



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Numbers 17: 1-13

“Aaron's Rod that Budded”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father we thank Thee for the privilege of the study of Thy word and we ask Thy blessing upon us. We pray that our response to the word of God may be the response of obedience and submission. Deliver us from rebellion. Enable us to give the Lord Jesus Christ the place that he should have in the Church of Jesus Christ.

We pray that He, the representative of man and our great higher priest, may be truly that for each of us and that we may not seek to approach Thee on the basis of our own merits in any way, but recognize that we do not have any merits whatsoever, and can only approach Thee through the high priest appointed by the Lord God. We give Thee thanks for the blessings of life through Jesus Christ and may our study tonight glorify him.

For Jesus sake. Amen.

[Message] Now I would like to read through chapter 17 of the Book of Numbers, beginning with the first verse through the thirteenth. And the Lord speaks on to Moses saying,

“Speak unto the children of Israel and take everyone of them a rod according to the house of their fathers, of all their princes according to the house of their fathers twelve rods: write thou every man’s name upon his rod. And thou shall write Aaron’s name upon the rod of Levi: for one rod shall be for the head of the house of their fathers. And thou shall lay them up in the tabernacle of the congregation before the testimony, where I will meet with you. And it shall come to pass that the man’s rod whom I shall choose shall blossom: and I will make to cease for me the murmurings of the children of Israel, whereby they murmur against you.’

“And Moses spake unto the children of Israel, and every one of their princes gave him a rod apiece, for each prince one, according to their fathers' houses, even twelve rods: and the rod of Aaron was among their rods. Moses laid up the rods before the Lord and the tabernacle of witness. And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds. And Moses brought out all the rods from before the Lord unto all the children of Israel: and they looked, and took every man his rod. And the Lord said unto Moses, ‘Bring Aaron's rod again before the testimony, to be kept for a token against the rebels; and thou shalt quite take away their murmurings from me, that they die not.’ And Moses did so: as the Lord commanded him, so did he. And the children of Israel spake unto Moses, saying, ‘Behold, we die, we perish, we all perish. Whosoever cometh any thing near unto the tabernacle of the Lord shall die: shall we be consumed with dying?’”

Now in our last study, we studied the rebellion of Korah and those associated with him, and we noticed from chapter 16 and verse 10 and verse 40, that it was the desire of Korah and the Rebellion against the lord to seek the priesthood. For example in chapter 10 of verse 16, we read, “And he has brought Thee near on to him and all Thy brethren, the son’s of Levi with Thee and seek either priesthood also.” So Moses was not very

happy with the fact that Korah and those associated with him wanted the priesthood. In verse 40, we read, “To be a memorial unto the children of Israel that no stranger that is not of the seed of Aaron come near to offer incense before the Lord that he be not as Korah and as his company as the Lord said to him by the hand of Moses.”

We pointed out or tried to point out that the priesthood is something that is in the hands of God and only those can serve as priests who have been appointed by the Lord God, and in the Old Testament it was the tribe of Levi and specifically the family of Aaron that had the priesthood, and no one else could serve as priest. And the attempt of Korah and others to usurp the office of priest was really to rebel against the Lord God.

Now we also drew the analogy with reference to our Lord’s priesthood that only Christ has the right of approach to God, that he has been appointed by the Lord God. In fact the writer of the Epistle of the Hebrews puts together two texts remember, in order to show that. In Hebrews chapter 5, the text from Psalm 110 where the psalmist writes, “Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” And then just before that he also sites the text, “Thou art my son. Today have I begotten Thee.” So, the fact that he is the son of God marks him out as one who is the divine son and thus qualified to be a representative of God, and the fact that he is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek and therefore, a priest forever makes him out to be an eternal priest. So, the Lord God is the -- the Lord Jesus Christ is the only one who can serve ultimately as a priest for men.

Now in these typical passages from the Old Testament, it is very clear that these are the ways in which the Lord God is trying to prepare Israel for the coming of the true priest. So, in numbers chapter 16, the priesthood is defended and chapter 17, it is authenticated by this experience that we have just read with reference to Aaron’s rod, and then in chapter 18, it is confirmed further. So, this is designed to lay stress upon the fact that there is only one priest who is a valid representative for the people of God.

Many years ago, C. T. Studd was well known in Britain as an athlete, was converted to the Lord Jesus Christ and as one of the Cambridge Seven went out as a missionary. Mr. Studd had quite an influence in Britain and in fact, not only in Britain but even in the United States and other countries of the western world. He was one of the famous Cambridge Seven. And in one of Mr. Studd’s statements he made this comment, “If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.”

Well that is a magnificent sentiment and it meant a lot and a lot of people had been affected appropriately by it, but if Mr. Studd had given the whole truth, he could have gone on and said, “And not only is he God and has died for me, and has offered the sacrifice by which we are saved, but he also has continued to live and so, his saving work as high priest encompasses the work that he did on the cross and the work that he does now to secure the benefits of everything that he accomplished on the cross.”

Now Korah has rebelled against the Lord and so, the Lord evidently now takes the initiative in showing that it is only the tribe of Levi and specifically the family of Aaron that has the right of priesthood. Now in chapter 17 then, in verse 1 through verse 7, we have the test that is proposed by the Lord God. And so he tells the members of the children of Israel for the head of each of the tribe to take a rod.

What is interesting about this is that the term rod, *matteh* in the Hebrew, is a term that refers to a tribe as well as a staff or a rod. And so there is to be one rod for each tribe, and he also says that they are to write the names of the tribes on these rods, and they are to take them and put them in the Tabernacle and there is going to be a little test proposed. And the test proposed is simply this. The rod that blossoms is going to be the rod of the tribe that is recognized by the Lord God as the priestly tribe, and the rod specifically of the head of the tribe that blossoms. Well that is the person who is authorized by the Lord God to act as the representative of the people, and so this is the divine test.

In the preceding chapter it is rebellion on the part of the people, but now it is the Lord who takes the initiative and proposes the test, and we read in the eighth verse, after they have done this, Moses laid up the rods before the Lord in the Tabernacle witness and it came to pass on the morrow. “Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and behold the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds and bloomed blossoms and yielded almonds.” And so it is clear that the Lord God has by this significant sign indicated that it is the family of Aaron that is to have the high priesthood and the tribe of Levi is to carry on the priestly activity.

Now in verse 10, we read, “And the Lord said unto Moses, bring Aaron’s rod again before the testimony to be kept for a token against the rebels and Thou shalt quite take away their murmurings from me that they die not.” Now notice the word for token, this is to be a sign. And so, Aaron’s rod that budded becomes the sign that Aaron and his family are to have the high priesthood in Israel and no other one is able to exercise the high priestly Ministry. The tribe of Levi will carry on priestly activities, but the high priesthood rests with the descendants of Aaron, Aaron and his descendants.

As I mentioned last week that was what the writer of the Epistle of the Hebrews calls a law of a carnal commandment or the law of a fleshly commandment. In other words, a person had to be from the right family in order to serve as high priest in the nation Israel. So this is to be a sign and you remember that the children of Israel, as they traveled throughout their wilderness journey, they had in the Tabernacle, in the ark, inside the ark, they had a copy of the law and they had a copy of Aaron’s rod that budded. It was a constant reminder to them that priestly activity was associated with that one family and high priesthood was associated with Aaron.

Now there are significant things about this that we should not lose, and I want to try to in the remaining time that have lay stress upon this. It is obvious that one of the great things designed to be illustrated by this is that there is only one person through whom we may have access to the Lord God. In the Old Testament, the children of Israel

approached the lord through the activities of Aaron and his descendants. Eleaza who followed him was high priest too. So, in New Testament times the only way in which we may approach God is through our great high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. That means that all of the ways of salvation, all of the ways of access to God are invalid.

Now to put it in simple terms, it means just as plainly as it possibly can be that prayer for example can only be made in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. It can mean just it can be seen that it is just as plain as if we were to say if a person prays in any other name than the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, God does not honor that prayer. Now that seems to be a very arrogant kind of thing and it is certainly a very exclusive thing, but this is true to the teaching of the New Testament. And so we should not be ashamed as Christians to say that it is only through the Lord Jesus Christ that we have access to God. There is no access apart from him. Any kind of religion, any kind of movement that does not acknowledge that he is the only way of salvation is therefore not of God.

Now people may say that this is an arrogant approach to things. They may say that it represents pride on the part of son, but that is the teaching of the word of God and if there is criticism, it is the kind of criticism that should be directed to the Lord God, because he is responsible to this, for this.

Now let’s turn to one or two of the other things here because there probably is some significance in the fact that Aaron’s rod budded. Notice the description that is given in verse 8. “The rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded and brought forth buds and bloomed blossoms and yielded almonds.”

Now what is the significance that lies back of that? It seems in this context at least that it is significant. What is the point of the almonds for example? Well, if you look at that word in the original text and the expression that is used here is shekadim almonds, yielded almonds. The first thing that you discover is that this term comes from a Hebrew word that means to be wakeful and then comes to mean to sprout or an almond was

called a “waker.” Now we know almonds as almonds, but Hebrews knew almonds as wakers, that’s what they called it. So they would call it a waker.

When they said almond, they thought of something that awakened. So, the idea of awakening is associated with the word. There is another thing that is significant about the almond and it is this. It was the first tree that budded after winter. So, it was the first tree to awaken from its winter sleep.

That is interesting too because think of some of the ways in which the Lord Jesus is described. Turn over to 1 Corinthians chapter 15 in verse 20 for example. In the great chapter on the resurrection, we read these words, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.” Now the twentieth verse, “But now has the Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept.” So that would seem to suggest that a waker or to speak of almonds and then to think of things typical would suggest the resurrected Savior. That is this was simply an Old Testament way of illustrating the Lord Jesus Christ in his resurrection, as a resurrected person he is the high priest who is able to save unto the uttermost those that come unto God by him.

There is another feature by an almond that is rather interesting and it is this. It contains a large proportion of oil. Now I do not want to make too much over this and after all, we are just talking about illustrations, remember. But it is stated in that same Epistle to the Hebrews with reference to the Lord Jesus Christ ultimately that he has been anointed with the oil of gladness beyond his fellows in a citation from Psalm 45. So the idea of the first tree that awakens from winter sleep and a large proportion of oil associated with it forms a very nice illustration of the Lord Jesus as the first fruits from the dead and also as the first fruits from the dead anointed by the Holy Spirit, the chariot, his Messianic ministry inclusive of his high priestly work. So I would like to suggest to you that this word here is simply an illustration of the fact that the one person through whom men approach God is the Lord Jesus, and he has looked at here typically as the resurrected Savior.

Now in being a resurrected Savior that suggests some of the things that are written in the Epistle to the Hebrews. So if you will, I would like for you to turn over to Hebrews chapter 7 and we will just look at a few verses here to lay stress upon some of the things that the author of this Epistle thinks about this resurrected Savior. And remember he is right in the midst of the section in which he is developing the Ministry of the Lord Jesus as the high priest after the Order of Melchizedek.

Chapter 7 and verse 23 through verse 25 of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and they truly were many priests. Now what he is talking about of course, are Aaron and Eleaza and all of that long line of high priests who descended from Aaron and served in Israel in the high priestly office. They truly were many priests because they will not suffer to continue by reason of death. In other words, they lived and they died, they lived and they died. As long as they lived, they were the true representative of the people of God and the ones through whom individuals came to the Lord God in the Old Testament, but they would die and sooner or later they would die, and that became quite a problem.

As you read in the Old Testament, you will notice that sometimes men succeeded the high priests who were not very lovely kinds of men. And so having had a fine high priest who was not only a human being, or rather the Epistle to the Hebrew says, but also a humane person with all of the kinds of qualities that would care for the people of God that would come along. And Eli and then his sons would come along and they would be sons that no one really respected and also sons that did not care at all for the people of God, and the result was that the people of God suffered. So, the writer says they truly were many priests because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death. But this man because he continueth forever has an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.”

And so the fact that our Lord is the high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek and has come out of death in resurrection and now serves in the power of

an endless life, means that he is able to save unto the uttermost those that come into God by him. So the resurrection of the Lord Jesus guarantees the continual activity of the Son of God for the benefit of those who are trusting in him. It guarantees the inviolable priestly Ministry of the Lord and it guarantees the effectiveness of that work. He has finished the work of redemption once and for all in Cavalry’s cross and the unfinished work of intercession and advocacy he continues in at the present time.

So that, it is not simply a matter of the work that he did on the cross, which is the ground of the merits that we enjoy as children of God, but he lives in order that every one of the saints of God may experience to the full all of the benefits that he has won in his death. What a magnificent savior we have, who has accomplished the redemptive work and then lives forever to see that we enjoy all of the benefits of it. Christian believers have the greatest assurance of the enjoyment of the life of God. One can see this illustrated in the New Testament in the life of the apostles for example. In Luke chapter 22 and verse 31 and verse 32, and that well known section we read these words, “And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that Thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen Thy brethren.”

That is an anticipation of the ministry that he carries on for each one of us today. Isn’t that a comforting thing or do you not find that comforting? I find that tremendously comforting to know that in all of the experiences of life, the Lord Jesus is constantly praying for me that my faith shall not fail. The high priest in Israel was a person who typically represented our Lord, but we have the reality.

I don’t know whether you remember this or not, but in the ministry of the Lord Jesus -- in the ministry of the high priest in the Old Testament I should say, representative of the Lord Jesus, it was stated concerning the high priest in Israel that “Thou shalt put the two stones upon the shoulders of the ephod, for stones of memorial unto the children of

Israel and Aaron shall bear their names before the Lord upon his two shoulders for a memorial.”

That is Exodus chapter 28 and verse 12. Notice what is stated. “The two stones upon the shoulders of the ephod for stones of memorial unto the children of Israel and Aaron is to bear their names before the Lord upon his two shoulders.” So the stones of the ephod were on the two shoulders of Aaron the high priest and the names of the tribes of the children of Israel were on those stones. What does that suggest to you? Well that suggests to me that Aaron is the representative of the people of God, as he stands before the Lord God, and since he has the names of the twelve tribes upon his shoulders, he is their representative before the Lord God and the fact that they are upon his shoulders, suggests that their destiny is bound up with the strength of the higher priest, for the shoulder is the place of strength.

Now don’t look at my shoulders. Look at the shoulders of someone else, whose shoulders are really strong. That is the place of strength and so the names were on the shoulders. And not only were the names on the shoulders, the names were also elsewhere. And in Exodus chapter 28 that was verse 12 and verse 29, we read these words, “And Aaron shall bear the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart, when he goeth in unto the holy place, for a memorial before the Lord continually.” So the names of the children of Israel were on the shoulders, the place of strength, the names of the children of Israel were in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart.

All of this is designed to represent typically the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of course, being it from the heart, that is the place of concern and affection. And what that means is obvious, surely to us, that the Lord Jesus as the fulfillment of the reality is the one who stands for us in all of the strength of the power of an endless life. But also because he is appointed by God as one of us possessed of a true human nature, he shares in the sympathy and concern that a person who is one of us might have.

And the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews in order to illustrate it, uses the great incident in Gethsemane where the Lord Jesus there offers prayers and supplications with strong crying in tears unto him that was able to save him from death and was heard, in that he feared. Though he were a Son, yet learned obedience by the things which he suffered and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal life unto all them that obey him called of God and high priest after the Order of Melchizedek. And so because of the resurrection from the dead and the power of an endless life, he has all of the strength in his eternal shoulders to bear all of the difficulties and trials of life with which we may be concerned, and because also he bears our names upon his heart, he has all of the sympathy and concern that one should expect from one who is one of us, and who is actually known testing in temptation just as we know it apart from sin.

Recently in teaching at Trinity, I was talking about the impeccability of the Lord Jesus Christ. One of the great doctrines of the word of God is the fact that the Lord Jesus was not only sinless, but also unable to sin. Now most people who are Christians recognize that the Lord Jesus was sinless. He couldn’t be our Savior if he were sinful, if he had committed sin. He would need someone to die for him. Sometimes however, Christians do not realize that the Lord Jesus was not simply sinless, but also unable to sin. To say that he did not sin is to say that he was sinless. To say that he could not sin is to say that he is impeccable.

Now with reference to his human nature, He was peccable and temptable. So far as His divine personality is concerned, He is temptable and impeccable. In other words, impeccability is related to His divine Sonship. Temptability is related to his true humanity. And so, because he is a true human being, he can be tempted. Now occasionally students find that very difficult because they will say, not simply students of course, anybody who studies the Bible you are students. They will say if he was impeccable how was it then possible for him to sympathize with us? After all, isn’t it necessary to be able

to fall to be sympathetic, but if you will think about that for a moment, you will see now that does not follow at all. Sympathy is related to the experience of testing.

Now it is a true experience of life that is possible for individuals to undergo increasing degree of intensity of testing. If we could for example draw a diagram, we would draw it something like this with a line going like this or maybe one line like this and put 5%, 10%, 15% and so on to 100% degree of intensity, and then have each person’s life begin until we fall out under the temptation to which were exposed.

And some of us would find that we would fall when the degree of temptation reached 5% for some 10%, for some 15%, and probably some like Mr. Prier would get up to 30 or 40%, [laughter] but the rest of us common people we would fall out long before then, but you see now if you would just think about that for a moment, you will realize that the person who has undergone the temptation that is the most intensive is the person who best understands the testing of others.

For example, a person who falls out at 5% degree of intensity cannot understand at all a person who has passed the 5% and falls out at the 15%. That person does not have any understanding of the degree of intensity of testing at 15%, if he yielded at 5%. He is much weaker. He cannot really enter into the intensity of testing to which another person might be exposed.

Now if you will think of the Lord Jesus Christ, you will realize that he bore the intensity of testing to its fullest and overcame. So that all along the way, he can understand me and my 5 or 10%, he can understand you at your 15% because he was there, he can understand Mr. Prier to his 30 or 40% and the Apostle Paul at his 60 or 70% or whatever the case may be.

He understands all of that and in addition because he is the eternal priest after the Order of Melchizedek and has the power of an endless life. He has the strength to overcome at every degree of intensity of trial. That is the kind of high priest we have. We have a high priest who bears our names upon his shoulder, bears our names upon his

heart, knows the intensity of testing to the fullest, for he has been there and knows also how to overcome. Therefore, it is not surprising that the author of the Epistle of the Hebrews should say in the fourth chapter having announced the fact that he is going to talk about our great high priest who has passed through the heavens should say, “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

There is only one priest for men and that is the Lord Jesus Christ and he has shown to be that because his rod has budded and blossomed in his resurrection and that is God’s way of saying, “There is no way of approach to me, except through him who has been appointed high priest for men.” Any other approach is to come up some other way like a robber and a thief, and there is no acceptance for such. But those who do come and come through him have a high priest who as the writer of the Epistle of the Hebrews says that he is able to save under the uttermost those who do come to God through him. May God help us to take advantage of the blessings that we do have in our high priest, who is able to save to the uttermost.

What a terrible thing it is to try to come to God some other way, like the moments, and like many people even in professing Protestantism, who seek to come through their good works, or through people in other false religions who do not come through Jesus Christ, God’s appointed priest. And how surprisingly disappointing it is to realize that we who are believers in him as a high priest so often do not take advantage of the blessings that we have. May God help us to learn to come to God through him. That is an experience that should characterize us in all of the daily experiences of life. Let’s learn what it is to come to God through him in all of the trials of life. Let’s bow together in a moment of prayer now.

[Prayer] We thank Thee Lord for these marvelous little incidents in the Old Testament that remind us of the Ministry of the Messiah who has now come. We thank

Thee for the Lord Jesus Christ and for the high priesthood, which Thou has confirmed as the one high priesthood of the Triune God.

We thank Thee for a great representative, the Lord Jesus Christ, not a priest after the Order of Aaron who died, but one after the Order of Melchizedek who lives forever in the power of an endless life. Oh God, may we learn truly to lean upon him, not only for our salvation, but for all of the experiences of life day by day. May Lord, our understanding of divine things encompass the daily experiences of life. Give us Lord a great desire to know Thee truly in the experiences of our daily lives.

For Jesus sake. Amen.