

CHAPTER 2

The thousands of Israel, having been mustered in the former chapter, in this are marshalled, and a regular disposition is made of their camp, by a divine appointment. Here is,

- I.** A general order concerning it (v. 1, 2).
- II.** Particular directions for the posting of each of the tribes, in four distinct squadrons, three tribes in each squadron.
 - 1.** In the van-guard on the east were posted Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun (v. 3-9).
 - 2.** In the right wing, southward, Reuben, Simeon, and Gad (v. 10-16).
 - 3.** In the rear, westward, Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin, (v. 18-24).
 - 4.** In the left wing, northward, Dan, Asher, and Naphtali (v. 25-31).
 - 5.** The tabernacle in the centre (v. 17).
- III.** The conclusion of this appointment (v. 32, etc.).

~~<GRE>~~ NUMBERS 2:1-2

THE STATIONS OF THE SEVERAL TRIBES

Here is the general appointment given both for their orderly encampment where they rested and their orderly march when they moved. Some order, it is possible, they had observed hitherto; they came out of Egypt in rank and file (~~<PRS>~~ Exodus 13:18), but now they were put into a better model.

1. They all dwelt in tents, and when they marched carried all their tents along with them, for *they found no city to dwell in*, ~~<PSA>~~ Psalm 107:4. This represents to us our state in this world. It is a movable state (we are here to-day and gone to-morrow); and it is a military state: is not our life a warfare? We do but pitch our tents in this world, and have in it no continuing city. Let us, therefore, while we are pitching in this world, be pressing through it.

2. Those of a tribe were to pitch together, *every man by his own standard*. Note, It is the will of God that mutual love and affection, converse and communion, should be kept up among relations. Those that are of kin to each other should, as much as they can, be acquainted with each other; and the bonds of nature should be improved for the strengthening of the bonds of Christian communion.

3. Every one must know his place and keep in it; they were not allowed to fix where they pleased, nor to remove when they pleased, but God quarters them, with a charge to abide in their quarters. Note, It is God that *appoints us the bounds of our habitation*, and to him we must refer ourselves. *He shall choose our inheritance for us* (~~210~~ Psalm 47:4), and in his choice we must acquiesce, and not love to flit, nor be *as the bird that wanders from her nest*.

4. Every tribe had its standard, flag, or ensign, and it should seem every family had some particular ensign of their father's house, which was carried as with us the colours of each troop or company in a regiment are. These were of use for the distinction of tribes and families, and the gathering and keeping of them together, in allusion to which the preaching of the gospel is said to *lift up an ensign, to which the Gentiles shall seek*, and by which they shall pitch, ~~210~~ Isaiah 11:10, 12. Note, God is the God of order, and not of confusion. These standards made this mighty army seem more beautiful to its friends and more formidable to its enemies. The church of Christ is said to be *as terrible as an army with banners*, ~~210~~ Song of Solomon 6:10. It is uncertain how these standards were distinguished: some conjecture that the standard of each tribe was of the same colour with the precious stone in which the name of that tribe was written in the high priest's ephod, and that this was all the difference. Many of the modern Jews think there was some coat of arms painted in each standard, which had reference to the blessing of that tribe by Jacob. Judah bore a lion, Dan a serpent, Naphtali a hind, Benjamin a wolf, etc. Some of them say the four principal standards were, Judah a lion, Reuben a man, Joseph an ox, and Dan an eagle, making the appearances in Ezekiel's vision to allude it. Others say the name of each tribe was written in its standard. Whatever it was, no doubt it gave a certain direction.

5. They were to pitch about the tabernacle, which was to be in the midst of them, as the tent of pavilion of a general in the centre of an army. They must encamp round the tabernacle,

(1.) That it might be equally a comfort and joy to them all, as it was a token of God's gracious presence with them. ^{<146>}Psalm 46:5, *God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved.* Their camp had reason to be hearty, when thus they had God in the heart of them. To have bread from heaven every day round about their camp, and fire from heaven, with other tokens of God's favour, in the midst of their camp, was abundantly sufficient to answer that question, *Is the Lord among us, or is he not? Happy art thou, O Israel!* It is probable that the doors of all their tents were made to look towards the tabernacle from all sides, for every Israelite should have his eyes always towards the Lord; therefore they worshipped at the tent-door. The tabernacle was in the midst of the camp, that it might be near to them; for it is a very desirable thing to have the solemn administrations of holy ordinances near us and within our reach. *The kingdom of God is among you.*

(2.) That they might be a guard and defence upon the tabernacle and the Levites on every side. No invader could come near God's tabernacle without first penetrating the thickest of their squadrons. Note, If God undertake the protection of our comforts, we ought in our places to undertake the protection of his institutions, and stand up in defence of his honour, and interest, and ministers.

6. Yet they were to pitch afar off, in reverence to the sanctuary, that it might not seem crowded and thrust up among them, and that the common business of the camp might be no annoyance to it. They were also taught to keep their distance, lest too much familiarity should breed contempt. It is supposed (from ^{<103>}Joshua 3:4) that the distance between the nearest part of the camp and the tabernacle (or perhaps between them and the camp of the Levites, who pitched near the tabernacle) was 2000 cubits, that is, 1000 yards, little more than half a measured mile with us; but the outer parts of the camp must needs be much further off. Some compute that the extent of their camp could be no less than twelve miles square; for it was like a movable city, with streets and lanes, in which perhaps the manna fell, as well as on the outside of the camp, that they might have it at their doors. In the Christian church we read of a throne (as in the tabernacle there was a mercy-seat) which is called a *glorious high throne from the beginning* (^{<217>}Jeremiah 17:12), and that throne surrounded by spiritual Israelites, twenty-four elders, double to the number of the tribes, *clothed in white raiment* (^{<60>}Revelation 4:4), and the banner over them is *Love*; but we are not ordered, as they were, to pitch afar off; no, we are invited to

draw near, and come boldly. The saints of the Most High are said to be *round about him*, ^{<B7E1>}Psalm 76:11. God by his grace keep us close to him!

^{<04E>}NUMBERS 2:3-34

THE STATIONS OF THE SEVERAL TRIBES

We have here the particular distribution of the twelve tribes into four squadrons, three tribes in a squadron, one of which was to lead the other two. Observe,

1. God himself appointed them their place, to prevent strife and envy among them. Had they been left to determine precedency among themselves, they would have been in danger of quarrelling with one another (as the disciples who strove *which should be greatest*); each would have had a pretence to be first, or at least not to be last. Had it been left to Moses to determine, they would have quarrelled with him, and charged him with partiality; therefore God does it, who is himself the fountain and judge of honour, and in his appointment all must acquiesce. If God in his providence advance others above us, and abase us, we ought to be as well satisfied in his doing it in that way as if he did it, as this was done here, by a voice out of the tabernacle; and this consideration, that it appears to be the will of God it should be so, should effectually silence all envies and discontents. And as far as our place comes to be our choice our Saviour has given us a rule in ^{<D4B>}Luke 14:8, *Sit not down in the highest room*; and another in ^{<4E7>}Matthew 20:27, *He that will be chief, let him be your servant*. Those that are most humble and most serviceable are really most honourable.

2. Every tribe had a captain, a prince, or commander-in-chief, whom God himself nominated, the same that had been appointed to number them, ^{<04E>}Numbers 1:5. Our being all the children of one Adam is so far from justifying the levellers, and taking away the distinction of place and honour, that even among the children of the same Abraham, the same Jacob, the same Judah, God himself appointed that one should be captain of all the rest. There are *powers ordained of God*, and those to whom honour and fear are due and must be paid. Some observe the significancy of the names of these princes, at least, in general, how much God was in the thoughts of those that gave them their names, for most of them have

El, God, at one end or other of their names. Nethaneel, the gift of God; Eliab, my God a Father; Elizur, my God a rock; Shelumiel, God my peace; Eliasaph, God has added; Elishama, my God has heard: Gamaliel, God my reward; Pagiell, God has met me. By this it appears that the Israelites in Egypt did not quite forget the name of their God, but, when they wanted other memorials, preserved the remembrance of it in the names of their children, and therewith comforted themselves in their affliction.

3. Those tribes were placed together under the same standard that were nearest of kin to each other; Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, were the three younger sons of Leah, and they were put together; and Issachar and Zebulun would not grudge to be under Judah, since they were his younger brethren. Reuben and Simeon would not have been content in their place. Therefore Reuben, Jacob's eldest son, is made chief of the next squadron; Simeon, no doubt, is willing to be under him, and Gad, the son of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid, is fitly added to them in Levi's room: Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin, are all the posterity of Rachel. Dan, the eldest son of Bilhah, is made a leading tribe, though the son of a concubine, that more abundant honour might be bestowed on that which lacked; and it was said, *Dan should judge his people*, and to him were added two younger sons of the handmaids. Thus unexceptionable was the order in which they were placed.

4. The tribe of Judah was in the first post of honour, encamped towards the rising sun, and in their marches led the van, not only because it was the most numerous tribe, but chiefly because from that tribe Christ was to come, who is the *Lion of the tribe of Judah*, and was to descend from the loins of him who was now nominated chief captain of that tribe. Nahshon is reckoned among the ancestors of Christ, ~~4004~~ Matthew 1:4. So that, when he went before them, Christ himself went before them in effect, as their leader. Judah was the first of the twelve sons of Jacob that was blessed. Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, were censured by their dying father; he therefore being first in blessing, though not in birth, is put first, to teach children how to value the smiles of their godly parents and dread their frowns.

5. The tribes of Levi pitched closely about the tabernacle, within the rest of their tribes, v. 17. They must defend the sanctuary, and then the rest of the tribes must defend them. Thus, in the vision which John saw of the

glory of heaven, between the elders and the throne were four *living creatures full of eyes*, ^{<010>}Revelation 4:6, 8. Civil powers should protect the religious interests of a nation, and be a defence upon that glory.

6. The camp of Dan (and so that tribe is called long after their settlement in Canaan (^{<012>}Judges 13:25), because celebrated for their military prowess), though posted in the left wing when they encamped, was ordered in their march to bring up the rear, v. 31. They were the most numerous, next to Judah, and therefore were ordered into a post which, next to the front, required the most strength, for as the strength is so shall the day be. *Lastly*, The children of Israel observed the orders given them, and did *as the Lord commanded Moses*, v. 34. They put themselves in the posts assigned them, without murmuring or disputing, and, as it was their safety, so it was their beauty; Balaam was charmed with the sight of it: *How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob!* ^{<021>}Numbers 24:5. Thus the gospel church, called the *camp of saints*, ought to be compact according to the scripture model, every one knowing and keeping his place, and then all that wish well to the church rejoice, *beholding their order*, ^{<015>}Colossians 2:5.