped.

"I hurried back there to the dining booth to find out if any of my lodgers noticed which way the two men went," Rahab explained. "They were here, but they left just before the wall gates of the city were closed for the night. If they are Israelites, probably they're on their way back to their camp, and the soldiers could overtake them before they reach the river."

Rahab lied about these things, but God makes use of all kinds of people to bring about His purposes. In this matter He was using a Canaanite woman, who had never been taught God's Commandments.

The king's officers didn't spend any more time talking. They strode out of the inn and barked orders to nearby soldiers. Within a very few minutes, the gates swung open, and a searching party of soldiers scurried off into the darkness in the direction of the river. (Verses 5-7)

As soon as the soldiers had left, Rahab went up to the flat roof of the inn to talk to the Israelites. She expected to find them well hidden under the flax on the roof. Instead, she found they were not yet fully covered.

"You're safe for now," Rahab whispered. "They won't be back for awhile. We Canaanites are well aware of your intention of taking over our country. I know that your powerful God will give you this land. Our whole city is frightened because you have so swiftly overcome nations to the east and southeast. We have been dreading the day when your soldiers come over the Jordan. Our terror is so great that no one has any courage left."

"If you believe that Israel is going to take over your land, why are you trying to protect us?" one of the Israelites asked.

Rahab Trusts in God

"Because I believe your God is the true God. Long ago we heard of the great miracles He performed, especially in causing the Red Sea to part so that your people could pass through it. (Verses 8-11)

"I want to be spared by your soldiers," Rahab continued. "I have showed you kindness. Now promise me that your people will spare me and my close relatives -- the households of my father and all my brothers and sisters -- when this city is attacked."

"We promise to do as you ask," the Israelites told her, "if you will agree not to mention to anyone what has taken place here tonight."

Rahab solemnly assured them that she would keep the matter to herself. The Israelites then instructed her that she should tie a red cord, which one of the men gave her, in the window of her establishment, and that all her relatives should take refuge there when the soldiers of Israel would reach Jericho.

"Our soldiers will be told to spare the place where the red cord is," Rahab was told, "but if any of your family is outside your doors when we attack, we won't be responsible for them. On the other hand, if any of your family within your inn is harmed, we shall be responsible before God for that harm."

"So be it," the other Israelite muttered, "but these promises can't mean much if we don't get out of here tonight. We don't dare wait until daylight, and the gates will be barred all night."

For answer, Rahab motioned for them to follow her. They went downstairs to an open window facing outward from the wall. Rahab gave the men a bag of food and a long rope, and the scouts knew what to do. They tied one end of the rope to a ceiling beam and let the rest of it drop out the window.

"Don't try to return to your camp now," Rahab warned. "The area between here and the river will be swarming with our soldiers for many hours. Hurry to the hills west of here and hide there for three days. By that time it should be much safer for you to go back."

One at a time the Israelites slid down the rope, which more than reached all the way down the high wall. Rahab pulled the rope back up and waved to the men as they melted into the darkness. (Verses 12-21)

It wasn't easy to travel over strange terrain at night, but the darkness wasn't intense enough to prevent the scouts from keeping on the move. The two fleeing men shortly reached the white limestone hills, where they found a number of caves. They chose one next to a small water spring, and for the next three days it was their hideout home.

The Scouts Report to Joshua

At the end of three days the two men set out eastward during darkness to successfully reach the Jordan. There they waited for daylight, and again managed to swim the river. From there it was only a short distance to the Israelite camp and safety.

Joshua was pleased at the report of the scouts, especially because it showed the shattered morale of the Canaanites. As for Rahab and her family, Joshua readily agreed to the promise that this one Canaanite family would be spared. (Verses 22-24.) Joshua knew that God's death sentence upon Canaanites did not apply to those who willingly forsook their heathen gods and put their faith in God. After all, the reason God had condemned the Canaanites was because they were the worst sort of idolaters. (Deuteronomy 9:4; 12:29-32.) Those few who repented, as Rahab did, were to be shown mercy. (Genesis 12:3.)

As soon as Joshua had finished hearing the report, he told his officers to take word to the people that they should prepare to break camp next day.

Great activity followed. Flocks and herds grazing outside the camp had to be rounded up. Families packed their possessions except what was needed for meals and a night's rest.

Early next morning the Israelites finished breaking camp. The tabernacle tent, fence and all that went with the tabernacle were packed for moving, and the Israelites set out on a march toward the river. The trip took almost all day, and took them away from the acacia groves near Mt. Nebo, but into more groves of palm trees. They stopped just before arriving at the river, and set up camp again on the east slopes leading down to the Jordan.

Although the Jordan wasn't a large river such as the Nile, those Israelites who were curious enough to go on down to it were greatly impressed by it because it was the largest river the new generation had ever seen. At that time of year, due to spring rains and the melting of the snow in the high mountains to the north, the Jordan was swift and swollen to overflowing by the silty waters.

Those who saw the river returned to tell their neighbors what it was like. Only the very strong swimmers could hope to make it across the Jordan, and building rafts or a bridge would require so much time that all the armies of Canaan could concentrate at the spot and easily ruin such a project! However, this was to be no problem for Israel, because God had already given private instructions to Joshua so the people would realize God was with Joshua as He had been with Moses.

A Miracle Needed!

Next morning Joshua told the priests they should personally take up the ark of the covenant and bear it to the river ahead of the Israelites. (Joshua 3:1-7.) Ordinarily the ark was carried in the center of the mass of people, and was borne by Levites who were the sons of Kohath. (Numbers 2:1-31; Numbers 4:15.)

As God commanded, Joshua then told the priests that they should wade into the edge of the overflow water only a foot or so with the ark, and then stand still while God intervened in the flow of the river. Meanwhile, the evening before, Joshua asked the people to gather together to listen to what he had to say.

"All of you should make yourselves and your garments clean for what will happen tomorrow," he told them. "Before us there is a swift and swollen river to cross. I have already heard that some of you may not think that it's possible to cross it. Have some of you lost faith in your God, who brought you out of many situations far worse than this one? Now be assured that God will again prove to us His power by taking us safely over the river. The ark

of the covenant will be carried to the river before you by almost a mile. When those who carry the ark walk into the Jordan, the stream shall cease to flow past the ark! That part of the water to the south shall drain away, leaving a waterless river bed over which we shall cross to the west bank! This should show you that God possesses all the strength and means to get us safely over the river, to drive out our enemies before us and deliver Canaan into our hands!" God made sure that no one entered the Promised land with doubts and misgivings.

Joshua then instructed the twelve tribal leaders that each should select a husky man from his tribe and send him to Joshua for a special task. Every man selected, when he passed over the river bed, was to pick up a good-sized stone from the rocky river bottom and carry it to the west bank for building a monument. (Joshua 3:8-13.)

The Jordan Flows Backward!

Early that morning the priests started out with the ark. None of the Israelites followed until the priests were almost a mile away, which put them at the edge of the river. They probably hesitated for a minute or so on the east bank, then walked boldly into the swift, muddy water. Every man realized that unless God acted within seconds, men and ark would be swept away downstream.

Before they could wade in up to their knees, the water flowed away to their left. At the same time the water to their right abruptly ceased flowing. In fact, its direction of movement was actually reversed! As the priests continued to march into the midst of the Jordan, it gradually grew higher and spread farther out on its flooded banks to the north.

Thus, with water receding in both directions, a growing expanse of empty river bed was exposed to the view of the marveling priests and those of the waiting Israelites who could see the miracle from a distance.

The bearers of the ark went in to the middle of the river bed and then obediently stood where they were. They felt deep gratitude for being allowed to have a part in such a great miracle. When Joshua had made certain that all was ready, he signaled the Israelites to move on to the river.

It required a long time for millions of people and their tremendous flocks to pass any given point, the specific number of hours depending on how wide their ranks were. In this event, even though the river bed was emptied for such a great distance, and gave the people plenty of room to spread out, probably the people were pouring over the Jordan for several hours. (Verses 14-17)

Whatever the time needed, the priests, who were rugged outdoor men, patiently remained standing where they had walked into the water. They didn't move out of the river bed until the last of the Israelites had passed over, including the lead group of 40,000 soldiers sent by the two and a half tribes already settled east of the Jordan to help take Canaan.

One probably would wonder how men could remain standing so long, especially while holding the ark. Perhaps God gave them special strength to stand for such a long period while bearing a weight.

Except for the priests, the last to pass over the river bed were Joshua, his aides and the twelve men who had been picked to obtain stones from the middle of the river bed for a monument on the west side of the river. Before they picked the stones for that purpose, Joshua had them erect a twelve-stone memorial in the Jordan where the priests had stood so long with the ark. To make this possible, the priests naturally had to move forward a short distance while the men worked.

After the monument in the river was finished (it was still visible in the river many years later when the Bible account was written), each of the twelve men took up from the river bed a stone as large as he could carry and walked out to the west bank.

Promise Miraculously Fulfilled

Behind them came the priests, and as soon as they had carried the ark well up on the west bank, a peculiar murmuring sound came from the north. Within seconds the murmur grew into an alarming roar. The waters that had been held back for so long had abruptly been freed, and came rushing and boiling down the river channel with a thunderous swishing noise! (Joshua 4:1-18.)

This mighty miracle of God, plainly foretold by Joshua, had a deep effect on the Israelites. They realized now that Joshua, like Moses, had been chosen by the Creator as an outstanding leader. Their respect for him was very great from that day on. (Verse 14) The Israelites also realized that God had now completely fulfilled His promise to take all of this new generation over the Jordan into the Promised land.

Again the congregation fell into moving order, this time with the ark carried by Levites in the center of the column. The people traveled straight west a few miles and stopped to make camp. It was there that the twelve stones carried from the Jordan were stacked up into a monument. Joshua then came before the crowd to speak to as many as could hear him.

"This heap of stones is to be a reminder of God's great miracle in bringing us across the river," he announced. "Tell your children in time to come what it means. Remind them that God also brought Israel across a much greater body of water -- the Red Sea. This monument is also to remind all peoples who see it or learn of it that our God is to be greatly feared and respected."

Regardless of Joshua's reference to God's strength, there were some people who stared fearfully toward the west as night came on. They felt uneasy because the west edge of Israel's camp was only a little over a mile away from the forbidding walls of the strongly fortified city of Jericho!

Chapter 52

Walls of Jericho Fall

IT was on the tenth day of the first month (Nisan in the spring -- not January in the winter) that Israel crossed the Jordan River and made camp in Canaan at a spot called Gilgal. The west border of the camp wasn't much more than a mile from Jericho, a thick-walled city swarming with enemy soldiers. (Joshua 4:19-24.)

Israel's First Passover in Canaan

It had been just forty years before -- minus five days -- that Israel had fled from Egypt. (Exodus 12:18, 29-34, 51; Numbers 14:26-35; Deuteronomy 1:3; Joshua 5:6.) The Exodus had started after the first observance of Passover. Now again it was almost time to prepare for another Passover. But before it should be observed, God told Joshua that most of the males of Israel should undergo a physical rite that had been required as a sign and seal of the covenant between the Creator and Israel.

After the Passover, which fell on the seventh day of the week that year, the people observed the Days of Unleavened Bread by eating no bread with leavening in it. One of their main dishes was roasted grain that had been taken from the fields of their enemies. This was only one item of food that had been acquired since entering the region of the Jordan. In fact, so many edible things had been taken in recent days that Israel's food supply was sufficient to keep them without gathering manna. As a result, manna, which had been the main food for forty years, ceased to appear on the day after the Passover. (Joshua 5:2-12.)

Meanwhile, there was no sign of Canaanite soldiers except those who could be seen in the distance on the walls of Jericho. Nevertheless, enemy spies kept a close watch on Israel. Their reports on the parting of the river spread quickly to every ruler in that section of the world. These leaders were greatly concerned by this amazing event. They had felt temporarily secure from Israel because they had considered the Jordan practically impossible to cross during its swollen condition. The king of Jericho was especially worried. Even though his fighting force was composed of many fierce men skilled in battle, the very numbers of Israelites camped so close to his city were enough to make his nights sleepless. (Joshua 5:1.)

To make certain that no more Israelite spies could get into Jericho, he gave orders that the gates of the city should close and remain closed twenty-four hours a day. No one was to be allowed in or out -- except, if necessary, a few special spies of his, and they were let down the walls on rope ladders and brought up the same way.

This was a costly precaution, because it meant turning away caravans arriving from other lands with valuables and food. The king reasoned that it was wiser to remain bottled up with what food was on hand rather than take the slightest risk of allowing any Israelites to enter Jericho in disguise. (Joshua 6:1.)

Joshua Meets the Lord

A few days after Israel had arrived in Gilgal, Joshua went alone, despite the protests of some of his officers, toward Jericho. He wished to see for himself what the place was like at closer range. He suddenly found himself face to face with a sturdy man holding a gleaming sword and gazing intently at him. Joshua strode boldly up to him.

"Are you a friend of Israel or an enemy?" Joshua bluntly inquired of the stranger. (Joshua 5:13.)

"I am not an enemy," the man replied in a firm voice. "I am here as the commander of the army of God!"

It required several seconds for Joshua to realize that he was actually gazing at the Eternal manifested as a man. This was Joshua's closest contact with God. He fearfully fell forward and placed his forehead on the ground.

"What would you ask of me, my Lord?" Joshua humbly inquired. We know this man was the Lord because he allowed Joshua to worship Him. Angels never allow God's servants to worship them. (Revelation 22:8-9.)

"Your feet are on holy ground," was the answer. "Remove your shoes and I shall tell you how to take Jericho."

Joshua lost no time in obeying. Then he carefully listened to the instructions from God. (Joshua 5:14-15.)

"Return to your camp and carry out the orders I have given you," he was told. "If you do just as I have told you to do, it won't be necessary for you to storm the walls or gates of Jericho in order to conquer it, even though many fierce fighting men are garrisoned within that fortress."

Inspired and encouraged in what he should do, Joshua returned to camp. Once he turned to gaze back to where he had been encountered, but there was no one there!

As soon as he arrived back in camp, to the relief of his officers, Joshua told them and the priests of his unusual experience and of God's plan to take Jericho. (Joshua 6:2-7.)

Siege of Jericho Begins

Next day the king of that city was startled by the dreadful news he had been expecting.

"Sentries have just reported seeing many persons on foot approaching from the Israelite camp!" an officer announced.

Surrounded by anxious aides and officers, the king hurried to the east wall. When he saw the growing columns of people marching toward his city, he nervously barked out orders for all soldiers to take their battle stations, and for all civilians to get off the walls and streets and out of the shops and into their homes or shelters.

As the Canaanites continued watching, they became discouraged, confused and relieved in turns. The foremost of their approaching enemies marched just close enough for discerning that they were soldiers. Then they veered to the left and moved along to the south of the city.

"Why should they give us such a wide berth if they intend to attack?" one officer asked.

"Perhaps they don't intend to attack," another observed. "Possibly they're just moving on to the west."

"That hardly seems possible," the king muttered. "They've taken every city from the Arnon River to Mt. Hermon!"

Rising hope that Israel was moving out and by-passing Jericho was abruptly downed when the foremost Israelite soldiers turned north to parallel the west wall of the city. A little later they turned back eastward to distantly flank Jericho's north wall.

The city was being surrounded by thousands upon thousands of Israelites!

Why they remained at such a distance baffled the Canaanites. Another mystery was the presence of seven long-robed horn blowers marching behind the first large segment of the moving column. As they marched, they held up carved trumpets called "shopharim" which were made of rams' horns, and emitted shrill blasts that echoed from the hills to the west. Behind the horn blowers marched four more robed men carrying what appeared to be a large box. The Canaanites had no way of knowing that this object was the ark of the covenant, and that the other seven robed men were priests who had been instructed to blow special horns. This was the only sound that came from the Israelites. It was frightfully puzzling to their watchers, because it was the usual habit of soldiers on the march to shout or sing. In this case, the Israelites had been told not to utter a word during the marching around Jericho.

For well over an hour the Canaanites uneasily watched the enemy parade. It required somewhat more than that for any part of the marchers to pass around Jericho and return to the Israelite camp. Jericho's ruler remained on the wall, gravely puzzled as to the meaning of such a weird demonstration. (Joshua 6:8-11.)

"Didn't anyone here think to try counting them?" he impatiently asked.

Canaanites' Fear Mounts

"We have estimated that about one hundred thousand passed around the city, sir," an officer spoke out. "As you know, our spies have reported that Israel has at least five or six times that many soldiers."

"Spies are not always right," the king murmured. "This performance today seems to me to be only an effort to display manpower that isn't necessarily there. How do we know that all of them were men? Most of them could have been women and children dressed as soldiers. Why did they parade at such a distance unless they fear our spears, arrows and catapults? If they don't come closer, they can't harm us. Even as besiegers, they would have to hold out many days before our supplies are exhausted, and that isn't the pattern of their operation."

These weak optimistic remarks from the king did little to generate hope or enthusiasm in those about him. The next day, however, brought a little relief to the Canaanites from their fears when dawn showed no evidence of further siege preparations.

Before long, however, it was observed that Israelites were again approaching Jericho. Renewed excitement and fear reigned in the city for awhile. Then, as they had done the day before, the Israelites swerved southward, later continuing westward to march at a distance from the south wall, swinging north around the west wall, going eastward past the north wall and back to their camp. Meanwhile, there was no chant, shout or song from the Israelites. The only sound was that from the seven horns, whose continuous piercing tones carried loudly to the Canaanites in an irritating, suspenseful and nerve-wracking manner.

"This is obviously some kind of enchantment by which Israel is trying to overcome us without attacking us," the king of Jericho proclaimed to his people after the Israelites had finished their second day of marching around the city. "Why should we allow enchantments from these foreigners to bother us? I have heard that they have only one God. We have many gods to protect us."

Next day the Israelites appeared for the third time to march around Jericho in the same manner and at the same distance. As usual there was the strange box-like object and the seven men going before it while blowing their horns.

On the fourth day the same thing happened. By now many of the Canaanites were becoming increasingly fearful because they didn't know just what to expect. Some believed that a great, consuming fire might fall from the sky. Others were afraid of all kinds of calamities. Some, in an effort to hide their growing fears, began to joke about the Israelites.

Next day the Israelites came around again. This time, although the ruler of Jericho wasn't completely in favor of it, the soldiers lining the tops of the walls lifted their voices in loud taunts to the Israelites to come closer. The ruler didn't wish to do anything to rouse the ire of the enemy, but at the same time he felt that his soldiers' morale could be sparked up if they were allowed to deride Israel. The marchers could plainly hear the challenges, but they remained silent except for the blaring of their seven horns.

For six days the Israelites marched once around the city in the early morning of each day. (Joshua 6:12-14.) On the sixth day the Canaanites shouted even louder at the Israelites as they passed around the city, though they actually believed that if the whole Israelite fighting force should accept their dares and attack, losses by the Canaanites would be much greater than any harm they could inflict upon Israel.

"This is a silly, time-consuming, childish game these people are playing," Jericho's ruler announced to the people and soldiers in an effort to boost morale. "Their intended enchantment failed to work the first time, and now they are merely repeating it again and again in the hope that it will finally take effect. It should be plain by now that these people cannot harm us by such means." The city's king just couldn't understand God's plan of battle.

Israelite Tactics Change

Inasmuch as the Israelites had been encircling Jericho a little after sunrise each day, Canaanite sentries were surprised when they saw the marching column approaching at early

dawn on the seventh day. High officers feared that this might indicate some drastic change in Israel's plans, and the king was immediately notified of what was happening outside the wall.

The Israelites went around the city in the same manner as usual, but the more interesting fact was that instead of returning to camp, they began to encircle the city again. In fact, they spent almost the whole day marching around Jericho. By mid-afternoon they had made six rounds and were starting on the seventh. (Joshua 6:15.)

At this point another unusual thing happened. Hundreds of thousands more soldiers had strode out from Israel's camp and now joined the marchers. The bright, palm-studded plains around Jericho gradually grew dark with the growing immensity of armed forces.

The challenging hoots and shouts that had been coming from the Canaanites gradually died away when Israel's military strength was displayed. Many people within the city fell into a state of panic when they realized how many fighting men were confronting them. This fear and panic spread like a contagious disease, only much more rapidly. Even the ruler and his officers were grim-faced and nervously silent. No jeering taunts or attempts to belittle Israel's might could boost the Canaanites' morale now that they were faced by the stark cold fact of Israel's true strength. The people in Jericho felt doomed.

It was late afternoon when the Israelites finally finished marching around the city for the seventh time. At this juncture the ark and the trumpet blowers were just east of Jericho. There they stopped, and all the other marchers came to a halt.

Greater tension gripped the Canaanites. Jericho's ruler, who had been squirming in anxiety in a chair inside one of the wall towers, came slowly to his feet. He stared unblinkingly out at Israel's silently threatening throng.

At that moment the seven horn blowers, who had not sounded for several minutes, blew an unusually long, high blast. This was followed by a chilling surge of shouts from the people surrounding Jericho, those in Israel's camp and the many who were spread out between, as Joshua had commanded them to do. (Joshua 6:16-19.)

The noise that resulted from the millions of throats was like the thunder and hiss of a tidal wave crashing against a rocky cliff.

Divine Overthrow

Within seconds, however, the vast din of voices was drowned in another noise -- an ominous, deep rumble approaching like the growing reverberation of the hoofs of millions of swiftly approaching horses!

Those on the walls felt a sickening sway. Those inside the city were aghast to see widening cracks appear in the cobbled and bricked streets. Screaming people began to pour out of the buildings. Those on the walls began to race down steps and ladders to a firmer footing.

But it was too late to find safety. The walls, as well as the streets, were already cleaving.

In the midst of the ear-splitting clatter, the king and his officers were among the first to realize, in their last moments of life, that the mighty God of Israel didn't even recognize the

puny, powerless gods and idols of this world. (Deuteronomy 4:39; Isaiah 45:5; I Corinthians 8:5-6; Isaiah 2:20-21.)

Then the walls of Jericho reeled violently outward and crashed down with a deafening roar. (Joshua 6:20.)

Skeptics used to ridicule this miracle. But the skeptics were wrong. Jericho's wall did fall down flat.

Archaeologists have found the ruins of Jericho just where God said the city was. And after carefully excavating the site for several years, world-famous archaeologists found that the earth had preserved an amazing record of God's miraculous destruction of Jericho.

The walls of the city that fell in Joshua's day could clearly be seen to have fallen **OUTWARD** and **FLAT**, as the Bible stated in Joshua 6:20. This record has been described in many books dealing with Jericho though the date assigned for the collapse of the wall is not usually correct. In only one place was the wall left partially standing. That must have been where Rahab's house was built, because God had promised to protect her and her family because of her faith. (Hebrews 11:30-31.)

Chapter 53

One Man's Sin

THE THUNDERING collapse of the walls of Jericho was no great surprise to the Israelites. They had been told by God, through Joshua, what to do and what would happen. Even so, it was a chilling experience to witness the death of thousands as they tumbled with the walls. (Joshua 6:16-20.)

The Israelite soldiers knew what to do at that point. They broke from their ranks and rushed into the spreading clouds of dust, scrambling over the rubble in a tightening circle to hem in all the Canaanites who hadn't died in the collapse of the walls. The Israelites swiftly obeyed the strict order to slay every human being and animal in the city.

Only One Family Spared

The only people spared were Rahab, the inn proprietress, and her close relatives. Because Rahab had determined to quit serving pagan gods and learn to obey the true God, and had

acted on her new faith, God listed her in the faith chapter of the New Testament among those who trusted in God and are promised a better resurrection. (Hebrews 11:31, 35.)

Rahab and her relatives were in the inn at the time of Jericho's fall, and though the inn was built on the wall, that particular portion of the wall was miraculously spared. A group of soldiers, led by the two scouts who had promised protection to Rahab, went up the inside of the piece of wall and brought Rahab, those related to her and their possessions to a safe place outside Israel's camp. (Verses 20-23)

The account of the perishing of the idolatrous inhabitants of Jericho by God's command is an episode, among many others, that various religious leaders in high offices declare should be removed from the Bible. They feel that God used poor judgment in allowing such accounts to be written into the Scriptures. But in reality, when God had these wretched idolaters destroyed, He was actually showing them mercy. In the judgment they and other ignorant idolaters will be resurrected and given an opportunity to learn God's way to peace and happiness. (Matthew 12:41, 42; Revelation 20:11-12; Isaiah 65:19-25)

The Israelites had already been warned not to take any booty of any kind from Jericho except articles of gold, silver, brass and iron, which were to go into God's treasury. Everything else and everyone in Jericho was accursed, but items made of these metals could later be purified by fire. These things were carefully sought out and set aside to later go into the treasury of God's sanctuary. No one was to keep any of these things for himself, nor was anyone to take for himself things such as clothes, food, precious stones, animals and so forth. Any person who took any personal booty was to become accursed by God, and would bring such a curse on Israel that all would suffer. (Joshua 6:17-19.)

After the metals had been removed, the Israelites set fire to Jericho. Although most of the walls and many of the buildings had been built of stone and bricks, a great part of the city was made up of heavy beams, poles, planks and boards. There were other flammable materials, but the wood alone was enough to produce a tremendous fire in which dead Canaanites were at least partly cremated. (Verses 24-25)

As for that standing portion of the wall on which Rahab's inn was located, it came crashing down when the wooden beams supporting her house were burned.

By now darkness had come on. Carrying their booty, the Israelites turned from the blazing ruins and returned to camp.

Next morning Joshua called a meeting of the elders and officers.

Jericho's Desolation a Memorial

"Pass on the word to all the people," Joshua informed them, "that no man should ever rebuild Jericho. It could present a strong temptation, what with the great wall stones and wells remaining there. Anyone who reconstructs the city will fall under a curse from the Creator, and he shall become childless. His oldest child shall die when he lays the foundation and his youngest shall die when he sets up the city gates. Let the ashes and stones of Jericho be a monument to the destruction that will come to all idol-worshippers." This prophecy was fulfilled about 500 years later when a very foolish Israelite rebuilt Jericho. (I Kings 16:34.)

News of the fall of Jericho spread swiftly over the land, and Joshua became famous in that part of the world because of his leading Israel to take the city. Consequently, fear of Israel mounted in the surrounding nations. (Joshua 6:27.)

The next city Joshua intended to conquer was called Ai. It was about twelve miles from Jericho in a westerly direction, and though it was considerably smaller than the destroyed city, Joshua had no intention to by-pass any fortress that might later prove a source of trouble.

Again scouts were used to obtain information. When they returned from Ai, they reported that this Amorite fortress wasn't very large or strong, and that it would be no great problem for Israel to attack and destroy it.

"It won't be necessary for all or even a great part of our army to attack this place," the scouts told Joshua. "The walls aren't very high, and it is too small to contain very many fighting men. Two or three thousand of our soldiers should be able to conquer it." (Joshua 7:2-3.)

At first it seemed to Joshua that it would be risky to send such a small number of soldiers, but then he began to wonder if he would be showing a lack of faith in what God could do for Israel by sending ten or twenty times as many men as the scouts suggested. After all, the scouts he sent were chosen from among his best officers and were men of good judgment. Joshua concluded that it wouldn't be necessary to send more than three thousand men.

A few hours later the Israelite soldiers emerged from the caravan road leading up from the Jordan valley, and saw the city of Ai atop a ridge. It was evident that they could be plainly seen by the Amorites, and that a surprise attack would be impossible. Nevertheless, the Israelite soldiers were confident because of what God had done for them at Jericho, and they marched boldly up to Ai. Their leader was certain that the Amorites would surrender when they were told to give up without a fight or be set upon by the whole Israelite army.

Tragedy at Ai

Suddenly the gate of Ai swung open, and thousands of screaming Amorite soldiers rushed out at their would-be attackers!

The Israelites had supposed that the inhabitants of Ai would be quaking with fear, and this abrupt turn of events so surprised them that they momentarily froze in their tracks. By the time they got into action, spears and arrows from the onrushing Amorites were raining into the ranks of the Israelites, and some of these weapons were finding fatal marks. On top of that, rock catapults atop the wall had gone into operation, and huge stones were thudding among the Israelites.

"Where is the help and defense God promised us?" was the question that crossed the minds of most of the Israelite soldiers. It was being made shamefully obvious to the Israelites that God's protection, since the crossing of the Jordan, hinged upon their obedience.

Faith in their Creator swiftly fled, and so did the Israelites. Instead of fighting back, they turned and raced away through a hail of stones, arrows and spears. This cowardly move spurred the screaming Amorites to greater boldness, and they pursued their enemies all the way back through the defile which contained the road by which the Israelites had come.

When at last the routed and panic-stricken Israelites were clear of their pursuers and could group safely together, they found that the Amorites had slain thirty-six of their number and had wounded many more.

It was a dejected and disgraced piece of army that returned to camp. When the people heard what had happened, their confidence in God tumbled to a new low. They couldn't understand why God would promise them swift victory over all their enemies, and then allow about three thousand of their soldiers to be disorganized, chased and crippled by the idol-worshipping Amorites. (Joshua 7:4-5.)

In those days it was the custom to show regret, self-reproach or humiliation by tearing one's clothes and tossing dust upon his head. That was what Joshua did when he heard what had happened. He was so upset and discouraged that he called the elders together before the tabernacle to join him until sundown in prostration and an attitude of repentance.

"Why have you brought us over Jordan to let us fall into the hands of the Amorites?" Joshua inquired of God as he lay with his face to the ground inside the tabernacle. "It would have been better for us to stay on the east side of the river than try to attack our enemies here and end up fleeing in terror from them. When all the Canaanites and other nations hear of this, they shall decide we are really weak, and shall come with their combined forces to surround us. We shall be destroyed, and the great name of our God shall be disgraced!" (Verses 6-9)

"These things haven't happened because of any unfaithfulness on my part," God replied. "My orders were that no booty should be taken from Jericho for personal gain. I warned Israel that anyone who did so would become as accursed as Jericho's people, and that a curse would fall on all Israel as a result. Someone has gone against my will in this matter, and a curse has fallen on this nation. That is why the attempt to conquer Ai was a failure. My help and strength was not with the soldiers, nor will my help be with Israel again in any attempt to overcome your enemies until you remove and destroy the guilty one."

Joshua was surprised and shocked when he heard this. It hadn't occurred to him that the defeat of his soldiers could be due to someone obtaining booty from Jericho and hiding it.

"Get up and tell the people what has happened," God continued. "Tell them that they cannot successfully face their enemies until the guilty one is removed, and that they should wash themselves and be ready to appear before you tomorrow while the guilty one is found." (Verses 10-15)

Joshua obeyed, and next morning the heads of the tribes gathered before the tabernacle and drew lots to learn what tribe had the guilty person. The tribe of Judah drew the telling lot. Then it was up to the heads of the families of Judah to draw lots. The head of the family of the Zarhites drew the unwanted lot, and next it was the turn of the household heads of the Zarhites to draw lots. According to the manner in which God caused the lots to be drawn, the household turned out to be that of Zabdi.

The men of the household of Zabdi solemnly gathered together to do their part. The vast crowd of silent onlookers knew that one of these men was responsible for the death of thirty-six men, the injury of many others and the swift and humiliating retreat of the Israelites from Ai. (Verses 16-18)

The Guilty Man Found

The lot indicating guilt was drawn by a man by the name of Achan, referred to in other scriptures as Achar. (I Chronicles 2:7.) Long before the lot was drawn, it was evident to many bystanders that this man was the one being sought. His face grew more drawn and his expression more frightened as matters proceeded.

The pale and shaking Achan was brought before Joshua.

"Don't try to hide your evil deed," Joshua advised him. "Honor your God by confessing what you have done."

"I -- I didn't realize at the time how much I was sinning against the God of Israel!" Achan tearfully burst out as he fell to his knees and bowed his head. "I was tramping through the rubble of Jericho with other soldiers when I stumbled by myself into the remains of what surely had been the dwelling quarters of a wealthy Canaanite family. When I looked around and saw many valuable things that could increase my family's living standard, I didn't think it would greatly matter to take some of them, especially because most of them would be burned and wasted. One of the things that caught my eye was a beautiful Babylonian robe that shone as though it were woven of golden threads from a rainbow. I stuffed the robe under my jacket, scooped up a handful of silver coins from a chest, grabbed some small object that looked as though it were solid gold, jammed these things into my pouch and then climbed out of the place to join the other soldiers." (Joshua 7:19-21.)

"Where are these things now?" Joshua queried.

"I buried them in the ground inside my tent," was the painful reply.

Joshua immediately rushed officers to Achan's tent. They returned within a few minutes to show Joshua a costly Babylonish type garment, a number of silver coins and a small, wedge shaped bar of gold.

Joshua was aware of the unpleasant event that had to follow. According to God's orders, Achan and his family, his livestock and his possessions -- including the things he had stolen -- were taken to a spot well outside the camp of Israel. There Joshua again confronted Achan to ask him why he had been so thoughtless and disobedient as to bring so much trouble on his people.

"I didn't mean to bring on what happened," Achan murmured. "I just didn't take God's warning seriously concerning how much one person's sin can affect others!" Those were Achan's last words. He was led away to be stoned to death in the sight of his family and thousands of others.

Then he and all his possessions were burned and a great heap of stones was piled over his body. Since he had tried to enrich his family by rebellion, his family had to stand by and watch all their livestock and other property destroyed as a warning to all. (Joshua 7:22-26.)

Joshua returned to the tabernacle to humbly ask God to be merciful to the Israelites and strengthen them against their enemies.

"Don't be discouraged," God told him. "Now that the accursed man has been removed, I have removed my curse and my anger. Now take the army and go to the city of Ai. Use some of your men to bait the Amorites into coming out. Hide the greater part of the army so that they can surprise the enemy. Then you will see how I shall deliver Ai and all its people to you!" (Joshua 8:1-2.)

Chapter 54

Conquest of Bethel and Ai

GOD'S promise to Joshua to help in a second attempt to conquer the Canaanite city of Ai swiftly brought Israel's leader out of his state of discouragement. Joshua immediately chose thirty thousand soldiers for the strategy he had in mind.

Well-planned Strategy

"I'm not sending you to directly attack Ai," Joshua informed the officers who were to be in command. "Late tonight you are to take your soldiers toward Ai. Guides will show you the way. Do not go far from the city. Go around it to the west side and conceal yourselves in the rugged country behind Ai toward Bethel, which is a few miles west of Ai. I shall send others before dawn. Be very careful that no one can be seen from Ai or from the city of Bethel to the west. I shall go with a few thousand to be in the valley just north of Ai when the sun comes up. When the people of Ai discover us, they will rush out to attack and we will flee from them. When you who are hiding west of Ai see me waving a bright banner from the end of my spear, you will know that it is time to rush into Ai and set the city on fire. The huge fire will attract the attention of our pursuers. The 5,000 soldiers on the west and the troops on the north side of the valley are then to move swiftly in on the confused enemy." (Josh. 8:1-13.)

It was well after dark when the thirty thousand fully equipped foot soldiers set out to the northwest. Guides led them to a safe hiding place just west of Ai. Every effort was made to muffle the stomp, clank and jingle of marching men as they moved into the heights between Ai and the adjoining city of Bethel.

When at last the soldiers reached an area where they could hide, they rested for the remainder of the night. The only fires allowed were small ones hidden under overhanging rocks that would eclipse any show of light.

Joshua remained at the Israelite camp at Gilgal until after midnight. Then he set out with the elders of Israel and officers and the remainder of the soldiers. In the early morning hours they arrived on the north side of Ai. By the time he arrived, it was not far from dawn. There wasn't any time to be lost in preparing for what had to be done.

"Take five thousand soldiers and move in between Ai and Bethel before sun-up," Joshua instructed some of his officers. "Make sure no one from Bethel hinders our conquest of Ai."

Joshua and his "bait" forces moved down into the valley north of Ai just before dawn.

Ai Caught Off Guard

When light came over the area, guards on the wall of Ai were startled to see that military forces were approaching the city from the north side of the valley. Word was sent to the king of Ai who was still feeling victorious because his soldiers had previously routed what was considered an invincible army.

When the king witnessed the Israelites approaching on the plain, he became very excited. Here, he thought, was a golden opportunity to twice vanquish the dreaded enemy that had invaded Canaan. Any city or nation that could put Israel on the run two times would be regarded as gloriously heroic and powerful. Flushed with the thought of a second victory, the king lost no time in ordering most of his men out to clash with the Israelites before they could reach Ai.

The north gate of the city swung open, and out rushed the howling troops of Ai to head swiftly down into the valley and directly toward the Israelites. Intending to make a great name for himself as the leader of the forces that would overcome the feared Israelites, the king of the city rode out with his men. When the two forces were only a few hundred feet apart, the king noticed that the Israelites suddenly came to a halt. It seemed that they were getting ready to make a stand, but when they turned and ran off eastward in the direction of the Jordan River, the ruler of Ai could scarcely believe his eyes.

"We've got them on the run already!" one of the king's officers shouted.

"Send a man back to the city!" the king shouted back excitedly. "Tell him that I order every man there, and also the soldiers from Bethel, to join us at once and wipe out the Israelites even if we have to drive them all the way to the Jordan!"

Still at a safe distance away in the valley, Joshua and the soldiers with him continued to move away in feigned flight. When Joshua saw a second regiment pouring out of Ai, he was certain that there couldn't be many more men, if any, remaining in the city. (Joshua 8:14-17.)

The time had come for Joshua to wave a bright banner attached to his spear. The signal was seen by sharp-eyed lookouts west of Ai. They motioned to the 30,000 men hiding about and below them. Within minutes the thirty thousand Israelite soldiers were racing into the unmanned city.

Already the men of Ai and Bethel were too far away to hear the loud screams of the women and children whom they had left undefended. They were shortening the distance between themselves and the Israelites, and contact and victory appeared to be only minutes away when one of the officers moved close to the excited king and gestured frantically toward the rear.

Idolatrous Canaanites Trapped

The king looked around, and his expression of almost gleeful anticipation faded from his face. He gave a signal to halt. The bewildered soldiers came to a stop and looked about to see why they had been ordered to stop. Then all of them saw the smoke and flames belching up from inside the walls of Ai!

"We've been tricked!" the king roared. "Get back to the city!"

When Joshua saw the Canaanite soldiers stop and set off in the opposite direction, and saw smoke billowing up from Ai, he again waved the banner he had been holding. The men with him suddenly turned on the Canaanites. The thousands of Israelite soldiers hiding at the north rim of the valley opposite Ai leaped out of hiding and stormed down the slopes at a right angle to the path of the enemy troops racing back toward the cities of Ai and Bethel. The 5,000 in hiding on the west plunged toward Bethel.

Then out of Ai rushed the thirty thousand Israelites who had set the fires in the streets of the city to lure the enemy soldiers back. Joining the other troops they set off directly toward the oncoming troops of Ai and Bethel. At the same time Joshua and the men with him began pursuing the Canaanites westward.

Boxed in on three sides by rapidly approaching troops, the Canaanites had to stand and fight or race madly about trying to find a way of escape to the south. Those who tried to fight were quickly wiped out. Those who tried to flee up the south slope of the valley were overtaken and slaughtered. The only man to be captured alive was the king. (Joshua 8:18-23.)

Leaving thousands of dead bodies littering the valley, the Israelites converged on Ai and destroyed the rest of the pagans who remained there. Not until then did Joshua lower the banner that waved from his spear.

Things of value were removed from the city, and then it was burned. As for the king of Ai, he was hanged on a tree as a punishment for his gross idolatry. At sunset his body was cut down, tossed on the ground before one of the gates of Ai and covered with a large heap of stones. News of the king's disgraceful end was certain to swiftly reach other rulers of nearby cities, communities and nations, and thus add to the fear and terror growing in that region of paganism.

What was more likely to impress the other nations, however, was that twelve thousand Canaanite men and women perished that day. (Verses 24-29)

A Blessing and a Curse

After the victors had returned to Gilgal with their booty and had rested a few days, Joshua declared that a special ceremony would be held in an area several miles north of Ai. All Israel made the journey over rough country, the ark being carried along as usual. The only ones who didn't go along were a few soldiers to watch over the camp and take care of the animals.

The people congregated on the slopes of two neighboring high points, Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim, as Moses had commanded them (Deuteronomy 11:29-30.) They watched and listened as the sacred ceremonies took place. An altar was erected on Mt. Ebal, of unhewn stones as God had commanded. (Exodus 20:25.) Burnt offerings and peace offerings were made there. Joshua read to the people the many blessings that would come to them through

obedience, and the cursings that would come to them through disobedience. These things were written on the stones of the altar.

The laws from God, given through Moses, were also read to the people in this solemn assembly. The voices of the readers on the mountains rang out with miraculous, far-reaching volume to the millions scattered over the area, to remind them of how God wanted them to live, and of the tremendous importance of being obedient. (Joshua 8:30-35.)

At the end of the reading of the laws, six tribes on Mt. Gerizim summarized God's blessings for obedience. Then the other six tribes on Mt. Ebal echoed the curses that would surely befall Israel if they broke the law. (Deuteronomy 27:1-19.)

After the ceremonies the people camped and then started the return trip to Gilgal.

Israel made this journey into enemy territory and back without encountering so much as one enemy soldier. However, the movements of the people weren't unnoticed, and the rulers of the land became more distressed when they heard of this greater penetration into Canaan.

For centuries the small nations of the region of Canaan had warred among themselves and slain one another. Now that a foreign enemy had entered the land, the rulers put aside their differences and decided to pool their fighting forces and put up a united front against Israel. Israel had no knowledge of these particular plans, though Joshua and his officers were aware that such a thing could happen. (Joshua 9:1-2.)

While this threat to Israel was being organized, several dusty travelers one day approached Gilgal with their burros. Alert Israelite guards went out to stop them, but brought them into the camp to meet Joshua after they requested to visit with the leader of the Israelites.

"We are ambassadors from a distant nation," a spokesman for the strangers declared. "We have heard how your people have come up from the south to conquer the nations in this part of the world. We have come a long way to meet you and to ask you to promise our nation, because we are peaceful people, that you will not carry on war with us if ever you reach our borders." (Verses 3-6)

"You men could be from any of the enemy nations close around us," Joshua told them. "We need proof that you are from this distant nation you have mentioned. Otherwise, it would be foolish to make a promise to you that we would refrain from attacking your nation."

"We assure you, sir," the spokesman replied, "that we are not from any enemy nation. We will be your servants. We have been sent here by the leaders and people of our country -- a distant one -- to tell you that they have heard of the fame of your great God. They are aware of how He dealt with the ruler of Egypt, and how He helped you become victorious over the Amorites and the kings of Heshbon and Bashan. When our people realized how your God helped you in these battles, they knew that it would be foolish to try to stand against you, so they sent us to ask you to promise not to attack a country so respectful of your power and your God."

"It could be as you say," Joshua said, "but as genuine ambassadors you should have some credentials or proof of who you are."

Logical Sounding Lies

"We were purposely not given any," was the reply. "Our superiors knew that if we were stopped by soldiers of any of our neighboring nations, and if it were found that we were ambassadors on a secret peaceful mission to Israel, the neighboring nations would then consider our nation as an enemy. In fact, for the sake of our country's safety, we were told not to even mention the name of our people. Our superiors hope that this matter can be worked out with our remaining completely nameless for the sake of safety, extreme as it seems. Then, if ever Israel arrives at our borders, we shall make ourselves known."

"I've never heard of anything like this," Joshua murmured to his officers as he shook his head. "I think it's time to end this conversation and send these men away."

"Something occurs to me, sir," the spokesman for the strangers suddenly remarked. "Perhaps we can at least prove that we are from a distant nation if you will examine our clothes and the few things we have with us!"

"Here is something worth considering," an officer whispered to Joshua. "A careful examination of these men's possessions might give us some valuable clues as to how far they have come."

After a minute of thought Joshua nodded his approval. The strangers were taken out to where their burros were tied, and all that these men had was carefully examined by competent officers. A few minutes later the officers reported to Joshua.

"Obviously they actually have come a long way," Joshua was told. "Their clothes are dusty and stained with days of travel. Their shoes are well worn as from many miles of walking. Even the sacks on their burros are old-looking as from many hours of exposure to wind, sun and dew. Their empty leather wine bottles are dried out and cracked. They brought out what food they had left. It was hard, moldy bread they claimed was freshly baked the day they started out for here." (Joshua 9:7-13.)

To Joshua and his officers this seemed fair evidence that these men had come a great distance from a foreign land.

Chapter 55

"And the Sun Stood Still"

JOSHUA and the elders had just received men who claimed to be ambassadors from a far away land. They came to seek peace. If so, reasoned the elders, then there would be no particular harm in promising not to attack a nation that wasn't included among the enemy nations of Canaan. Although these men looked like swarthy Canaanites, Joshua knew that some similar tribes had gone to other lands, especially North Africa, to live.

The elders of Israel were told of these things, and it was decided that it would be well to do what the strangers asked, and promise no harm to their nation. This was carried out in a solemn ceremony with Joshua, the strangers, priests and elders present. However, though there was an element of doubt present in this matter, God wasn't consulted. (Joshua 9:3-15.) God's warning against making peace with Canaanites was temporarily neglected, and Israel's leaders paid more attention to these strangers than to God.

New clothes and provisions were supplied the strange ambassadors. After they were given food and overnight lodging with the Israelites, they thankfully and smilingly set off to the north to their mysterious nation.

"Send several armed scouts to follow them without being seen," Joshua ordered. "I am curious to know just where they came from."

It wasn't expected that the scouts would return for many days, and it was a surprise when they returned early on the third day.

"It wasn't necessary to be gone any longer," they reported. "The men we followed went north for a few miles, then turned west and went directly to the Hivite city of Gibeon about twenty miles to the west. If that is their home, then Israel has promised to spare a city or nation well within the Promised Land!" (Verse 16.)

"We have been tricked!" Joshua muttered. "Get fifty thousand troops ready to move, and we'll go straighten this matter out!"

Treachery Discovered

Having been informed that the strange men claiming to have come from a distant nation had gone to a city only about twenty miles from Gilgal, Joshua was quite perturbed. These men had exacted a promise from Joshua that Israel would not attack their country. Now it was quite evident that their "country" was an area well within the bounds of Canaan, and God had instructed Israel to destroy all nations, cities and people within those bounds. Obviously these men had tricked Israel into a sacred promise to spare their people, which was against God's will.

The many thousands of Israel's soldiers quickly assembled at Joshua's command. Led by scouts who had followed the men responsible for tricking Israel into a peace pact, Joshua and his soldiers spent three days in arriving at their destination. It was the walled city of Gibeon,

the capital of a district of swarthy people called Hivites. Four Hivite cities, including Gibeon, had joined in this strategy in seeking peace with Israel. (Joshua 9:16-17.)

The Israelite soldiers moved boldly within the shadows of the walls of Gibeon, but there was no sign of soldiers on the walls to protect the city.

"Send men to the gate with this message," Joshua told his officers. "Have our men tell them that those men who came to see us in Gilgal must be sent out to speak with us right away."

A group of soldiers went to the nearest gate and loudly repeated Joshua's request. There was a response only a few minutes later. The gate swung open, and out walked the men who had come to Gilgal posing as strangers from a distant nation. A few Hivites of high rank accompanied them. Behind them was a crowd of Hivites silently watching to see what would happen. The "ambassadors" sheepishly walked up to Joshua and his officers.

"Why did you go to all the trouble of trying to fool us into believing that your native land was quite distant instead of within our land only a few miles from our camp?" Joshua asked them. (Verse 22)

The Hivites' Excuse

"We have heard about how you have wiped out your enemies," a Gibeonite officer explained. "We didn't want to be counted among them. The city of Gibeon here, and three other Hivite cities to the south -- Chephirah, Beeroth and Kirjathjearim -- formed a secret alliance to seek a promise from Israel's leaders that you would not attack us. We heard that you are a fair and honest people, and would keep any vow you might make.

"We became aware that your God commanded you to destroy all the people of this region, and we were so alarmed that we tried to carry out the only plan we thought might save us. But we aren't begging for freedom now. You have us in your power to deal with as you wish." (Verses 24-25)

Joshua was in no hurry to make any decision. Yet he knew if he wiped out their cities, he would be breaking the pledge that the leaders of Israel had made before God as a witness. There was no other choice. Israel had made a binding agreement and would have to pay the price of letting these Hivites remain in their land.

Joshua dismissed the Gibeonites, set up camp near Gibeon and held a conference with the princes of Israel.

When the main body of Israel heard the decision of the elders and Joshua, many of them were disappointed. Some were even angered, and sent spokesmen to the elders to voice their feelings. (Joshua 9:18.)

"It is not right to allow these pagan Hivites any mercy!" shouted one of the spokesmen. "God has commanded us to destroy them!"

"God will punish us if we fail to attack those four Hivite cities at once!" another yelled heatedly. "Why are our leaders defying the Creator in this matter?"

There was much murmuring among the assembled thousands after these remarks, which were not necessarily made because the speakers desired obedience. So much wealth had already been taken from their enemies that a part of Israel had become greedy, and those were the ones whose ire was roused because of being deprived of the booty of the Hivite cities.

Hivites Made Perpetual Laborers

Ignoring the loud protests, the elders told the people that Israel should stick to the agreement not to attack the Hivites, but that Israel should make the inhabitants of the four cities bond-servants of Israel to serve in the physical needs of the Levites. This would keep them in close contact with God so that they would never return to idolatry. (Verses 19-21)

When the troops who had accompanied him heard what Joshua was about to do, even some of them muttered in disappointment at being deprived of the excitingly profitable opportunity of plundering the Hivite cities.

Joshua called the rulers and chief officers of the Hivites before him and made this proclamation:

"Though you have sought peace and have recognized our God as great, you tricked us. Therefore you are cursed. No longer shall your mighty men of war bear arms. Instead, they shall become wood choppers and water bearers for us. When our people take over this area, your people shall join us and work as bond servants. Your tasks will be especially for those in service for our God wherever He shall have us build His altar. You have no choice but to accept these conditions." (Verses 22-27)

"These are bitter terms for our warriors and the people of all four cities," the leader of Gibeon spoke out. "However, we feel it is better than being destroyed because of our sins. We know your greater forces and your great God are too powerful for us to face, and we must humbly bow to your will." (Verse 25)

The Hivites should have considered themselves quite fortunate to remain alive under the circumstances, but it is generally human nature to hope for more than is received, and there was a tone of bitterness in the voice of the Gibeonite leader.

Having ended these matters with the Hivites for the time being, Joshua and his many soldiers headed back toward Gilgal. They little guessed that they would very soon be racing back toward Gibeon. We shall now see why.

For many centuries there had been a city in the land of Canaan known as Salem. During the days of Abraham, a King was there whose name was Melchizedek, Who visited Abraham and blessed him after he rescued Lot and other captives from a group of marauding kings.

(Genesis 14:17-20.) Melchizedek ruled from Salem as long as the patriarchs -- Abraham, Isaac and Jacob -- dwelt in Canaan.

Later He ceased to rule from there when the children of Israel were in Egypt. In the days of David, God again chose Jerusalem (another name for Salem) as the city from which to rule His people.

The name Melchizedek means King of Righteousness. (Hebrews 7:1-3.) At the time the Israelites entered Canaan, the ruler of Salem -- then called Jerusalem -- was a Canaanite,

Adoni-zedek, a sinful king who pretended to be "Lord of Righteousness" -- a king who put himself in place of the true King of Righteousness.

A Plot Against the Hivites

News of the fall of Jericho and Ai brought fear to the ruler of Jerusalem, especially when he learned of the pact between Israel and the four Hivite cities just a few miles from Jerusalem, because Gibeon was one of the stronger cities of the area -- even stronger than Ai. (Joshua 10:1- 2) Adoni-zedek realized that other cities of Canaan must immediately band together to stand against the Israelites, or be defeated.

The proud king of Jerusalem sent messengers to the rulers of four neighboring Amorite cities. These were Hebron (where the Israelite scouts went on their return trip through Canaan about forty years before), Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon, and were located in an area only a few miles southwest of Jerusalem. Adoni-zedek suggested they all join forces and invade the Hivite cities to punish them for making peace with the Israelites. (Verses 3-4)

When the kings of these cities received Adoni-zedek's plea for their armies to join his in an attack on Gibeon, they agreed at once to send all their soldiers northward. Their forces were united on the way to Jerusalem, where Adoni-zedek's troops were added. Together these thousands of well-trained warriors marched onward to a spot just south of Gibeon, where they camped and readied their equipment for an attack on Gibeon, because the Hivites were now their enemies along with Israel.

When the Gibeonites saw these combined armies streaming up from the south, they sent swift messengers to race to Gilgal to ask for help from Israel.

While the messengers sped toward the Israelite camp, the armies from the south set up powerful catapults and ramming devices with which to assault Gibeon, and prepared long ladders and ropes for scaling the walls. Night was not far away, however, and the Gibeonites felt certain that no attack would be made until dawn.

The messengers from Gibeon arrived at Gilgal before nightfall, and were given an immediate audience with Joshua.

"Thousands upon thousands of Canaanite troops of the Amorite tribe were approaching Gibeon when we left!" they excitedly told Joshua. "Perhaps by now they have already attacked our city. As your servants, we beg you to send up at least a part of your great army to save us!" (Joshua 10:5-6.)

Joshua Had Learned His Lesson

Joshua wasn't inclined to give the messengers a quick answer. He wondered if the presence of so many fighting men could mean that Israel might run into deep trouble as punishment for not consulting God in the matter of making an agreement with the Gibeonites, or if God had forgiven him and the elders when they repented.

Not wishing another unpleasant situation, Joshua this time went into the tabernacle and prayed to God to give him a clear picture of what should be done.

"Don't be concerned about that army preparing to attack Gibeon," came God's answer. "Not one man of those many thousands will come out alive after I punish them!" (Verse 8) Now Joshua knew God had forgiven him and the elders.

Thus encouraged, he was convinced that he should go at once to the aid of the Gibeonites. He gave orders to his officers to assemble the army of Israel for immediate action. By nightfall the troops were assembled and ready to march.

Gibeon was about twenty miles west of Gilgal, and though they had a rough, uphill road between the two places, the Israelite army picked its way to the hill country through the night, and arrived within sight of Gibeon at dawn. (Verses 7, 9)

Coming over a rise at the head of Israel's troops, Joshua and his officers saw that the Canaanite troops from the south were just starting to move closer to Gibeon for their assault on the walls. Catapults were being pushed forward, scores of men were carrying metal-nosed logs with which to batter the gates, and thousands of archers, swordsmen and spear-bearers were marching within striking range of the walls.

"Draw up our troops to attack the invaders of Gibeon at once!" Joshua told his officers. "Keep the troops out of sight behind this rise, move north of Gibeon so that we can't be seen, and then divide up and swing around the east and west walls to surprise them!"

Minutes later hordes of Israelite soldiers raced around the walls of Gibeon to rush in among the troops moving against the Hivite city. The attackers were so surprised by this sudden onslaught by the Israelites that they halted in their tracks, then turned and fled in the opposite direction. The Israelites pressed in against them. So great was the slaughter that bodies were strewn for miles along paths that led northwestward, southward and southwestward from Gibeon.

All this didn't happen in just a short while. Many of the enemy soldiers tried to hide in ravines and among the rocks, and time was required in searching them out. The Israelites had orders to let no enemy fighters escape, regardless of how far they had to be pursued.

In fact, the main part of the enemy troops to escape the first attack had to be pursued as much as thirty miles to the southwest. (Joshua 10:10-11.) Part of the way was through a long, deep ravine. Then there was a steep ridge to go over, and next a rocky, rugged road so precipitous in places that steps had already been cut in the rocks.

By the time the enemy had been pursued even part of that distance, however, the morning was half spent. Joshua became concerned about being successful in destroying all the enemy troops before dark, after which any who were left would surely succeed in escaping. Already exceptionally heavy clouds were moving over the sky, which meant that darkness would come on even sooner than usual.

A Mighty Miracle

"Cause the sun and moon to stand still so that the day here will be made long enough for us to overcome our enemies," Joshua prayed to God. (Verse 12)

The battle continued. It was no small matter to flush out enemy troops from their hiding places as the area of fighting moved steadily southward. Meanwhile, the sky became darker, and it appeared that an unusually strong storm was likely to break in the region just south of Gibeon. Between thick clouds, the pale sun showed through at times. There was nothing unusual about that, but two or three hours after Joshua's unusual request of God the Israelites began to be aware that the sun was still in a morning position!

As the afternoon wore on while Israel kept up the bloody pursuit, it was noted with increasing awe that the sun still had not moved. In fact, it stayed in the midst of the sky for so long that daylight was extended by about twelve hours! (Verse 13)

Did God actually stop the Earth from rotating for twelve hours? We are not told. With God all things are possible. If this planet in a few minutes ceased turning, God must have performed a miracle much like the braking of a modern jet airplane upon landing. Remember, the Earth's surface is turning at a speed of one thousand miles an hour at the equator and more slowly as one approaches the poles. There was never another day like this one. Many religious leaders have argued that time was lost back at the battle near Gibeon, and that as a result the Sabbath was moved from Saturday to Sunday. Not so. THAT day did not become another day. It was merely an extra-long day of 36 hours.

The lengthened day was a reason for wonderment and fear among both Israelites and Canaanites. Even Joshua was awed by what happened. God honored an outstanding prayer in an outstanding way because He was fighting Israel's battles. (Verse 14)

Even so, Joshua was concerned about conquering all the enemy troops, many thousands of whom were well ahead of the Israelites. It appeared that they would escape while Israel was being delayed in sending out small groups in every direction to overtake enemy soldiers who had fled to the sides of the retreat paths to the south.

Then came another miracle from God. The sky grew increasingly darker. Lightning flashed above the Canaanite retreaters. Ear-splitting thunder reverberated between the mountains and through the deep ravines.

From the black clouds came a strange, hissing sound. The fleeing Canaanites looked up in inquisitive terror, and it was then that the power of God descended from the sky on them with deadly force!

Few Escape

The hissing sound from the sky was short warning to the Canaanites as to what was about to happen. Suddenly there was stinging pain from sharp blows on their heads and shoulders. Many were killed outright by falling objects. Others were beaten to the ground to quickly die as their prone bodies were exposed to more blows.

Some were able to reach the shelter of protruding rock ledges, and from there witness that they had been caught in a terrible shower of giant hailstones!

Within a few minutes almost all the Canaanite soldiers and their animals were battered to death. Then the tremendous shower of heavy hailstones miraculously stopped as suddenly as

it had begun. Some of those who had been spared managed to escape and take refuge in nearby cities, but most of them either died of their wounds or were later caught and slain by Israelite soldiers.
(Joshua 10:8-11.)

Shortly before this event produced by God, the five kings of the five Canaanite cities, fleeing southward near Makkedah with their troops, held a hasty conference.

"There is no hope of holding out against the Israelites," the king of Jerusalem remarked fearfully. "Our men have no more desire to fight. They're frightened because it is still daylight, whereas the sun should have gone down hours ago. Israel's God has something to do with this awesome thing. I propose that the five of us hide in one of the caves in this area, and let Israel pursue our troops. Then perhaps we can return later to safety."

The other four leaders quickly agreed. They gave orders to their officers to proceed without them. Taking scant provisions, they hurried away from their men and sought out an insignificant cave some distance up the side of the ravine through which they had been moving. (Verses 16- 17)

They had been in hiding only a short while when the storm of giant hailstones struck. They realized that their remaining troops would hardly survive such an onslaught from the sky, but they were more concerned about themselves than about their men.

What they didn't realize was that God had no intention of allowing them to escape. When the pursuing Israelites arrived to find dead Canaanites scattered throughout the ravine, a search was made for possible survivors in the rocks, defiles and caves. One soldier was as startled as were the five kings when he walked into the cave where they were hiding. He ran to notify Joshua at once, who gave orders to deal with them immediately. (Verse 18)

Trapped!

A short while later, as the occupants of the cave peered out at the main body of Israelite soldiers moving on to the south, they were surprised by large stones rumbling down from above and thudding in a growing heap on the ledge at the mouth of the cave. Almost before they realized that many men must be rolling the rocks from overhead, they found themselves trapped by a solid bank of stones much too great to be removed from the inside!

Meanwhile, at Joshua's command, the Israelites moved southward to seek out and slay most of the few enemy troops not killed by the storm of gigantic hailstones. They pursued them as far south as the city of Makkedah, where they temporarily camped.

Then Joshua sent men to the cave where the five kings were trapped. The men removed the stones piled there, seized the prisoners and took them to a spot part way between the cave and the city of Makkedah. There were a number of trees there, and five of them were chosen for a grisly purpose. The five kings were killed and their bodies hanged on the trees till sundown. Then they were cut down and taken back into the cave where they had tried to conceal themselves. For the second time great stones were piled against the mouth of the cave, this

time to form an infamous burial crypt for the five men who had tried to lead their armies against Israel. (Verses 19-27)

While the five kings were still hanging on the five trees, Joshua and his troops rushed into Makkedah and slew all the people and disposed of the king of that city in the same manner accorded to the ruler of Jericho. (Verse 28; 6:21)

In the days that followed, Joshua and his troops stormed over the southern region of Canaan to attack and overthrow a number of cities. The idol-worshipping inhabitants were slain and the leaders killed and hanged -- all according to God's instructions. God wanted idolatry and child sacrifice completely eliminated throughout Israel's land. Included in these cities was Hebron, the place Israelite scouts had passed through four decades previously.

The campaign that had started out as a move to defend the Gibeonites turned into a tremendous victory for Israel. Successful because of God's help, the soldiers returned to Gilgal with a great wealth of the spoils of war -- household goods, tools, implements, livestock and farm produce. (Joshua 10:29-43; Joshua 11:14, 16)

The defeat of the armies of these cities didn't mean that all of the southern part of Canaan was conquered. There were still more cities and tribes to take over in that region. Even after many more military operations by Israel's army during the next year or two there were still a few fortresses and armed areas to subdue.