

CHAPTER 17

Enough had been done in the chapter before to quash all pretensions of the families of the tribe of Levi that would set up in competition with Aaron, and to make it appear that Aaron was the head of the tribe; but it seems, when that matter was settled, the princes of the rest of the tribes began to murmur. If the head of a tribe must be a priest, why not the head of some other tribe than that of Levi? He that searches the heart knew this thought to be in the breast of some of them, and before it broke out into any overt act graciously anticipated it, to prevent bloodshed; and it is done by miracle in this chapter, not a miracle of wrath, as before, but of grace.

- I.** The matter is put upon trial by the bringing of twelve rods, one for each prince, before the Lord (v. 1-7).
- II.** Upon trial, the matter is determined by the miraculous blossoming of Aaron's rod (v. 8, 9).
- III.** The decision of the controversy is registered by the preservation of the rod (v. 10, 11).
- IV.** The people acquiesce in it with some reluctance (v. 12, 13).

~~CH17~~ NUMBERS 17:1-7

AARON'S INTERCESSION

Here we have,

I. Orders given for the bringing in of a rod for every tribe (which was peculiarly significant, for the word here used for a rod sometimes signifies a tribe, as particularly ~~CH13~~ Numbers 34:13), that God by a miracle, wrought on purpose, might make it known on whom he had conferred the honour of the priesthood.

1. It seems then the priesthood was a preferment worth seeking and striving for, even by the princes of the tribes. It is an honour to the greatest of men to be employed in the service of God. Yet perhaps these contended

for it rather for the sake of the profit and power that attended the office than for the sake of that in it which was divine and sacred.

2. It seems likewise, after all that had been done to settle this matter, there were those who would be ready upon any occasion to contest it. They would not acquiesce in the divine appointment, but would make an interest in opposition to it. They strive with God for the dominion; and the question is whose will shall stand. God will rule, but Israel will not be ruled; and this is the quarrel.

3. It is an instance of the grace of God that, having wrought divers miracles to punish sin, he would work one more on purpose to prevent it. God has effectually provided that the obstinate shall be left inexcusable, and every mouth shall be stopped. Israel were very prone to murmur both against God and against their governors. “Now,” said God, “*I will make to cease from me the murmurings of the children of Israel, v. 5.* If any thing will convince them, they shall be convinced; and, if this will not convince them, nothing will.” This was to be to them, as Christ said the sign of the prophet Jonas (that is, his own resurrection) should be to the men of that generation, the highest proof of his mission that should be given them. The directions are,

(1.) That twelve rods or staves should be brought in. It is probable that they were not now fresh cut out of a tree, for then the miracle would not have been so great; but that they were the staves which the princes ordinarily used as ensigns of their authority (of which we read ^{20:18} Numbers 21:18), old dry staves, that had no sap in them, and it is probable that they were all made of the almond-tree. It should seem they were but twelve in all, with Aaron's, for, when Levi comes into the account, Ephraim and Manasseh make but one, under the name of Joseph.

(2.) That the name of each prince should be written upon his rod, that every man might know his own, and to prevent contests. Writing is often a good preservative against strife, for what is written may be appealed to.

(3.) That they should be laid up in the tabernacle, for one night, before the testimony, that is, before the ark, which, with its mercy seat, was a symbol, token, or testimony, of God's presence with them.

(4.) They were to expect, being told it before, that the rod of the tribe, or prince, whom God chose to the priesthood, should bud and blossom, v. 5.

It was requisite that they should be told of it, that it might appear not to be casual, but according to the counsel and will of God.

II. The preparing of the rods accordingly. The princes brought them in, some of them perhaps fondly expecting that the choice would fall upon them, and all of them thinking it honour enough to be competitors with Aaron, and to stand candidates, even for the priesthood (v. 7); and *Moses laid them up before the Lord*. He did not object that the matter was sufficiently settled already, and enough done to convince those that were not invincibly hardened in their prejudices. He did not undertake to determine the controversy himself, though it might easily have been done; nor did he suggest that it would be to no purpose to offer satisfaction to a people that were willingly blind. But, since God will have it so, he did his part, and lodged the case before the Lord, to whom the appeal was made by consent, and left it with him.

~~CHITZ~~ NUMBERS 17:8-13

THE BLOSSOMING OF AARON'S ROD

Here is,

I. The final determination of the controversy concerning the priesthood by a miracle, v. 8, 9. The rods or staves were brought out from the most holy place where they were laid up, and publicly produced before the people; and, while all the rest of the rods remained as they were, Aaron's rod only, of a dry stick, became a living branch, budded, and blossomed, and yielded almonds. In some places there were buds, in others blossoms, in others fruit, at the same time. This was miraculous, and took away all suspicion of a fraud, as if in the night Moses had taken away Aaron's rod, and put a living branch of an almond tree in the room of it; for no ordinary branch would have buds, blossoms, and fruits upon it, all at once. Now,

1. This was a plain indication to the people that Aaron was chosen to the priesthood, and not any other of the princes of the tribes. Thus he was distinguished from them and manifested to be under the special blessing of heaven, which sometimes yields increase where there is neither planting nor watering by the hand of man. Bishop Hall here observes that fruitfulness is the best evidence of a divine call, and that the plants of

God's setting, and the boughs cut off from them, will flourish. See ^{<492>}Psalm 92:12-14. The trees of the Lord, though they seem dry trees, are full of sap.

2. It was a very proper sign to represent the priesthood itself, which was hereby confirmed to Aaron.

(1.) That it should be fruitful and serviceable to the church of God. It produced not only blossoms, but almonds; for the priesthood was designed, not only for an honour to Aaron, but for a blessing to Israel. Thus Christ ordained his apostles and ministers that they should go and bring forth fruit, and that their *fruit should remain*, ^{<456>}John 15:16.

(2.) That there should be a succession of priests. Here were not only almonds for the present, but buds and blossoms promising more hereafter. Thus has Christ provided in his church that a seed should serve him from generation to generation.

(3.) That yet this priesthood should not be perpetual, but in process of time, like the branches and blossoms of a tree, should fail and wither. The flourishing of the almond-tree is mentioned as one of the signs of old age, ^{<415>}Ecclesiastes 12:5. This character was betimes put upon the Mosaic priesthood, which soon became old and *ready to vanish away*, ^{<483>}Hebrews 8:13.

3. It was a type and figure of Christ and his priesthood: for he is *the man, the branch*, that is to be *a priest upon his throne*, as it follows (^{<382>}Zechariah 6:12); and he was to *grow up before God*, as this before the ark, *like a tender plant, and a root out of a dry ground*, ^{<250>}Isaiah 53:2.

II. The record of this determination, by the preserving of the rod before the testimony, *in perpetuam rei memoriam* — that it might be had in perpetual remembrance, v. 10, 11. It is probable that the buds, and blossoms, and fruit, continued fresh; the same divine power that produced them in a night preserved them for ages, at least so long as it was necessary for a token against the rebels. So it was a standing miracle, and the continuance of it was an undeniable proof of the truth of it. Even the leaf of God's trees shall not wither, ^{<303>}Psalm 1:3. This rod was preserved, as the censers were, to *take away their murmurings, that they die not*.

Note,

1. The design of God in all his providences, both mercies and judgments, and in the memorials of them, is to take away sin, and to prevent it. These things are done, these things written, *that we sin not*, ^{<611>}1 John 2:1. Christ was *manifested to take away sin*.

2. What God does for the taking away of sin is done in real kindness to us, *that we die not*. All the bitter potions he gives, and all the sharp methods he uses with us, are for the cure of a disease which otherwise would certainly be fatal. Bishop Hall observes here that the tables of the law, the pot of manna, and Aaron's rod, were preserved together in or about the ark (the apostle takes notice of them all three together, ^{<390>}Hebrews 9:4), to show to after-ages how the ancient church was taught, and fed, and ruled; and he infers how precious the doctrine, sacraments, and government, of the church are to God and should be to us. The rod of Moses was used in working many miracles, yet we do not find that this was preserved, for the keeping of it would serve only to gratify men's curiosity; but the rod of Aaron, which carried its miracle along with it, was carefully preserved, because that would be of standing use to convince men's consciences, to silence all disputes about the priesthood, and to confirm the faith of God's Israel in his institutions. Such is the difference between the sacraments which Christ has appointed for edification and the relics which men have devised for superstition.

III. The outcry of the people hereupon (v. 12, 13): *Behold, we die, we perish, we all perish. Shall we be consumed with dying?* This may be considered as the language either,

1. Of a repining people quarrelling with the judgments of God, which, by their own pride and obstinacy, they had brought upon themselves. They seem to speak despairingly, as if God was a hard Master, that sought advantage against them, and took all occasions to pick quarrels with them, so that if they trod every so little awry, if they stepped ever so little beyond their bounds, they must die, they must perish, they must all perish, basely insinuating that God would never be satisfied with their blood and ruin, till he had made an end of them all and they were consumed with dying. Thus they seem to be like a *wild bull in a net, full of the fury of the Lord* (^{<251>}Isaiah 51:20), fretting that God was too hard for them and that they were forced to submit, which they did only because they could not help it. Note, It is a very wicked thing to fret against God when we are in affliction, and in our distress thus to trespass yet more. If we die, if we

perish, it is owing to ourselves, and the blame will lie upon our own heads.
Or,

2. Of a repenting people. Many interpreters take it as expressing their submission: “Now we see that it is the will of God we should keep our distance, and that it is at our peril if we draw nearer than is appointed. We submit to the divine will in this appointment; we will not contend any more, lest we all perish:” and they engage Moses to intercede for them, that they may not be all consumed with dying. Thus the point was gained, and in this matter God quite took away their murmurings, and henceforward they acquiesced. Note, When God judges he will overcome, and, one way or other, will oblige the most obstinate gainsayers to confess their folly sooner or later, and that wherein they dealt proudly he was above them. *Vicisti Galilaeae — O Galilaeae, thou hast conquered!*