

The Church in the Wilderness in the Vision of God

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores God's sovereign view of His people, emphasizing their beauty and identity in Christ despite their wilderness experiences.

Scripture: Numbers 23:9-24

Topics: "Identity in Christ", "God's Vision for the Church"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the vision of God regarding the church in the wilderness, illustrating that despite Israel's failures, God sees them as a peculiar and beautiful people. He highlights that God's calling is irrevocable and that He sees no iniquity in His people, focusing on their beauty through the lens of Christ's righteousness. Darby encourages believers to look beyond their circumstances and failures, recognizing their identity and acceptance in Christ, which leads to peace and communion with God. He also points to the future hope of glory with Christ, urging the church to maintain a vision of its beauty and purpose in God's eyes.

Transcript

THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS IN THE VISION OF GOD

NUMBERS 24

ALL this statement of Balaam is of what God would do with His people.* Behind Israel's failure God takes up His own thoughts, and acts in His own ways, about them.

* The sovereignty and efficacy of the calling of God.

Firstly they are a peculiar people, separate from all other nations unto God ; chap. 23 : 9. " The gifts and calling of God are without repentance."

Secondly, God will see no evil in them; chap. 23 : 21. In the end, Israel will be the testimony that " His mercy endureth for ever."

Thirdly, we have the way in which their beauty and comeliness are seen, as looked at in " the vision of the Almighty," chap. 24 : 5-9. It is not man's sight of them, but God's.

Fourthly, speaking of the glory of Israel in connection with Christ in the latter days (chap. 24 : 15-25), Balaam says, " I shall see him, but not now ; I shall behold him, but not nigh : there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth. And Edom shall be a possession : Seir also shall be a possession for his enemies ; and Israel shall do valiantly. Out of Jacob shall come he that shall have dominion, and shall destroy him that remaineth of the city." Then he looks at the nations and says, " Amalek was the first of the nations, but his latter end shall be that he perish for ever." Of the Kenites, " Strong is thy dwelling place, and thou puttest thy nest in a rock ; nevertheless, the Kenite shall be wasted until Asshur shall carry thee away captive. . . . Alas! who shall live when God doeth this ? " The whole power, pride, and energy of the Gentiles is smitten. The " Star," the " Sceptre," arises, and delivers Israel. The pride of man is brought down, and Christ is set up. And there is the world's history. The great truth of all history is in its connection with God. His people being brought out before the Gentiles, He shews, in the great result, that His gifts and callings are without repentance; Rom. 11. Though He may not interfere for a long time, yet in the end it will be seen that He has taken notice of all that the nations have done ; and Christ, in whom His glory and purposes centre, shall be set up King upon His holy hill of Zion ; Psalm 2.

In chapter 24 we get out of the region of conflict and questioning into the place where God can look upon His people in their loveliness and beauty : to us the beauty of the church in all Christ's perfectness. The preceding chapter gives us their separation and justification. As looked at by God (and therefore by faith), the church is dead and risen with Christ. We are quickened together with Him (He having borne all our sins), as out of the grave, where our sins were left, But where the fulness and finishedness of acceptance in Christ* is not known, anxiety and despondency result in the heart of the saint, on the discovery of sin within, and he questions whether he is such. He does see iniquity-he is conscious from the teaching of God that iniquity is in his heart. It is not merely a natural consciousness of sins : the Spirit of God gives him a divine understanding of sin, and of what it is. The power of God's holiness is set up as a throne in the conscience, and he judges himself, as though he were himself to be judged for it. We constantly find souls in this state, miserable, distressed, and anxious, questioning whether they are saved ; whether they are in the faith. Now how is this to be disposed of ? Clearly not by the taking away of the Spirit, whose work has produced this discovery of sin, but by the eye being directed elsewhere entirely ; that is, to the work of Christ for him. It is not by the pulling down of the throne set up within that nearly drove him to despair. By looking to the work of Christ the standard of holiness is exalted, but he sees that he is made the righteousness of God in Christ, and he gets rest. The nearer he is to God, the less will he get rest otherwise, so long as God is God. He is taught to look entirely out of himself, and to understand that the righteousness of God is his by faith in Jesus Christ. When man is manifested to himself, he sees that he is wretched (Rom. 7 : 24), but man being proved to be bad, this gives way to God's righteousness, etc. The last Adam takes the place of the first in respect of life and judgment. In everything this is true. It will be fully realised in the glory by and by ; but faith does not wait for that. Faith does not take even conscience's view of the matter, but God's view, and rests there. The church is seen in God's presence and in God's sight; as here He " has not seen iniquity in Jacob, nor perverseness in Israel." Paul, looked at in himself, was " chief " of sinners ; I Tim. i : 15.

Israel had gone through the wilderness with constant failure, but at the end of the forty years' journey, when Satan resists their entrance into Canaan, God does not see iniquity in them. Moses had said of them in these very plains of Moab, " Ye have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you." But God sees no iniquity; He sees no perverseness.

Experience is not faith. You cannot know an object of faith by experience, you may know yourself by experience. But the experience of what passes in my soul is not faith. I want faith for that which is revealed (that is, in the revelation of God) and not a revelation. No doubt it is felt experimentally, it is not merely a matter of theory. Many a one who had by faith got peace, when he sees his sins again, loses peace. He may have received the grace of the gospel very sincerely ; yet, in measure his knowledge of it is superficial. He does not see it is applicable to his state. Faith looks not at itself but at God's righteousness in Christ: His grace has judged the whole condition of the sinner ; and, resting in His revelation, the soul stands in the consciousness of redemption.

Has God planted us in this condition merely to say, I am safe ? Is this the end of God ? Surely not! But this peace is the basis on which all happy intercourse with God goes on. He cannot have such intercourse with me while He is judging me. Take, by way of example, the parent dealing with a naughty child-there is no intercourse in that ; nor can there be any until the child is restored. Correction is not communion. The Holy Ghost's thoughts and revelations are founded on the righteousness God has set the church in in Christ. God has redeemed her-" brought her out of Egypt "* -charged Himself with the question of her sins. It is not that we should work up to a certain righteousness : there is not a question of righteousness to be allowed. God's side of the matter begins there. We may know terrors first, and it may be well that we should; but God begins with having the church.

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See Ephesians 5 : 25-27: " Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing ; but that it should be holy and without blemish.", He has loved it, and given Himself for it, that He might work. in and about it what He would like to have it. He presents it to Himself, not merely as purified, but more, " a glorious church." Well now, our souls ought to follow this ; we should start from the point whence God starts-His determination to bless, as it is said, " And when Balaam saw that it pleased Jehovah to bless Israel." This foils Satan.

To return. Balaam goes not now as at other times to seek for enchantments. He finds himself in the presence of God, and Satan and Balaam can do nothing. " There is no enchantment against Jacob, neither is there any divination against Israel." So in our case ; when it is manifest that God has the church, Satan can do nothing. It is a settled thing. The church is to be a blessed church, and the Holy Ghost can take His stand there, and occupy Himself with her portion, and set before the soul her beauty and glory which are of God.

But Balaam set his face " towards the wilderness "-why ? Because the children of Israel were yet in the wilderness. The wilderness was not Canaan, but Israel was there. The world is not heaven nor the glory, but the church is there now ; and while the church is in the wilderness, the Spirit of God can take up the parable and shew what the church is in God's eye. So here, Balaam is not walking through the tents of Israel, or he would have heard the murmurings and discontent of Israel. He is not in the camp, he is gone up to the top of the hill, and, looking at them with God's eye, what does he see ? Israel abiding in their tents according to their tribes. The Spirit of God comes upon him,* and he takes up his parable and says, " Balaam, the son of Beor, hath said, and the man whose eyes are open hath said : he hath said, which heard the words of God, which saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open : How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel," etc.

* Observe, the Spirit of God did not come upon him before; God met him, and put a word in his mouth (chapter 23 : 4-16), but not the Spirit upon him.

We have to look at God's thoughts about the church. The Holy Ghost speaks of the church, as to what it is to God ; and God's thoughts are not merely of the glory of the church in the world to come, but of the beauty, in His mind, of the people in the wilderness.

Would we have happy thoughts about the saints ? we must rise up to what the church of God really is to God. We must get " the vision of the Almighty " (the knowledge of the beauty and comeliness of the church in all Christ's perfectness), in order to have our souls soft and tender and humble about what passes around. If we do not see this, we shall not be able to maintain the sense of Christ's love. And, further, unless by the power of the Spirit we get away from circumstances, so as to see the church, and the saints individually, as Christ sees them, instead of seeking to nourish and cherish them, as Christ does, we shall be disappointed. This often makes us angry : it should not, but it does. We shall either lower our standard and be content with conformity to the world in the saints, or become discontented and judicial, angry and bitter against them, the flesh being disappointed and vexed. Faith assumes the acceptance of the saints in Christ, while it seeks in the exercise of godly and gracious discipline that they should be maintained and bloom in the fragrance of Christ's grace.

" As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river's side, as the trees of lign aloes which Jehovah hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters," What a most blessed picture! And could we be happy in seeing them stunted, dishonouring the Lord ? The glory of Christ is concerned, for His character is to be seen in us. Paul says to the 'saints at Corinth (not, Ye ought to be, but), " Ye are the epistle of Christ, written with the Spirit of the living God." No, I must grieve when I find in them that which is contrary to their beauty in Christ. They are " as trees of lign aloes," and as " cedar trees." It is not merely that God has not seen iniquity in them-Ile has seen beauty.

Israel were in the wilderness, their enemies all around but for all that, the table is spread for them in the presence of their enemies I es ; and here arc God's thoughts about them, thoughts of comeliness and goodness ; they were " as gardens by the river's side, as the tree,, of lign aloes . . . as cedar trees by the rivers of' waters." - Thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures," Psalm 36 , 8. What an unlikely place, the wilderness, in which to look for rivers of waters! " He shall pour the water out of his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters, and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted."

Balaam was in the very presence of Balak , who would have done anything to bring a curse on the people ; and he says, " God brought him forth out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn : he shall eat up the nations his enemies, and shall break their bones, and pierce them through with his arrows. He couched, he lay down as a lion, and as a great lion : who shall stir him up ? Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee."

And this is what we have to see in the church, spite of Satan. Though in the wilderness, and in the presence of its enemies, a table is spread for it there. Spite of all the power of Satan, the beauty of the church is this-not in the glory, because there it is not in the presence of Satan ; not in the rest, but now-the display of the efficacy of the calling and of the power of God in the presence of Satan, in the very place where Satan rules. The church is set in the efficacy of the fulness of Christ's work. It has failed. But, unless the soul has the consciousness of redemption-the fulness of redemption in Christ, it cannot see this.

We should know that we are the Lord's " garden we should have in the wilderness the consciousness of being planted as God's " trees," and not merely of being saved. God has set rivers of water to flow there-not thence, but there-that though in a dry place, the church should bear testimony to the perfectness of Christ's work, to the infiniteness of the efficacy of Christ's death. What a marvelous miracle of grace is the acceptance of the church! Yes, such is its efficacy, that in this dry and barren land, this land where no water is, the waters of God flow; and God's people have rivers of waters around them to refresh them through it. That a poor wretched creature such as I am should have the Holy Ghost dwelling in me, and be a tree of the Lord's planting, is as great a miracle as bringing me to glory. " Greater is he that is in us, than he that is in the world." God has put a wall, an unseen wall of grace, around us ; and while Satan is deceiving and blinding the eyes of the world, these waters of God supply the saints, watering the plants of His planting inside the fence of God. What a manifestation of divine power and grace.

O beloved, our souls need to see the church, and the saints individually, thus in God's vision, with our eyes open, in the Spirit: otherwise we shall not get into the power of God's thoughts. We do not want " the vision of the Almighty " in order to see that a saint is a saint ; neither do we want " open " eyes to discover inconsistencies in the walk of our brethren. We want to rise up and have our eyes open to see, as God sees, this beauty and glory of the church. God is in possession of us , And remember this was said in the very presence of Balak. It is blessed we should have the certainty of these things in the midst of Satan's power.

What does David say? (Psalm 33). "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." The enemies can only look on, and see how blessed I am whilst I feast on what God has provided. " Thou anointest my head with oil ; my cup runneth over." Not only have I got mercy and peace, but I have understood its fulness-an overrunning cup. He can both dwell upon the proved faithfulness of God, and count upon it for the future also ; as he goes on to say, " Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life," and finishes with " I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

One thing more. Balaam sees the beauty of the people in "the vision of the Almighty"; but not only so, he sees their hope in the One that is to be in the midst of them in the latter days. There is the actual beauty of God's people ; there are the secret unfailing springs whereby they are refreshed ; the power of God is for them against their enemies. But we must see the future also: " And now [he says to Balak], behold, I go unto my people ; come therefore, and I will advertise thee what this people shall do to thy people in the latter days.... I shall see him, but not now; I shall behold him, but not nigh ; there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the comers of Moab," etc.

So as to the church ; it will be brought into glory and blessing with Christ. We do not merely see the beauty of the church, according to God's mind, its present loveliness and preciousness in His sight, but we see Him who is to be in the midst of the church, the Bridegroom of the church, whom we are longing for - " We shall see him as he is," I John 3 : 2. By faith we see Him now-we see One our souls long for who has loved the church and given Himself for it:* and when He thus comes out in His glory and beauty, we shall be with Him. The same Holy Ghost, who forms us for His eyes, gives Him to our eyes to be the centre of our affections and joy.

* We look out for Him not merely as the Star of Jacob. The Star is known to us in a more blessed way.

There is our hope: We shall see Him as He is. If we have the Spirit shewing us the beauty of Christ now, we are looking for the fulness of glory and beauty in the day of the glory. Let us see that our affections are

going out towards Himself.

" How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob! and thy tabernacles, O Israel! " We have the strength of God's love to think of for present comfort, and where there is a right view of the beauty and comeliness of the church, and yet of her failure, there will be great humbleness and tenderness of spirit towards the Lord, and towards one another.

The Lord grant we may not sit down content in wretched coldness of heart, with evil in ourselves, or in our brethren. The waters of God are at the root of the plant, however miserable the pruning. How precious this! May we rise up, in the sense of the beauty we have in God's mind, to delight ourselves in Him, who is our comeliness, to glory in Him who is God's delight, and our joy and glory. Amen.

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O beloved, our souls need to see the church, and the saints individually, thus in God's vision, with our eyes open, in the Spirit: otherwise we shall not get into the power of God's thoughts. We do not want " the vision

of the Almighty " in order to see that a saint is a saint ; neither do we want " open " eyes to discover inconsistencies in the walk of our brethren. We want to rise up and have our eyes open to see, as God sees, this beauty and glory of the church. God is in possession of us , And remember this was said in the very presence of Balak. It is blessed we should have the certainty of these things in the midst of Satan's power.

What does David say? (Psalm 33). "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." The enemies can only look on, and see how blessed I am whilst I feast on what God has provided. " Thou anointest my head with oil ; my cup runneth over." Not only have I got mercy and peace, but I have understood its fulness-an overrunning cup. He can both dwell upon the proved faithfulness of God, and count upon it for the future also ; as he goes on to say, " Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life," and finishes with " I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

One thing more. Balaam sees the beauty of the people in "the vision of the Almighty"; but not only so, he sees their hope in the One that is to be in the midst of them in the latter days. There is the actual beauty of God's people ; there are the secret unfailing springs whereby they are refreshed ; the power of God is for them against their enemies. But we must see the future also: " And now [he says to Balak], behold, I go unto my people ; come therefore, and I will advertise thee what this people shall do to thy people in the latter days.... I shall see him, but not now; I shall behold him, but not nigh ; there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the comers of Moab," etc.

So as to the church ; it will be brought into glory and blessing with Christ. We do not merely see the beauty of the church, according to God's mind, its present loveliness and preciousness in His sight, but we see Him who is to be in the midst of the church, the Bridegroom of the church, whom we are longing for - " We shall see him as he is," I John 3 : 2. By faith we see Him now-we see One our souls long for who has loved the church and given Himself for it:* and when He thus comes out in His glory and beauty, we shall be with Him. The same Holy Ghost, who forms us for His eyes, gives Him to our eyes to be the centre of our affections and joy.

* We look out for Him not merely as the Star of Jacob. The Star is known to us in a more blessed way.

There is our hope: We shall see Him as He is. If we have the Spirit shewing us the beauty of Christ now, we are looking for the fulness of glory and beauty in the day of the glory. Let us see that our affections are going out towards Himself.

" How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob! and thy tabernacles, O Israel! " We have the strength of God's love to think of for present comfort, and where there is a right view of the beauty and comeliness of the church, and yet of her failure, there will be great humbleness and tenderness of spirit towards the Lord, and towards one another.

The Lord grant we may not sit down content in wretched coldness of heart, with evil in ourselves, or in our brethren. The waters of God are at the root of the plant, however miserable the pruning. How precious this! May we rise up, in the sense of the beauty we have in God's mind, to delight ourselves in Him, who is our comeliness, to glory in Him who is God's delight, and our joy and glory. Amen.

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