

**Reading:** Numbers 10:11-36

**Theme:** Starting Well.

People are beginning to look to the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang South Korea during February (9<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>) and a few months later (4 - 15 April) to the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games in Australia. The TV pundits will analyse everything, especially the way the competitors start - on the downhill or the bobsleigh, the sprints etc. In many events you need a really good start – hence the analysis. You don't hear them make those comments about the biathlon - the 10km sprint or the 20km individual for men or the ladies biathlons (*skiing and shooting*) or the Marathon or long-distance races! In the biathlon the ones who are noted are the ones there at the finish, some of them in a sprint finish as with long distance events! We know many people can start a New Year with a number of resolutions - new diet, new fitness regime, new intentions and even if they start well, these intentions can soon fade and evaporate from the scene. We are just starting a New Year and I hope we will start well, but especially continue going on well in our Christian lives.

From the reading we see the people of Israel starting really well on the next part of their journey to the Promised Land. If we were to only know about this starting well, we'd think they would go on so well, but sadly they fall at the first hurdle in Chapter 11. This evening I want us to focus on the excellent start they made, to learn and apply lessons for ourselves, especially from the example of Moses. I have 5 headings, each beginning with O:

### 1. Overview.

The people, under Moses' guidance and leading, had reached Mount Sinai within 3 months after leaving Egypt. They had stayed there for about 10 or 11 months. During that amazing time, they had received the Law, Moses had gone into the mountain, the people had sinned and been restored, they had seen Moses go up yet again and receive

the details of the Tabernacle and he had the name of the Lord proclaimed to him. They had completed the Tabernacle's building, the garments for the priests etc and all had now been set up. The book of Leviticus had been given and there had been a census taken, the camp organised, the Passover celebrated and silver trumpets for communication signals set in place. All was now in place for them to make progress, to advance the two weeks or so into the Promised Land.

Recognise as a church and as individuals, even with great backgrounds, privileges and achievements, we always need to keep on advancing in our own Christian lives and in the life of the church. As individuals we need to go on with our Saviour in our daily walk in life. As a church we need to make progress and develop. In our lives things may be great or even traumatic, but we all need to keep on going on and to do as our Lord and Saviour requires. As we look back over our Christian experience, short or long, have we made progress? The Israelites, under Moses' leadership did – see their:

## **2. Obedience.**

On the 20th day of the 2nd month of the 2nd year the pillar of cloud on the Tabernacle lifted up and moved (v11). Here was the clear signal to move. In v13 it is stressed that this was the first move, and this 1st journey was in obedience to what the Lord had commanded through Moses. Moses had been the messenger of God to the people and they had previously said they wanted the Lord to speak to Moses and then Moses to them and they would obey all that he said (*Exodus 20:19 and especially Deuteronomy 5:24-27*). At this time the people were as good as their word and on the signal of the cloud being taken up, they started to take down their tents, to dismantle their neighbourhoods and get ready to leave what had become home for 10 months or so. It was a lot of hard work and must have been an inconvenience and yet the people of Israel knew the Lord was leading them and they obeyed.

It is thrilling to consider that the Lord still leads us on; He does so in line with His word and mostly through it. Matthew Henry wrote *"Note, Those that have given up themselves to the direction of God's word and Spirit steer a steady course, even when they seem to be bewildered. While they are sure they cannot lose their God and guide, they need not fear losing their way."* This means our safest path is to obey God. In our lives there will be those times when a number of equally good and appropriate ways lay ahead of us and we need to choose, then it is not so easy; but desire God's way and will for His glory, seek His will and He will lead and guide us. Proverbs 3:5-6 are such important verses as we each seek the Lord's will ahead for us *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths."* (NKJV)

The way ahead and of progress for us all as Christians - young or old, new or mature, is a continuing and continual obedience as we journey on to our heavenly promised land. Sometimes there are periods of rest, when we are settled, but we need to be ready to move on at the Lord's bidding. Sometimes, like the Israelites, it seems we make progress from one desert situation to another! Yet in it all the Lord knows where He would take us and lead us and we can say that *"All the way my Saviour leads me:"* but if we are honest it doesn't always feel like that does it? For His leading can confuse us, dismay us, cause us fear and pain and yet in His love and wisdom He still wants us to walk in His ways, as in them we can be sure of His care and provision even when we do go through desert times, all seeming dry and barren in our lives. In such times He may be causing our affection and attention to be fixed on our promised land as we are reminded this world is a desert place compared to heaven. We need obedience in our progress and advancement, but we see:

### **3. Order.**

At the start of chapter 10 we are told of two silver trumpets - the mobile communication equipment for the huge camp of Israel some 9 miles square (3x3) - they had their various uses and no doubt had various clarion calls or tunes to sound for various actions. Can we imagine 2 million people getting ready to go off after the pillar of cloud? There would have been chaos and our God is not a God of chaos, but of order and decency and so there were the sounds, signals, calls for when each section of the camp was to set off in their tribes. The early part of Numbers deals with the organisation, appointing of duties and the set out to the camp, even the ordering of departure is put in place (*mainly chapter 2*). From our point of view, we can see that it is ordered and structured so that families, friends, and relationships were all maintained and also that everyone recognised that they were all to play their part.

The Tabernacle was to be taken down and the family groups of the Levites - the Gershomites, Merarites and the Kohathites (v17 & 21) had their appointed tasks in taking down the Tabernacle and the 1st two groups went on ahead to setup the Tabernacle, while the Kohathites carried the altars, the Ark of the covenant and all Tabernacle furniture as God had said and so it could be put into place as soon as possible when they arrived. It would be so easy to read these things and just treat them as incidental details or ask "*So what?*" Yet it shows the order and care of the Lord in His leading the people out. He is the God of order and we have evidence of that most clearly in Creation.

Our Christian forefathers were very hot on self-discipline and structure. Perhaps they became too taken up with the form and discipline as an end in itself, but they had much going for them in the self-discipline. Some were very methodical and earned the nickname "*Methodists*" which was initially a term of derision. We need to be self disciplined and ordered in all areas of life, especially in our times of reading God's word and prayer. We don't do this just

to tick boxes (*imaginary or real*), but to cultivate and nurture good and godly habits. Our thoughts, appetites and desires need to be disciplined and ordered; the life of the church here needs to be ordered. Yes, there is to be a freedom, even spontaneity in worship, which may not be natural to some of us (*me especially*), but it must not descend into chaos.

Whether we realise it or not there are legal requirements on us as a church - financial requirements, insurance requirements employment legislation, charity laws, health and safety, child protection and so we could continue on. We need order; our worship has to be ordered according to what God has laid down in His word as acceptable worship. We read of such order later in Numbers, for God is to be worshipped aright - both then and now and we are not to relegate Him in our worship, nor impose our own ideas or culture as the only style of form of worship. There is a rich variety of regularised worship available in the Church, even though that may not always be suited to our diverse tastes, backgrounds and cultures. In fact we read in 1 Corinthians 14 that Paul insisted on order in the church and said in v33 "*For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.*" The people of Israel had to advance in order, but as they did so, some non-Israelites were not going to go with them, but Moses wanted them to do so and we note:

#### **4. Outreach.**

Personally I think Moses is a great example here, as well as a challenge to me and to you. He did not know what lay ahead, did not have a "*Rough Planet Guide to the Promised Land*", nor had internet reviews and tips, but he encouraged his brother-in-law and family to go with them. It was a reaching out to him and the family to join with them and their God, that he and his family would be cared for by the people of Israel and they also would be partakers of the good the Lord was going to do for Israel and that Hobab would be of use to the people - he had a role, a part to play.

Is it just me, or does v31 seem an odd verse to you as well? The Lord was leading them, so why would Moses want Hobab his brother-in-law to go with them as an expert in the desert, as an early Bear Grylls? The way they were to go would be shown by the Lord, but God's leading, guiding and keeping does not prevent us, or excuse us from seeking providential help from our friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ, from experts. We are not to rely upon them above the Lord, but gratefully use and benefit from their God given gifts and talents for us all to make easier and wiser progress.

Yet above all that benefit, Moses had concerns for others to go with them. Here he is reaching out to get his brother-in-law and family to come with them, and enjoy the benefits of all that the Lord would give them. This could have been in terms of material blessing, but especially spiritual blessings. We, as Christians, as we go on towards heaven, should be concerned for others, especially family members, to go along with us. The Lord has promised very much good to all who trust in Him, they will have a secure home in heaven and will be sure of going to that home and inheritance. We are to encourage, urge others to come along with us. We can use the promises of God to present the wonders of the gospel; other times use the warnings of God in the gospel, but we are to be concerned enough to tell people the gospel. We are to be as Moses was - concerned to take others with us to heaven and not get there empty-handed, even be a pathfinder for our family and friends. You may feel you the only one who is a believer in your family, or you may be the first? Finally see:

## **5. Ordinances.**

It would appear that the Ark went ahead of the whole community of Israel. This happened at other times, but this first uprooting of the camp is noted; the Ark is out there ahead of them, carried by the Kohathite Levites. Each day Moses commenced the journey with prayer and ended it with prayer. It is not hard to apply this part of the

narrative to ourselves and I know I spoil you, but here is a three-point mini sermon within this 5-point sermon:

**a. Trust the Lord to guide us every day:** The Israelites had a visible cloud; probably above the Ark of the Covenant and so they had clear and sure leading. Even though we do not see such, we have the Lord with us as His people and He is leading and guiding us. We have to look for His leading and guiding day by day. Last year's, last week's, and yesterday's guidance are all to encourage us to freshly trust Him in His love and care to guide us today and in the year ahead, to do so all our lives long. He will not only give fresh guidance, but give fresh provisions of His grace for us as we go on with Him.

**b. Seek God's blessing at the start of each day and venture (v35):** Moses asked God to go ahead of them and scatter their enemies. Do we realise we have enemies against our spiritual life and prosperity as believers? Because of that we should seek God's protection and guidance in a world that would trap, snare, seduce and hurt us if it could, for there are unseen evil forces moving against us, through the world and all that it would bring to us. We are in a spiritual battle and we are to pray for God to help us and keep us each day. In part of the Lord's Prayer we ask to be delivered from evil or the evil one. David virtually uses these words at the start of Psalm 68 *“May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may his foes flee before him.”* – a psalm for the church militant as the church goes on in spite of her enemies and opposition. We need to watch and pray at the start of each day and to look to the Lord to help and protect us.

**c. Pray for God's presence and peace at the close of each day (v36):** God's presence will make us rest in safety. Moses wanted God with them as they settled down, as the camp was set up, as life's activities, meals and sleep continued. He knew the Lord's presence was needed at all times. They may have been countless thousands, but their rest, peace and security depended on the Lord's presence

with them. Our own safety and security is not in us as individuals or as a church. We do not have enough strength, ability, training, intellect etc. Our safety, rest and peace are in the Lord and as we retire to our beds at night, we can thank God for His keeping and pray for it to continue while we are asleep. David wrote in Psalm 4:8 *"I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, makes me dwell in safety."*

As a start to go to the Promised Land, the Israelites went off well - perfectly out of the gate, blocks; into the correct ski or stride pattern, things looked well, but then they met a testing time and things didn't go so well, and they hit the barriers and tested God.

I pray that we would all start well as we go into this New Year, that we would then run with patience and endurance the race that is before us, whether it is going to be a long marathon or short sprint, that we would look to Jesus and take our help, encouragement and guidance from Him who has gone ahead of us as the Author and Finisher of our faith.