Numbers - Commentaries by James Lampden Harris

Hormah, Hormah: Part 2

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“Turn you, and get you into the wilderness by the Red Sea.” Does it seem hard to us to do so? If there has been failure and declension, only let us come back in simplicity of faith to our starting point, the cross of Christ, and then we too shall learn, as Caleb and Joshua, afresh and more deeply how the Lord hath triumphed gloriously. Humbled, if needs be, in the eyes of others, bowing submissively under their taunts, receiving all as a part of the discipline we need, and, oh! how light compared with our folly. God shows Himself as an upbraiding God. “He giveth grace to the humble.” All the progress we have made in the knowledge of divine things, in which we have complacently rested, is not to be compared with the deeper lesson of the, grace of God, yet to be learned in the cross and from the cross. It may seem to us to be only the shame of retracing our steps but it is in reality to go on with God, learning steps; manifestations of His grace in Christ Jesus; it is to find a reality in the very truths which we had only superficially handled before; for real Christian progress is characterized by our estimate of great essential truths—truths connected with, and flowing from, the person of Christ. “That I may know Him.”

Is it a weariness to learn more experimentally the value of the ever-blossoming, fruit bearing priestly ministry of our Jesus—a ministry so immediately flowing from His person? Starting indeed from the cross, and keeping near the cross, it is blessed to learn its value, as Israel knew the brazen serpent, the last resource of the grace of God in the wilderness; for as surely as Jesus Himself is the Alpha and Omega, so also is the cross to us the first and the last great doctrine of God. It is well too to learn when all can find fault, and the finger of scorn is held up at the failure of God's people, and they cry insultingly: “There, there, so would we have it,” that the charge shall not lie against us, for it is God that justifieth. “He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel.” These and other lessons are to be learned in thus turning again by the way of the Red Sea—by humbling, instead of justifying, ourselves—by really confessing sin, instead of resolutely maintaining a position—by knowing rather the comfort of the Lord's presence, in being, as it were, turned back in apparent disgrace, than presenting a strong front, and going on without God. All effort to maintain a position to which even the grace of God has led, but the maintenance of which (instead of the maintenance of Christ's honor) has become the object, must end in discomfiture. It is presumptuous sin. And if Christians will refuse to turn back at the bidding of God, and to humble themselves under His mighty hand, in order to drink more deeply into the riches of His grace, God will resist them; and what will the end be?

There is one lesson to be learned under every failure and disappointment; namely, death and resurrection. The Lord Jesus Himself might say as to Israel, “I have labored in vain, and spent my strength for naught, and in vain;” but let His own death and resurrection come in, “He shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied.” His servant Paul had to say, at the close of his ministry: “This thou knowest, that all they which be in Asia are turned away from me;” but, however he might feel disappointment even keenly, yet his labor in the Lord was not in vain, and still the sure foundation of the Lord standeth. And in our days, those who have labored for the Lord, and been disappointed in the result, have they learned nothing? Has not disappointment taught them death and resurrection? Has it not tended to bring back the soul in solemn review, and to see the need of death to be written on much of their service, which had not Christ simply for its object? Cannot they justify God for their disappointment? But their labor is not in vain in the Lord. Disappointment at Kadesh-barnea led to a triumphant entrance through Jordan.

Oh! that we all knew better how to get into the place of blessing: it must be a very low place indeed. Many a goodly pretension will there have to be given up; no position of credit in the eyes of others must be sought to be maintained. We must justify God in all His righteous judgment Then controversy is over, and we shall prove Israel's God to be our God, “Who remembered us in our low estate: for his mercy endureth forever.” And although death and disappointment have been written on our fondest expectations, it is only to teach us not “to trust in ourselves, but in God that raiseth the dead, who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver, in whom we trust that he will yet deliver.” The very sense of deep need will only open more clearly the fullness of Jesus, and we shall have learned, by our inexhaustible experience, to keep more close to the Spring-head of living waters, by finding the cisterns we had hewn out for ourselves broken and incapable of holding any water.

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(Concluded from page 148.)

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