

A
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[PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD – ‘MERCY’](#)

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“AS A SOLDIER”

1 Timothy 1: 16-20; 2 Timothy 2: 1-4; Numbers 1: 1-19; 2: 1, 2; 2 Samuel 11: 6-13

R.D.P. We were reading at home in the beginning of the first book of Samuel, where a very dark picture emerges of the state of things in Israel which came about after the people had settled into the land and the tabernacle was pitched at Shiloh. The priesthood is corrupt, the high priest extremely weak and unable to intervene in relation to the conduct of his sons; the service of the house of God was corrupted, and God speaks to Eli first by a man of God, then through the boy Samuel, and finally of course the ark of God is taken captive. It is a sobering part of the book to read. Yet it is also the opening of a very bright chapter through Hannah and Samuel, which is encouraging. But one younger brother, after some of us attempting to give some kind of outline to all this, asked ‘Does this have a bearing upon us in our day?’ Now that really exercised me as to our own day. Most of the things prescribed by God for the people as coming through the wilderness and into the land were there. The priests were there, the tabernacle was there, the ark of God was there, the candlestick was there and all the other furniture. The Levites were still at least nominally in their place and yet the whole thing was falling into decay and decline and eventually to the sad point where the ark of God was taken captive, and the question was, ‘Does it have a bearing upon us?’ I thought about that, beloved brethren, because it had come to that pass because no one had taken care of it.

I believe that we need to pay some attention today to taking care of God’s testimony and of what is precious to Christ. That side of the truth is perhaps something we need to address more. It has been said that if we have the Lord Jesus in all His love and grace we must also have Him in His faithfulness to God. I believe that that is something that should be part of the teaching of the present time. I have been concerned recently that the basic things – that which is fully believed amongst us – might be reiterated and today I thought

we could speak about this aspect of the truth that involves the care of what is precious to Christ and the care of God's testimony.

The book of Numbers is the fourth book of Moses, but it is striking if you look at the date there that you do not get that book written until you have Exodus and Leviticus. That is part of the teaching I think. Here we are, or mostly all, who know what it is to have had the wonderful experience of what comes in in Exodus as to redemption. We know what it is to be purchased, we know what it is to be protected by the blood, we have known something of the covenant of God, and known something of the grace of God. I think Exodus is a book full of grace. I think the prime stamp you could put on the book of Exodus is grace. And then the book of Leviticus, which has to do with that people who have been redeemed in their approach to God and learning what is suitable to God, the inside place. But then Moses does not finish his writings without the book of Numbers which is about the military side, the side in which things are cared for in the wilderness, and the first thing he speaks about there is the soldier.

Perhaps in this reading we could look at the importance of every one of us taking up this matter of being a soldier, what Paul speaks of as "a good soldier of Jesus Christ". I believe it is fundamental to everything else in Numbers, that you have the soldier. In Timothy Paul speaks about the 'charge', and that also is upon my spirit. This is not a haphazard movement through the wilderness, this is not persons who are to move according to the way that they feel or driven by their circumstances, but as persons who are under charge. You get that in Numbers and it also comes through in Paul's ministry here in Timothy, "This charge" he says, "I commit to thee".

And, beloved brethren, I want us to see that he does not commit it to a genius or to a person of overwhelming intellect, or of magnetic personality or outstanding gift, but to one who was diffident, who was nervous, who was weak in his body, who was, perhaps not the best one fitted to carry it – just like us, persons like ourselves. These are the persons to whom the continuance and charge of the testimony is committed, and he speaks to him that he might "war by them the

good warfare, maintaining faith and a good conscience". Then in his second epistle he speaks about a good soldier, "a good soldier of Jesus Christ". I thought we might look, if we have time, at some of the detail in Numbers, noting the numbering from twenty years old and upward, and so on, and what that may involve, and all who were there as part of that numbering and naming at the beginning of the book. And finally I thought Urijah sets out what it is to be a good soldier of Jesus Christ. I do not think warfare in the wilderness is aggressive, it is defensive, and you find persons who in their lives have taken up the charge in relation to the defence of what is precious to Christ.

R.H.B. He takes his share in suffering, the good soldier; that seems to imply suffering that could be avoided but voluntarily accepted out of affection. Is that your thought?

R.D.P. I believe so, yes. He is not exactly to take his share in fighting but in suffering. I think the principal weapon of the believer in the wilderness in this area in which things are hostile is suffering. Would that be right?

R.H.B. Yes, I was wondering what form that might take in our own day. Have you any impression as to that?

R.D.P. Well, I am just trying to work at what the soldier is. If we look at Numbers we get some help. I know it is difficult to read all these names but the book of Numbers sets things in order and you find that it involves a system – a word which we perhaps shy away from. I think what you get in Numbers is a system of things which is instigated in relation to the testimony; what is systematic is there.

Now the soldier, what is he doing in the wilderness? He is there in the place where he sinned, he is in the same world where the invitation to offend still is. He is not translated to heaven. He goes to work, he goes to school, he moves about in his family, he meets the neighbours, he meets situations in life, and he is defending the testimony of God in it. Would you say that? I do not think these are great set battles. This is the day-by-day warfare, that involves, you

might say, the outer ring of the defence of what is called in Numbers the tabernacle of testimony. Would you think that is right?

R.H.B. Yes, and it has in view the defence of what is precious to God, does it not? There was the sense in which when the ark was captured it was able to take care of itself, was it not? It went into all sorts of incongruous places and brought down what was opposed, but I was thinking of what you said at the beginning that it was lost to the people really because nobody was bothering about it; it had almost become an incubus, had it not, a chore, it seems.

R.D.P. And a long time elapses before things are returned to what is normal in relation to the ark – the glory departed from Israel. It is a striking section of scripture, but the testimony of God was in the wilderness, and the testimony of God is here today. My impression is that the testimony is everything that has been declared as to God. The whole truth of God revealed involving the incoming of Jesus, and the way that God has made Himself known – that testimony in all its detail and in all its glory and its fulness is here in this wilderness scene. I am not talking specifically about the brethren, or about a particular company. I am saying that the revealed truth of God is here in a world which has little good news at all, which is collapsing and deteriorating on every hand. The testimony of God is here in this place; and it is here, but it is not staying here. That is another thing about the wilderness. You may say the overall testimony to the tabernacle in the wilderness was that it was not staying here, it was going through and it was going out of it. But the whole truth of God is there, and here are persons who have been taken up by God, ourselves part of them, who have been redeemed by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus, who have had the covenant of God revealed to us, who have known something about the structure of His testimony, and there comes a point in history where He says, I want you to defend it, not on the basis of, ‘we will if we have time’, or ‘in accordance with our ability’, but on the basis of a charge.

J.S.G. The thought of suffering referred to, according to the note, seems to be linked with 2 Timothy 1, the glad tidings – “suffer evil

along with the glad tidings” (v 8). Is that connected with your thought of God’s testimony here? In a practical way would it mean that the defence of it would be that we do not defend our own rights, we live and act in these circumstances you have mentioned in everyday life in accord with the glad tidings? Would that be one way in which the defence takes place?

R.D.P. I believe so. If we get a picture of the testimony, the tabernacle of testimony, the overall impression was that it was going through the wilderness and it was not going to stay here. I think that aspect of the gospel is very important. The gospel is related to what is going out of the world. It is not setting up something here or improving something here, it is going out of the world. That is why I say the military side of the saints in the wilderness, that side of defending things, is not aggressive, it is not attack, it is defence.

Because there are no territorial claims, the saints have no place here, they are not looking for anything here. They are connected with something that belongs in another place and their joy is in their individual part of faithfulness to defend what there is in relation to the testimony of God.

P.M. One feature of the soldier which comes in your second scripture, is that he has been enlisted. When does that take place?

R.D.P. That is why I thought that we would get some help from Numbers. We get help from these ages and dates. When you look into the detail, striking things come to light. The military age in Numbers is twenty years and upward, and you will notice that there is no ceiling put upon it. When it comes to defending God’s testimony here, there is not a point where that ceases. So you get a man like Caleb who says, “I am this day eighty-five years old” (Josh 14: 10), and he was ready for war, but it starts at twenty involving a certain maturity. I believe there comes a point in the life of a believer where he knows the fulness of grace and the blessedness of the love of God in expression, as we get in Exodus. We may also know something about the order and glory of the service of God, but there comes a point where you set yourself to defend it. I think that brings in Timothy because he was left at Ephesus to defend the great truths

that had been opened up there. The attacks of the enemy began there immediately.

P.M. So the thought of the charge and being enlisted means that it is not optional, does it?

R.D.P. No, I think that is right. It is a conscious charge. These may not be popular things to say in this day, but I think we need it at the present time. I believe that the sense of what is precious to God and what is precious to Christ needs to be definitely before us. God's testimony in these days needs caring for, and the first level of care is the soldier, and that is to be the believer. It is the believer in his life in the ordinary affairs of life. He takes his stance in relation to the defence of the testimony. As I said, I use Urijah as an example because there he was in the field, he had no knowledge of all the details of what David was doing, but in type in simple faithfulness to Christ he stands there as a soldier, and through him God is able to bring to an end that course of declension in David, and the soldier stands firm in Urijah.

J.W. What part does the recognition and confession of Jesus as Lord and owning His rights have in this?

R.D.P. I think that is part of it. Would you agree? It is "from twenty years old and upward", and "all that went forth to military service". They had had a sense, and there are persons here like it and thank God for it, who have been moved by the Spirit of God who confess the name of the Lord Jesus; they have gone forth to war, as we read in Numbers, and I think that involves the confession of His Name. It involves taking ground for Christ, does it not? These may seem simple things, but I do believe that if there is no thought of the soldier in the public setting, there will be no thought of the Levite and there will be no service of God. As far as we are concerned it involves this structured way in which the teaching comes to us. Would you agree with that?

J.W. Yes. That would be a public matter, would it not, recognising Jesus as Lord? We are equipped for it by receiving the Holy Spirit, are we?

R.D.P. I believe so. I think being a soldier is more than being a believer. Would you agree with that?

J.W. Yes.

R.D.P. It is one thing to be a believer. Thank God for all of us here who know what it is to be believers, but to be a soldier I think involves confession of His Name. It involves the reception of the Holy Spirit and then Numbers teaches us that we are to come under the idea of charge. It is not that I am now a free agent; in the divine teaching you are to come under charge and under direction, which Numbers teaches us.

D.E.R. Is it love for the Lord which alone will motivate us to become good soldiers?

R.D.P. I believe so, it is the wonderful grace of God in Exodus. I am impressed with that. Numbers is military, but Exodus is grace, the grace of God. They wandered, they complained, and all the rest of it, yet the general tone of the book of Exodus is that His grace was upon them there. That is a wonderful thing and is calculated to affect us in our hearts, as Romans teaches us, I think, so that grace has its way with us and there begins to be movement of heart in relation to Christ: "Should we continue in sin that grace may abound? Far be the thought", Rom 6: 1. Shall I continue to yield my members, my hands, and so on, which have been used in what is sinful? No, he says, I will give them in the service of Christ, and there begins to be a movement of heart. I think now is the time, where there is the idea of enlistment as a soldier. Would you agree with that?

D.E.R. Yes indeed. We might feel very weak, and so on, but grace is available today, so that Paul says, "be strong in the grace", that is, in the power of grace, "which is in Christ Jesus". So that grace can strengthen us in the weakening state of Christendom in the days we are in.

R.D.P. I think so, and it is not without point that Timothy is physically, and as far as his courage was concerned, a weak vessel. He does not feel strong, he does not feel able, he needs

encouraging from time to time, he has many ailments in relation to his body, and yet this charge is committed to him. It cannot be without point that God has chosen not to commit the charge of His testimony to persons who appear manifestly outwardly able to bear it, but to weak, fearful persons like ourselves, and He is going to sustain them in bearing it. He is going to have His testimony carried by persons who have no illusions as to their own strength.

Q.P. In the last chapter of this book Paul refers to “Christ Jesus who witnessed before Pontius Pilate the good confession”, 1 Tim 6: 13. I wondered if the truth of this morally is set forth in Christ Himself.

R.D.P. Well, we learn everything in Christ really. Every moral feature that is to be seen in the saints you see in Christ, do you not? He witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate, and so it is that you look to Christ for everything. We had a brother local with us who said, If you ever do not know where to start – start with Christ.

You can always start there, and that would be true. But here it is looking after the things that belong to Him, and the whole testimony of God is here in the world still. What a wonderful thing! Here are persons who take up the charge of that. If you consider Urijah: what could he do? He was just an ordinary man and we know very little about him, but he was faithful man, and a man who is so marked in the divine affections that he finds a place in the royal genealogy, in the beginning of Matthew – “her that had been the wife of Urias”, Matt 1:6. You find that he is honoured by God because he stood as a soldier in relation to the defence of what was of God here.

R.W.F. We speak of Timothy’s weaknesses. He did have one strength at least which Paul identified. He had genuine feeling how the saints got on (see Phil. 2:20). Is that the hallmark of one who is concerned to accept and fulfil the charge?

R.D.P. Yes, I believe so. I was going to refer to that later. He had genuine feeling and concern how the saints got on. If I could suggest to us all to consider this scripture in Numbers; you see the camp, the tabernacle in the wilderness, and the priests were at the entrance. The Levites were encamped around it, and then the other

circle was the camp of Israel including these men who were soldiers, the military, who were camped there in their encampments and by the standards of their father's house and so on. You see how the whole thing was to be defended. Now when you come to the Levites you are getting close to the centre – we might speak about that later – but what is outside is the part of the soldier, the believer in his circumstances, in his job, in his body, in whatever I am able to do, to defend the whole testimony of God with a sense of it being a charge upon me.

D.J.R. Timothy also knew the scriptures, and is that something that is needed of a good soldier, he knows the rules of engagement?

R.D.P. Yes, I think so. I am not saying Timothy did not have any strengths because he did, but characteristically he is portrayed in the scripture as a person who was weak physically and perhaps weak as to courage and so on. Paul also encouraged him to stir up the gift that is in him. It just seems a remarkable tribute to the way that God moves, that He commits the testimony to such a man as that; and it is an encouragement for us that it is not going to fail even though it is committed to persons like ourselves; but as you say, he was not without qualifications.

D.H. In the first of the two World Wars there was a slogan, 'Your king and country needs you'. Can we apply that to the testimony? It is a question of enlistment, is it not, here, not conscription?

R.D.P. Now you had better tell us what the difference is.

D.H. Enlistment is that somebody is willing to take their share, is it?

R.D.P. I believe so. I believe that is what you get in Numbers. It says, "Take the sum of the whole assembly of the children of Israel ... by the numbers of their names, every male, according to their polls; from twenty years and upward, all that go forth to military service in Israel: ye shall number them". So they had already gone forth. I think there are persons here today who have gone forth to military service. They are persons who love Christ. There are persons in this room including a generation coming up – which I could say in many instances seems to have much more liberty in

confessing the name of Christ and being free to speak about the name of Christ and their salvation than perhaps my generation did.

We thank God for that. So they have gone forth for military service, and here I think in Numbers such persons are taken up by God and a certain order and shape is given to them so that it is not only what I have enjoyed in the glad tidings, but a part in the defence of the whole testimony of God here.

A.P. Would you say that personal evangelisation is part of what you are suggesting?

R.D.P. Well, that may be so. But the aspect I am speaking about is the side of defending the truth. I think personal evangelising and the preaching is all part of the testimony of God, but the principal thing in this setting is the defence of what is of God. Take Urijah as an example; his main task here was not to conquer territory, he was not seeking to make personal gain, but he wanted to be faithful to what was precious to God. That was the main task in his life and he was committed to that and he did not want to move away from the place that God has given him to do it.

M.J.W. Where do our gatherings come into this? Am I a soldier still today?

R.D.P. It must include our gatherings, and I have noticed again in Numbers that you get the interchange of the words, "the tabernacle of testimony" (1: 50) and "the tent of meeting", those two things. "The tabernacle of testimony" seems to suggest to me the greatness of the divine testimony. "The tent of meeting" seems to be the place where the saints go, where they meet. But I think this outward side begins before that, in a sense, in the way we take our stance as a soldier is in the ordinary affairs of life. That was just my concern as to it. I believe everything else depends upon it, because if I come to the meetings and I might take part and say right words, or even take part in the service of God, and yet this outward side of things is lacking with me, there will be hollowness to it all.

M.J.W. And yet I suppose we have all been trained in the grace that is in Christ Jesus through learning it from others whom we have

gathered with, so that there is the side of training, is there not? Learning the truth, learning what we have to defend when we are outside, that is all I wondered.

R.D.P. That is why I said that Numbers comes in the teaching after Exodus and Leviticus, because I think it is persons who in some measure have some knowledge certainly of the grace of God and the covenant of God, and the tabernacle of God as in Exodus. Then in Leviticus you get the teaching as to the approach to God and what is suitable in persons' lives and their condition as to their approach to God, and it is persons who are in the light of that who come forward to take a place as a soldier in relation to the defence of the testimony. Is that all right?

J.W. The soldier is to "please him who has enlisted him as a soldier". You spoke about the ordinary affairs of life, so we would approach them as to whether this or that is pleasing to him, would you say?

R.D.P. I think so. The soldier in this day, in Paul's day, was the Roman soldier. The Roman soldier was sometimes away from home for years, and his home comforts and all these things were something he had had to leave behind. It was arduous, it was active service, because his first charge was in relation to the command that he had, and his task was to "please him who has enlisted him". That takes on a particular blessing when you connect it with the believer and the Lord Jesus. "Him who has enlisted him" would be a reference to Christ, would it not, "please him who has enlisted him"?

K.J.M. One of the features of the soldier is that he is disciplined, is he not? "I also am a man placed under authority" (Luke 7: 8) was something that was said by a soldier. Urijah exhibits that, does he not, discipline?

R.D.P. He does. That is why I read as far as I did in that section because David goes to every length he could to bring about circumstances which would cover his own sin in his dealings with Urijah. First of all he approaches him in relation to his comforts and so on, that kind of thing. I think Mr. Taylor said it is like a sword

thrust to David's soul, when Urijah says, "The ark and Israel ... and my lord Joab ... are encamped in the open fields: shall I then go into my house", and then David tries another tack and makes him drunken, and yet it says he still did not go to his house. I think the thought of discipline comes out very strongly in Urijah; he would not be moved from his post, and I think he sets out the thought of the soldier. We live in a day when discipline is something which seems to be breaking down, but I think the soldier conveys the idea of "please him who has enlisted him".

D.E.R. To continue as a soldier the apostle seems to stress the importance of "maintaining faith and a good conscience". I was wondering whether that linked with what our brother was saying as to being pleasurable to the Lord.

R.D.P. I think that is good, "maintaining faith and a good conscience". Faith, I suppose, involves not only the body of doctrine and teaching – 'the faith' that it speaks of in the scriptures includes the moral effect of that in a man's soul. I think maintaining faith includes both. I do not think it is just maintaining a knowledge of doctrine, but it also involves the way that that works in the lives of every one of us, so "maintaining faith and a good conscience". I think it is Mr Coates who says conscience is like a fine pair of scales. You have it but as with a fine pair of scales it tells you nothing if you just look at them, it depends upon what you put in them. That is very important for us, I think, in relation to these things, that the fine pair of scales depends upon what you put in the one side. Now we can, as you know, put all kinds of things into the scales to make them balance, but the conscience is a provision of God where you have the means, there is the means, to define things accurately and finely. Say more about it.

D.E.R. I was thinking that faith would contrast with the material character of the world around us. We are governed by faith we are governed by what is unseen; and then if we have a good conscience it shows that our relations with God are right, we are not affected by the world or what is within us and around us which would distract us and draw us away from divine things.

R.D.P. So in 1 Timothy he says, “which last some, having put away”, and he speaks about these two men who, “made shipwreck as to faith”. It is as if it is a matter of the conscience. Conscience is not exactly a guide to faith, but it is a divine provision, which helps us to be maintained in what is due to God if the right weights are put into the scales.

P.M. Is that not why Paul in that passage speaks of himself as a delineation? It seems to me that there was something wrought out in the apostle which came into expression. Not only was he set for the defence of it, but it was expressed in himself, and there would be no power as a soldier unless I am in keeping with what is of God.

R.D.P. So that “maintaining faith and a good conscience” is a delicate balance of things which he says these two men had put away and had “made shipwreck as to faith”. These things seem to me to be very important in our day. He says, “I am set for the defence of the glad tidings”, Phil 1:16. Paul was a man who defended it, but it is something that is taken up consciously, that you are set for the defence of the testimony of God, and that will involve suffering. I think Urijah sets that out.

T.J.H. I was thinking of what you were saying earlier about the age, “twenty years and upwards”. Would you just clarify that you are not referring to what is literal as to the age. I may be eighteen, nineteen, twenty, or twenty three but you are referring to moral qualifications are you?

R.D.P. Here in Numbers in think the idea of twenty years represents a certain maturity. In Corinthians you have the reference “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I felt as a child, I reasoned as a child; when I became a man, I had done with what belonged to the child”, 1 Cor 13: 11. There comes a point in a believer’s life where there is a conscious move in relation to what belongs to a man. One of the things that belongs to a man, and that is stressed here, is the defence of the testimony. I think it is needed. If I can quote an instance from scripture, where you saw that what was precious in Israel was almost destroyed because a man did not take his

responsibility as a soldier, it is in relation to Phinehas (see Num 25: 6-9). You had Balaam's activities outside the camp of Israel leading to breakdown and sorrow and a man brings a Midianitish woman right into the camp of Israel which was blatantly against the law and a challenge to God's rights. It had been brought into the camp, beloved brethren, and it is a man who is of a priestly family who takes issue with that. It was very abnormal for that to be so – for Phinehas to have to strike as he did was a very unusual thing – because normally that would have been met by the soldier. Each one should have kept themselves right in their own conduct and kept their own heart more than anything that is guarded, so that what was precious in the camp was preserved.

B.E.S. The good soldier needs to know where the enemy is and where the opposition comes from. In 2 Timothy and also in the first part of Numbers it comes from within.

R.D.P. Yes, and I suppose you could say really with David it came from within but Urijah is alert, is he not. The camp was around the entire circumference, it seems, of the tabernacle. So from whichever direction an attack came there was that which was alert to it. When you come to Balaam, of course, it was secret influence. Balaam's attack could not easily be discerned, but he operates on the line of corruption in persons and that was this thrust here in the later part of Numbers at a time when very precious things were developing in the camp of Israel. He operated on the basis of corruption in one person and he makes a thrust really against the throne of God. Wold you say more?

B.E.S. Does that not emphasise the great need for self-judgment as the first step in all that you have been bringing before us?

R.D.P. Yes, I think so. I know there is a lot of detail in this which I could not open up and we do not have time to touch. I am just trying to bring out that if a young brother says, Is there any application of this scripture in Samuel to us today? I think the answer is, yes, because of what there was that would care for what was precious to God. It had failed in Samuel's day, and if you read it you are

devastated by it. Eli is sitting on his seat powerless to do anything, although saying the right things. His sons were taking flesh hooks and wrenching pieces of meat out of the sacrifices for their own use, they were corrupt in all their dealings. God sends messages through a man of God, and finally he sends a message through a boy, that he was going to end Eli's house and the sad thing is that the ark of God was taken, the glory of God. He "gave his strength into captivity, and his glory into the hand of the oppressor", Ps 78: 61. I am concerned that we are all aware of the fact that the testimony of God is here; it is here by the Spirit but it is through men, ordinary men and women, believers, who have a heart for Christ that what is precious to Him is defended.

R.M.B. Is it right to think that we defend the truth by walking in it ourselves?

R.D.P. Yes, that is good. This is not somebody that is taking an initiative. He does not go and find the enemy and fight him, but if attacked he defends, and the soldier defends the testimony of God I think in the ordinary circumstances of his life in the position in which God has put him. If you read chapter 2 you find that the soldier is not only selected and numbered by name, but he is given the place where he is to be. I think it has been said that the soldier is preserved on the basis of responsibility, but the position where God places him is sovereign. The basis for that is because in the numbering of the soldiers the tribes are given from the eldest to the youngest, beginning with Rueben, but when you come to where they are encamped he starts with Judah. So sovereignty enters into where you are in your life, but responsibility enters into the taking up of the charge. Would that be right?

R.M.B. When our brother asked this question about when we are enlisted, it reminded me of that important address by Mr Raven which is called 'Responsibility for the Maintenance of the Truth'. One of the things that he brings out in that is that we are all responsible for the maintenance of the truth; and I think he says that we maintain the truth not by clinging tenaciously to the terms of it but by being living exponents of it ourselves.

R.D.P. Excellent, that is good. I think in a way, my part in the maintenance of the testimony is not so much in what I say but how I faithfully fill out the place that I have. In His sovereignty God has placed us in positions relative to the camp. We do not have time to go into all this, but the whole of the way they were placed in the second chapter is not necessarily where they wanted to go or where they wanted to live or what they wanted to do, they were placed strategically in relation to the tent of meeting. You could make much of that, and no doubt there are others here who could, but as in that position it is the being there and the reflection of Christ there that is the main defence. It is not so much what is aggressive or offensive in that way in the wilderness, it is defensive warfare. When you come to the land it is aggressive warfare because you have to dispossess what is already there, but in the wilderness you have no territory that you desire, there is nothing that you want, you only want to defend what is precious to Christ on its way through.

D.E.B. An important feature of any military operation is unity. You cannot operate in that way with persons having a kind of private personal agenda. Each one has to have the objective of the whole in view.

R.D.P. I think that is the teaching that Numbers gives to us. You find that things are arranged in order and the main focus of these early chapters of Numbers is the tabernacle of testimony or the tent of meeting, and first of all you get the soldier who comes in in relation to the defence of it, and then, where he lives. I am not making that literal, but I do think there is the idea of the place, the position, that each believer, as alive and having the Spirit fills. It is not a question of my private expeditions as to the truth, it involves what is orderly and what comes under divine direction. That is the charge, I think.

D.E.B. It is worthy of note that it is in the epistle to the Philippians, which in no wise could be spoken of as a military epistle, it speaks of each "thinking one thing", Phil 2: 2.

R.D.P. Yes that is very good, and if we had time to look at the detail of chapter 2 you could find the way that they were set, encamped “every one by his standard, with the ensign of their father’s house” (Num 2: 2), and then one standard for three of the tribes, they were all in relation to one standard and they were all set relative to one another. These things are all very important. I use the word ‘system’. We are almost afraid to use that amongst us because of the way that it became attached to the error that came in some years ago, but you do get what is systematic in Numbers very strongly. It seems to me to be part of the truth that we need to recognise because we are in a day where Christendom is splintering in all directions, and it is possible that we might be tempted to splinter in our thoughts as to how things are to be met, and so on. I think here it speaks of divine direction and guidance and the centre of it is the tabernacle of testimony.

Q.P. In the Song of Songs where it refers to the protection of Solomon’s couch, it speaks of “Threescore mighty men ... Of the might of Israel. They all hold the sword, Experts in war; Each hath his sword upon his thigh”, SoS 3: 7,8. I wondered whether that reference to three threescore links with this thought that we are in this together.

R.D.P. It may do; certainly they were united, they were together in it. The tribes were not all living in the same place, some were to the south of the camp and some were to the west of the camp, and so on, they are in different aspects, but they had one object in the centre, did they not? I think the tabernacle of testimony involved what was universal, but the camp of Israel was around it on different sides and all aware of one another and the standards were set there. I think we need to ask ourselves whether first of all we have gone forward in the care for what is precious to Him, that is the beginning of Numbers; and secondly whether we recognise that we are not our own in it, that we are under charge, and that involves direction which must be by the Holy Spirit.

T.J.H. How do you apply the idea of the standard today?

R.D.P. I have not thought much about it, but you say.

T.J.H. Well, each had his standard, but today the standard is all the same, is it not? Is the standard today Christ, which unites us?

R.D.P. That must be so, that would be characteristic. But the different standards here would have a bearing on the saints in different places, and the way that they move together in relation to their neighbours and the tabernacle – one standard three tribes, and that is repeated four times. As you say the divine standard is always the same, the standard is Christ.

P.J.W. “When the adversary shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of Jehovah will lift up a banner against him”, Isa 59: 19. That would be like the standard, would it, something which persons can rally to?

R.D.P. I believe so, which brings up quite a challenging matter for us as to whether we do have the same standard. As I say, these were different standards but you get the impression that in character, in shape, and so on, they were all the same, they would all be Christ, and while there were differences the principle of that is the same thing.

J.S.G. Does the Lord’s Supper in some way enter into what we are enquiring about? We must not surely think that there could be a different standard as to the truth and the Lord’s right, which we would specially look to in connection with the maintenance of the Supper in purity in one place as against another, could we?

R.D.P. I think that is right. The accent is upon responsibility in this book, “Every man by his own standard, according to their hosts” (Num 1: 52), but what dominated the whole of the camp was the tabernacle of testimony and the ark at the centre of it. As you say, the Lord’s Supper is the great standard for all of us, is it not?

J.S.G. Every believer who has confessed the Lord Jesus should break bread, should remember Him. There is no different standard about that either, but of course His rights enter into that, and walking in them.

R.D.P. Well, I am sure that is right, that would be what lies upon every believer. The fact is that not all do that, of course, but that does not alter the fact that that is what is proper to them.

J.S.G. I hope it is not diverting, but I wondered whether we could bring into this the need that there is not to go by what is done by so-and-so or what is done in such-and-such a locality; 'they think it is all right', but that we should look to the Lord as to what is pleasing to Him, as our brother brought in earlier, as the standard for us in our conduct. I feel for myself that whenever I have departed from that then I am not a good soldier.

R.D.P. So when they came at the beginning to be numbered, they came before Moses, Aaron and the twelve princes? I suppose Moses would represent what was authoritative. Paul says, "If any one thinks himself to be ... spiritual, let him recognise the things that I write to you, that it is the Lord's commandment", 1 Cor 14: 37. That was one of the qualifications here, they had to go by the scrutiny of Moses; then Aaron; I suppose that would be like the Lord's searching gaze. He says in Revelation, "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot" (Rev 3: 15), that is like Aaron. Then the twelve princes I think is a spiritual element that is amongst the saints. All these things enter into the soldier. This is a vast subject, beloved, we are only just touching the beginning of it. When you come to the land, the first five chapters of Joshua give the soldier's training, but the training there is for a different warfare and that culminates there with the captain of Jehovah's host. An army has been trained in the first five chapters of Joshua, but that is soldiering for the land. This is the wilderness, this is when we go out in our work, in our homes, facing all that is adverse, it is the way things are held in faithfulness to Christ. That, I think, is the beginning of things in Numbers.

D.E.R. I think what you are bringing before us is of real importance for the present time, because as we look back for perhaps thirty or forty years, there was a certain uniformity about what took place amongst the saints: the wording of the notice board, the time of the Supper, the way the notices were given out, and so on. But we

seem to be living in days when there is a tendency to adopt our own standard rather than what has been delivered to us. So I think what you are bringing before us is really very relevant to the needs of the moment.

R.D.P. Well, I have been looking at some of the books of ministry that have come out in the last thirty years, and I looked at London 1984, twenty years ago. I just added up the names at the front of the book and over fifty percent of persons who were helping the saints then are now gone, and the generations have moved on, and yet things are to be maintained from generation to generation. You get that in Timothy, "these entrust to faithful men, such as shall be competent to instruct others also". I believe that we need to be alerted to the fact that we have what is very precious and it needs to be cared for and it begins in our individual lives and our individual stance in relation to the testimony of God, the full revelation of God here. That is my simple exercise and I believe it is important at the present time.

P.M. The way they camped was not only around the tent of meeting but opposite to it. Is that important? Does that not mean that the entrance of each tent was looking at the tent of meeting and, speaking simply, they would get up in the morning and their first view would be that the tent was still there, the pillar of cloud was there, and the priest was serving, and that would be their outlook throughout the day would it?

R.D.P. Yes, I think so. I remember circumstances were very different when I was a boy. Many never had a car and you found that brethren lived by the meeting room and by where they worked. My father did that and he walked to the meeting and he walked to work. Now things have changed. Our fathers would not recognise the environment in which we now live. And if you notice, there is one thing about this the tabernacle was always in movement so the terrain would be different. If they could look back twenty years they would say, This is completely different. But what was the same was the tabernacle of testimony, it was the same, and the encampments of the people relative to it were the same. The whole aspect of the

world in which we live and the circumstances of meeting, employment and all these things, is completely different to our fathers' generation. They would never have recognised it. These men, would never have recognised the circumstances of life in which we are now, but the tabernacle of testimony is the same, and the one thing that is equally the same about it is that it is not here to stay, and our part, our privilege, is to have a part as one man or one woman in the defence of what is precious to Him.

P.M. You spoke earlier of the soldier in view of moving out of this scene to another, and really his way out was by keeping his eye on what was of God that was moving forward of itself, and he was in association with it. I believe, I feel the need of it for myself, that one's life should be characterised by what God has established in Christ, and what the movements of divine Persons are in relation to Christ, and thus we shall move forward together, will we not?

R.D.P. I believe so. So, when the camp moved they all moved with it, and they all moved in rank. Now it is not for me to say where brethren should live, it is not my matter, and I am not going to make this literal as to where a house is, and so on – these are things for brethren to work out – but one thing I am sure of is that you should make sure your door is opposite the tabernacle. Make sure that it is in relation to that because that is the divine thought and that is what the soldier would say, I am here to please another: I am not here to get entangled in the affairs of life here because I am not staying here, I am moving to another place and I am caring for His testimony. It is our privilege and responsibility beloved brethren.

M.W. I wondered in relation to what we have said that, if I am set in relation to the Lord and His interests and you are, then we would operate together. I was thinking of what was said as to different standards, and I think we all feel that, and we all have young that are seeking their way. Really if each of us is set individually in relation to the Lord with a true desire to please Him who has enlisted us, then do you think help by way of teaching and edification will come, but it will not say one thing to one and another to another.

R.D.P. That is good. The centre is the testimony of God. I am struck with that. At the end of the wilderness you would have looked around the terrain and – you would say, this is very different from what it was in the beginning – as is our day from the beginning of the recovery, but you could look at the tabernacle of testimony and you would say, Marvellous, it is just the same. What a thing if through all these years of opposition and then the corruption that has come in in the testimony that that precious truth of God that has come out centre in Christ in all its detail which the tabernacle would speak of, has been preserved through the wilderness. That is the divine triumph, and it will have been preserved through the Holy Spirit and the agency of persons like Timothy who were outwardly weak and feeble and lacking in courage. God says, I am going to put the testimony there and they are going to care for it for Me. Is that not fine?

B.E.S. It helps us to distinguish between two senses of the word ‘standard’, does it not? The standard in Numbers 2 is an ensign, it marks the position where persons should be, but if we are speaking about the standard of the truth and of value, well that is the shekel of the sanctuary, that is one standard to apply to everything. It is interesting to see in the books of Moses how many different things it applies to.

R.D.P. Yes, I am sure what you say is right. The standards here marked out the different locations of the tribes and where they were around the tabernacle. When the tabernacle of testimony moved, they moved, and all these standards would move together relate to it.

R.H.B. It says of the Lord, “having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end” (John 13: 1), and He says to the Father, “those thou hast given me I have guarded, and not one of them has perished” John 17: 12. They were precious to Him and formed the nucleus, did they not, of the assembly? What a charge, we might say, speaking with the greatest reverence, the Lord felt in relation to those men that they were given to Him of the Father and were to form the nucleus of what will be the dwelling place of God

eternally, their name is on it. Now that has been expressed for us, has it not, supremely in Him? He was Himself about to leave and yet those men were set up here to be more than conquerors in His absence.

R.D.P. It is very fine to see this, the divine triumph in it all. It is not being carried through in some kind of super-human strength. As far as the human side of it is concerned it is in weakness. What is precious to God is being carried here, and yet what will be held in frail human vessels is greater than anything the world will have achieved in the whole of its history.

A.P. The verse, “the same yesterday, and to-day, and to the ages to come” (Heb 13: 8), would fit in with your thought?

R.D.P. Yes, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and to-day, and to the ages to come”, very good.

EAST FINCHLEY

Key to initials

R.H.Brown; R.M.Brown; D.E.Burr Colchester; R.W.Flowerdew Sunbury; J.S.Gray, D.Hawgood Bexley; K.J.May Maidstone; P.Martin Colchester; R.D.Plant Birmingham; A.Poore Swanage; Q.Poore Swanage; D.E.Remmington St. Albans; D.J.Roberts Gillingham; B.E.Surtees Felixstowe; P.J.Walkinshaw Gillingham; M.Webster Buckhurst Hill; M.J.Welch Sunbury; J.Wright Havering

PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD – ‘MERCY’

Andrew Burr

Romans 11: 29-36

I would like to begin what I have to say this evening where our brother who spoke last week began. Those of us who were here will remember that he asked a few questions: would a father or mother give a child a task that they knew they would fail? Would a teacher do the same? That prompted a question in my mind, which I think was in the mind of the preacher – would God allow the sinner to reap the consequences of his sins and what he has done, when it lay in God's power to do something to save him?

What a question that is! – Would God allow us to go on the way to eternal destruction if it lay in His power to save us? The message in the glad tidings is that God would do no such thing. I think any who have any knowledge of God would know that that is the answer to that question. I thought we could think a little about what God would have to do in order to rescue the sinner from his destiny in destruction? What would God need? The impression I have is that the answer to the whole question is found in God's mercy. I seek to say a few words to fill our hearts with something of the glory of God's mercy.

We sometimes speak about God's mercy as if it could be defined in relation to our need. We say for example that mercy means that we do not receive what we deserve. I think we cannot understand God's mercy in relation to the measure of our need, because that does not measure the mercy of God. The mercy of God is measured by God Himself, and by an understanding of the glory of the God whose mercy it is. Evidently, if God is going to show mercy He must have power: the work of salvation is not a work for weakness, God must have power. If we were to look anywhere for power we would look to God. Think of the evidences that there are of the power of God, and think especially of the power that raised Jesus from among the dead. Think of the circumstances in which

Jesus died, His utter rejection and the power of both the empire and the religious system of the day agreeing and coming together to cast Him out and kill Him. All that was marked by the seal on His grave and the guard that was set. Then think of the power of God, the power that could choose His own time, His own moment, and could visit the realms of death for the Person of His choosing. There was no contest with the power of death in the presence of the power of God. God on His own, and by His own choice was able to raise Jesus from among the dead. What a wonderful thing that is! What a testimony that is to the power of God! As we shall see, that was for us. He was raised for our justification (see Rom 4: 25); but I simply dwell for a moment on the power that has been manifested in the exercise by God of His mercy.

What mercy needs more than power is authority. Authority is the right to exercise power: authority is the right to do anything. If you want to do something you must have authority to do it, you must be entitled to do it. This brings back a story about Queen Victoria.

The rule of her day was that, if a court martial had sentenced a soldier to be executed, the warrant had to be signed by the Queen herself. The Duke of Wellington brought a warrant for a man who had deserted twice, for whom the Queen's regulations prescribed the sentence of death. The Queen asked the Duke of Wellington if he knew anything about the man? He said, he may be a very good father, but he is a very bad soldier. That was the most that could be said about him. The Queen took the warrant and wrote on it, 'Pardoned'. What a wonderful thing! That was the exercise of mercy. I just draw it in to show that it was the Queen's right to exercise mercy. We know that, in the constitutional arrangements of this country, the Queen will normally exercise the rights she has on advice; but she does not have to. In that case she had the right to exercise mercy. That right and the circumstances in which it was exercised could not be questioned by anybody. As far as I know the Duke of Wellington accepted that. He did not say, Look what a precedent you are setting. This really will not do and we had better look into it a little more. The Queen had the right to exercise mercy

and that right could not be questioned by anybody. There was nobody in the system of law who was above her, and so it is with God. God is supreme. When we speak of the exercise of mercy, let us not think of our poor condition only but let us remember that mercy is an expression of the supremacy of God. In very simple terms it tells us that He is above everybody. He uses that supremacy in order to act as He will (see Eph 1: 11). If He wills He may show mercy. We often feel very wretched about our sins and it is right to, but there is nothing wretched about God. There is something very majestic about someone in a position of supreme authority engaging that supremacy with the needs of the wretched and helpless. How it completely changes the whole situation. We are dealing not only with the power of God but with God's authority.

Another thing which goes with His authority. There must not only be nobody who can question His authority, but there also can be nobody or anything that can change what He has decided. That is very important to the exercise of mercy. It would not do for mercy to be shown when at some later time some other reason would be discovered or some other person should come forward, that could overrule the exercise of mercy. If that situation existed, the expression of mercy would have no value whatever. The person to whom mercy was shown would be in constant fear that they would once again come under penalty.

That is why I started this passage where I did because it says, "the gifts and the calling of God are not subject to repentance". The gift of mercy is, as the note says, irrevocable. That also depends on the power of God. Once God has made a decision then He is able to sustain what He has done forever. It is not only through the remainder of the period of time but for ever. There is no point or any juncture at which the decisions that God has made will come under review or will become liable to be changed. We not only have in relation to God's mercy the power of God and the supremacy of God, but we have His unchangeability. Abraham relied on it, there were unchangeable things in which it was "impossible that God should lie", Heb 6:18. What was one of those things? God swore by

Himself (see Heb 6: 13). That is an unchangeable thing in which it was impossible that God should lie.

There must of course also be the will to show mercy. It is one thing to be able to do something, it is another thing to do it. The scripture says, “I will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy”, Exod 33: 19. In that sense the exercise of the authority and supremacy of which we have been speaking depends wholly upon the will of God.

God is not passive in that sense, but in another sense He is also not subject to some kind of decree that will determine the circumstances in which this or that may be done. He does not promulgate a law and set out the conditions in which He has to act in a particular way. It is a matter of His will.

We often speak about the will of God. The will of God is the means by which He expresses to us the greatness of His authority, but it is also the means by which He expresses to us what He is. So we see in the mercy of God, His love. What a wonderful junction the mercy of God represents. On the one hand we have His power and His authority and His will, and we also have His love and His grace.

Think of that, the grace of God. The thing about the grace of God is that He knows how to suit what He is and what He does to whatever need or situation He finds. He does not have to change Himself to do that. He does not have to transform Himself or modify what He is, or His right or claims. But the “God of all grace” (1 Peter 5:10) is able to apply Himself and what He is to whatever situation He may find including your situation, whatever it is. God is able to do that.

What a wonderful thing it is then for the sinner to look up and see all these wonderful beams of divine light criss-crossing over him, and finding in him and in the needs which his sin has created a meeting place – an opportunity – for them all to express themselves towards him or her and to do so perfectly and abidingly. How precious is the mercy of God! We sometimes sing about it: we have this evening:

How bright, there above, is the mercy of God! (Hymn 22)

‘There above’ – and so it is. You might say, I do not find these things in my heart. You find them in the heart of God. You find them expressed towards you in the Person of the Lord Jesus. We heard about that last week, God is not simply proposing that He has some better ‘ism’ for us to believe in than any of the other options which the world may offer. God is presenting all that He has in a glorious Person. We see in the coming, and in the Person, and in the form of Jesus, the embodiment of His mercy. All the things I have spoken about so far you will find in the fullest divine extent in the Person of Jesus. There they are without measure in the Person of Jesus. Put out your hand in your sense of need and it will be the hand of Jesus that reaches out to save you. That hand that clutches hold of yours holds the fulness beyond all telling of all the things of which I have already spoken, bundled together in an expression to you of the mercy of God.

Another thing that comes out and needs to be met in relation to God’s dealings with us, and conditions the exercise of God’s mercy, is righteousness. We sometimes maybe think that mercy and righteousness are alternatives, that is to say the decision by the person who exercises mercy is whether I should receive the due rewards of what I have done or not. The mercy of God is not like that because God is absolutely righteous. He can never set aside His righteousness, He can never say that sin should be allowed to pass. He can never excuse anything or pretend it did not happen.

He cannot even forget it – that would be weakness. But, beloved, there is no shadow of unrighteousness over the exercise of God’s mercy. The question is, Has God allowed the sinner to go on to destruction when it was in His power to save him? God has made full provision in the exercise of that power for His righteousness.

There can be no question about the righteousness of God. The cross of Jesus is a testimony that there is no question as to the righteousness of God. Beloved, the great wonder in the glad tidings is that the One who shows mercy takes my liabilities upon Himself and the One who shows mercy has Himself paid all that righteousness required that should be paid in relation to those

liabilities. If I may just go back to Queen Victoria, the happy outcome of that story was that some poor, bad soldier out in a camp – who knows where – found that his sovereign had become the surety for his righteousness. What a precious thing! How it changed the status of that soldier! All the other men in the camp, like the ninety and nine who had not gone astray, soldiered on in their own righteousness. Their righteousness was measured by their compliance with the Queen's regulations, but in their midst, and the worst of them all, from a soldiering point of view, a comrade whose Queen was surety for his righteousness. You can imagine the glow he would have had in his spirit as he thought of that. He was someone who had deserved nothing, someone who had let the Queen down, not just once but twice; but she herself was ready, without even knowing him or hardly anything about him, to undertake to be the surety for his righteousness. Think of the parallel in the gospel – you are not a stranger to God. He may be a stranger to you but you are not a stranger to God. He knows all about you. He knows just how bad I am. He knows all my evil thoughts as well as the things I have done. He knows the things I have done in secret as well as the things I have done in public. He knows how grossly He has been offended by the things I have done, but in His mercy He has undertaken to be surety for my righteousness. The righteousness of God is "towards all, and upon all those who believe", Rom 3 :22. How wonderful these things are! God is free to do that. No one can question His right to do it. You might say the only Person who could question God's right to do it is God Himself. But God must be right and He must do what is right. He must meet the claims of justice. God has done that. He did it before any of my sins had been committed. He has the means at His right hand to answer any question about the exercise of His mercy towards me. He can point to the Lord Jesus at His own right hand, the sin bearer glorified. He can look to Him as the answer for my righteousness, the price has been paid. As Paul says in this epistle, He "justifies the ungodly", Rom 4: 5. Peter has it, "for Christ indeed has once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3: 18) and He brings us to a God who justifies the

ungodly. What does justification mean? We speak a lot about that, but it means that I can stand before a God who could, if He wished, have all my history laid out before Him, and guilt would attach to none of it. It is not that He wipes the slate clean and leaves me nothing to remember and learn, but guilt no longer attaches to it.

Another has borne the guilt as His own and has borne the penalty that was due to me. So God is free to proceed in the exercise of His grace, and the outpouring of His love, to show mercy.

Paul refers here to the children of Israel and he uses them to illustrate what the bounty of God's mercy is. Another thing that belongs to mercy is riches. I do not mean money to pay, but Paul says, "God, being rich in mercy" (Eph 2: 4). It is not just a question of money to pay, but does God have the heart for this? On whom would He be willing to confer this wonderful gift? Should mercy be an exception or the rule? God is rich in mercy, his righteousness is towards all. The Lord Jesus has given Himself a "ransom for all" (1 Tim 2: 6). There is nobody who is outside the scope of what God is ready to do except those who place themselves outside the scope of it. They do that by simply not believing. What a terrible thing that is, what a door is closed by unbelief, what darkness falls, what shades fall where there is unbelief. God presents these things on the principle of faith. Do not say it is too good to be true, do not say it is not for me, do not say I do not need it. Beloved, God would not have acted in the way He has if there was any question but that you needed it. You certainly do. God has made this wonderful provision because He knows just exactly how great your need is, and that, however hard we may try we will never be able to meet that need ourselves.

The preacher last week referred to Jeremiah. He says you can get out the best soap you can find, and you can try and wash these kinds of stains out of your clothes and out of your skin, but you never will (see Jer 2: 22). You need a different kind of power from the power you have. God has the power and He is ready to exercise it. He has the love to do it and the righteousness to do it, and that is what His people Israel will have to come to. They thought that they

could make themselves acceptable to God and they thought that they had succeeded. The history shows clearly that they could not possibly have done so but they thought they had. And then, when God said He was going to bring in others on the principle of mercy, they said, we do not believe it, it cannot be true: the God we claim to know could not possibly want other people besides us. And so they disbelieved the mercy of God. God says, you forfeit all your rights: you do not deserve them any more; you will have to come by mercy just the same as all the others. God is never at a loss. We may forfeit everything, we may disqualify ourselves, we may feel we are utter failures; but God is not a failure. God has the riches and the depths: "O depth of riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!"

I cannot say any more but let us just think about the word.

Let us not think of mercy as simply an answer to a miserable condition. Let us from now on think about mercy as a glorious constellation, and meeting place of so many divine glories that have overabounded and triumphed in the presence of sin. As that hymn says:

But has found, in what sin had once made our part,
The domain of His love's display. (Hymn 85)

May He bless the word.

WEST NORWOOD

6 November 2005