

AARON'S ROD

Numbers 17

The teacher should read Exodus 28:1-4, 40-43 concerning Aaron, and review Numbers 16 as a background for the current lesson. He should also look over the route of the Israelites as found in Numbers 33 and as marked on a Bible map of the wilderness journey, and he should refresh his memory of the story of the spies in Numbers 13 and 14, especially Numbers 14:26-35.

Doctrinal Points

The Lord knows what is best for us. We should recognize Him as wiser than we are.

The signs given the Israelites in the Word are signs for us, too.

Faith in the Lord is measured by obedience.

There is no genuine goodness in anything done from self.

Notes for Parents

In our lesson for today the children of Israel have left Sinai and have been traveling through the wilderness for some time. Once they even came almost in sight of the Holy Land; but when the spies they sent on ahead reported finding strong cities, powerful enemies, and even giants there, they refused to attempt the conquest, even though two of the spies—Joshua and Caleb—reminded them that the Lord was with them and would surely give them the victory. For this lack of trust in the Lord they were condemned to continue their wanderings in the wilderness for forty years, until all who were of age at the time of their cowardly decision, except Joshua and Caleb, should have died. In the same way, we ourselves all too often lose some great happiness because we refuse to “trust in the Lord and go forward.”

And in another way we are very much like the children of Israel. When we are suffering from the results of some wrong we have

done, we try to find someone else to blame instead of ourselves. The Israelites blamed Moses and Aaron and rebelled against their leadership. If you have read chapter 16, you will know the immediate result of the rebellion and the terrible lesson they were given.

Then the Lord gave them a different kind of lesson. At Sinai the Lord had appointed Aaron to be high priest, and only a descendant of his was ever to hold this office. Now the Lord confirms the choice in the eyes of all the people by the sign of the rods. When twelve rods—one for each tribe, each marked with the name of the leader of the tribe—were laid up overnight before the ark in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle, Aaron’s rod bore buds and blossoms and yielded almonds. The other eleven remained mere sticks. In the Gospels the Lord tells us, “By their fruits ye shall know them,” and we all understand that fruits mean deeds. Almonds are delicious, nourishing, and long-lasting fruit, and the almond blossom is beautiful. The lesson is not hard to see. Only love to the Lord and obedience to Him can make us happy and good, with the kind of goodness which endures. We should take this lesson to heart, as Moses was afterward commanded to lay up Aaron’s rod before the ark forever “to be kept for a token against the rebels.”

Primary

Bring out especially Aaron’s position with reference to Moses and the people. This class should learn the function of the Levites and that of Aaron and his sons, and should have the background story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram refreshed in their minds. They are not too young to get the general lesson of the blossoming rod.

After the golden calf was destroyed, Moses set the people to work to build the tabernacle, a special tent in which they were to worship the Lord. The Lord had given Moses exact directions for making the tabernacle and the furniture that was to be in it. The holiest piece of furniture was the ark, a box or chest covered with

gold, in which were kept the two tables of stone with the ten commandments written on them. You remember that Moses broke the first tables when he came down and found the people worshipping the golden calf. But afterward the Lord told Moses to hew out two new tables from the stone at the foot of the mountain and bring them up, and the Lord wrote the commandments on them again for the people.

Do you remember the name of Moses' brother who went everywhere with him? It was Aaron. The Lord told Moses that Aaron was to be the high priest of Israel and that Aaron's sons were also to be priests. The whole tribe of Levi, to which Moses and Aaron belonged, were to have charge of the tabernacle and its furnishings and of all the things connected with the people's worship, but only Aaron and his sons could perform the highest services.

After they left Sinai, the pillar of cloud and fire led them from place to place through the wilderness, and the people began to blame Moses and Aaron for their long journey and all their troubles.

They blamed them for all their troubles.

They thought someone else should be high priest.

What did the Lord tell Moses to do?

How many rods were brought to him?

How were they to know which was which?

Where were the rods placed?

Next morning what did Moses find had happened to Aaron's rod?

What did this mean?

What did the Lord tell Moses to do with Aaron's rod?

Junior

The historical and geographical sequences are important for this age group. The teacher should have a map to show them. The moral lesson is within their reach, and they can also get some idea of the correspondence of the seed-plant series, which will show them the reason for the Lord's choice of this particular sign.

Where did the children of Israel camp for eleven months?

What did they all hear the Lord speak from the mount?

What other instructions were given at Sinai?

Where did Moses have to go to speak with the Lord?
How long was he gone the last time?
What did the people ask Aaron to do?
What did he make for them?
What did he use to make it?
When Moses came down, what was he carrying?
What did he do with them?
What did he do with the golden calf?
Where did Moses cut two new tables of stone?
Who wrote the commandments on them?

During the rest of their stay at Sinai, the people were kept busy with the construction of the tabernacle and its furnishings and the dedication of it with sacrifices and offerings. This was the kind of thing they could see and enjoy. The tribe of Levi was set apart by the Lord to have charge of everything pertaining to worship. They were to set up the tabernacle when the people camped and to take it down and carry it when the march was resumed, and they were to assist in the offerings and ceremonies. But only Aaron and his sons could be priests. The Lord appointed Aaron to be high priest, and no one but a descendant of his was ever to hold this office.

Finally the pillar of cloud moved. The people were set on the march by the blowing of two special silver trumpets. They were led into the wilderness of Paran which forms a large part of the Arabian peninsula north of Sinai. The thirty-third chapter of Numbers lists the stopping places in their order. Finally they reached Kadesh-barnea, very near the southern border of the Holy Land. But they did not go forward then. They sent twelve men—one from each tribe—to spy out the land, and ten of them came back and said they found enemies there too strong for the Israelites to conquer. And although the other two spies—Joshua and Caleb—reminded them that the Lord was with them and urged them to go forward, they voted to take the advice of the other ten. And the Lord said that because of their lack of faith they would have to go on wandering about in the wilderness until all the men who had been old enough to vote at that time—except Joshua and Caleb—had died.

When we are being punished for some wrong thing we have done, we are never very happy, are we? We often forget that it was all our own fault and try to put the blame on innocent people, sometimes on the very ones who tried to keep us from doing wrong in the first place. Our story for today is really a continuation of the story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.

What did the Lord tell Moses to have brought for each tribe?

How many rods were there?

How were they to know which was which?

Whose name was written on the rod of the tribe of Levi?

What did Moses do with the rods?

In the morning what had happened to Aaron's rod?

What was Moses told to do with Aaron's rod?

You know what almonds are. They are nuts which keep well, have a fine flavor, and are nourishing. And the almond tree has lovely blossoms, too. The Lord made Aaron's rod blossom and bear almonds to show the people that only worship in obedience to the Lord could make them happy and good.

The people really knew that it was the Lord who had appointed Aaron, but people are not always ready to accept the Lord's will. We like to think we can be good in our own way. We have many good affections: love of our parents, love of study, love of making useful things, love of certain kinds of work, etc. All these lead us to do some good things. But sometimes none of these is strong enough to keep us from doing wrong, especially when we think no one will know what we have done. Only love of the Lord can always keep us in the right way, for we know that the Lord sees and knows everything we do, and even everything we think and feel. We must always remember this. That is why Aaron's rod was to be laid up beside the ark in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle. You remember the first commandment. And the Lord says that the commandments should be written in our hearts. Our story for today is put in the Bible to help us see that only by obeying the Lord can we be happy.



Intermediate

A considerable part of the lesson time will need to be spent on background. The meaning of the lesson for the day itself is simple and should be given as a climax.

Our lesson today is from the book of Numbers. We have learned the meaning of the names *Genesis* and *Exodus* and why these two books are so called. The book of Leviticus is the detailed statement of the code of laws given to Moses at Sinai. These were called the “Levitical” laws because the tribe of Levi was set apart by the Lord to have charge of the Jewish worship and to teach and enforce the law. If we read the first four verses of the first chapter of the book of Numbers, we find the reason for its name. Before the people left Sinai, Moses was commanded by the Lord to number or count all the people by tribes, and there are many places in the book where numbers are prominent and where our attention is called to the twelve tribes, their leaders, and their individual functions. Our lesson for today is one of these.

In Exodus 28 we learn that among the Levites Aaron and his sons were given the priestly office by the Lord, and in Exodus 40 their solemn consecration to this office is described. Aaron himself was to be high priest, and only a descendant of his could hold that office.

The greater part of the wilderness journey came after the Israelites left Sinai. Chapter 33 of Numbers lists their stopping places. When they reached Kadesh near the southern border of the Holy Land, at the command of the Lord Moses sent twelve men—one from each tribe—to spy out the land. But the people let themselves be discouraged from attempting its conquest because ten of the spies said the enemies there were too strong for them. The other two spies, Joshua and Caleb, reminded them that the Lord was with them but they were not listened to, and so the Lord told them that they would have to wander in the wilderness until all who had been of age to vote at the time of the decision—except Joshua and Caleb—had died. So it was actually forty years before the entry into the Holy Land took place.

We know from experience how prone we are, when we are suffering from the effects of some wrongdoing of our own, to try to find someone else to blame. The Israelites blamed Moses and Aaron. The rule of Moses and Aaron pictures the rule of divine truth and love. When we turn against this, “the earth”—that is, worldliness—swallows us up and the love of our hearts is turned into consuming self-love. This is the negative side of the picture, detailed in the story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.

But the Lord, in the Word, follows this with a beautiful picture of the positive results of obedience to divine law. The twelve tribes picture all our good affections and thoughts, the tribe of Levi and especially Aaron as high priest portraying love of goodness from the Lord. The rods, one from each tribe, are symbols of power, the principles which put the various affections into practice.

We have many good affections: love of learning, love of useful service, etc. These are some of the things represented by the rods. But all these may fail under temptation. There is only one love which can carry us through everything, and that is love of the Lord—the power of which is symbolized by Aaron's rod.

The teachings of our church tell us that we are to shun evils as sins against God. This means that we are to judge our conduct by the standard of the Lord's laws instead of by any standards we make for ourselves or find in the world about us. Only in this way can we be sure of avoiding evil and doing good.

Aaron's rod, the power of love to the Lord, “brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds.” The buds stand for impulses toward good deeds; the blossoms, thoughts about how to do them; and the almonds, genuine good works, for nuts are both nourishing and lasting.

Moses was commanded to lay up Aaron's rod beside the ark in the Holy of Holies. In the same way, we must hold fast in our hearts to the one true guiding principle, which is love to the Lord.

Basic Correspondences

- the twelve tribes = all our good affections and thoughts
- Aaron as high priest = goodness from the Lord

a rod = power
the almond = goods of life

Senior

The principal lesson for this age is in the necessity of distinguishing between good works done from self and good works done from the desire to serve and obey the Lord. Even in the church there is a great deal of self-praise. There is no interior life in good works performed in this spirit.

It is not until the tenth chapter of the book of Numbers that we find the Israelites leaving Sinai. First the tabernacle and its furnishings had to be constructed, set up, and consecrated, and worship begun according to the prescribed rites. The Lord had named Aaron as high priest (Exodus 28) and his sons as priests under him, and the priesthood was to continue in his family. The book of Leviticus gives the detailed code of laws to be taught and administered by the tribe of Levi, to which both Moses and Aaron belonged. Then at the command of the Lord, all the people were numbered or counted by tribes, the event which gives the book of Numbers its name.

If you will look at a map of the wilderness journey, you will find that the Israelites traveled in a fairly steady line from Sinai to Kadesh-barnea near the southern border of the Holy Land. Their encampments along the way are given us in Numbers 33. At Kadesh they sent forward twelve men to spy out the Holy Land; but when the spies returned, the people allowed themselves to be discouraged from attempting the conquest. For their lack of trust in the Lord's power to give them victory—a power which Joshua and Caleb urged them to acknowledge—they were condemned to continue in the wilderness until all those over twenty years of age (voting age) at the time of their weak decision should have died. With the loss of their immediate hope and incentive, their natural selfishness inspired them to continual grumblings and to dissatisfaction with the leaders whom the Lord had given to them. The immediate background of our chapter is the rebellion of Korah,

Dathan, and Abiram and the two hundred and fifty “princes of the assembly” against Moses and Aaron. Their punishment is a vivid picture of the worldliness and self-love which overtake those who rebel against the Lord’s direction while professing to worship Him.

But after this terrible lesson the Lord gave the people another sign, a beautiful one this time, of the fact that only love to the Lord is able to produce genuine and lasting fruit. We recognize the twelve tribes as standing for all our good affections and thoughts. A rod is a symbol of power. Aaron, as high priest and leader of the priestly tribe, represents the principle that life should be lived in recognition of the Lord and in the attempt to learn and do His will. This principle alone has power to make our lives truly happy and fruitful.

We can imagine that the rods, in the hands of their owners, all inspired respect among the people. We hear people say, even of a man who is an atheist, that he is a good man because he does things which benefit humanity. But we should realize that if such a man does recognize his duty to do good to others, it is from some early religious influence and training or from the acceptance of standards in the community which stemmed from a religious source, and that if he does not recognize God in what he does, he is ascribing goodness to himself. His goodness is then merely on the outside and is not genuine, for we read in the Gospels: “There is none good but one, that is, God.” What the Lord shows us in this story is that He alone is the source of the power to do good, and that in His sight—when the rods are laid before the ark in the tabernacle—all principles except that of loving obedience to Him are unfruitful.

The almond was appropriate for several reasons. It is a noble and beautiful tree, blossoming profusely (see Jeremiah 1:11). The blossoms are lovely, and the fruit delicious, nourishing, and lasting. The blossoms of a plant or tree represent our thoughts about specific uses or good works; and the fruit, the good works themselves. If our lives are governed by the principle of love to the

Lord and desire to do His will, we shall find delight in thinking about His truth and its specific applications, and we shall find deep and lasting joy in serving Him from day to day. Our lives will not be sterile when laid before the judgment seat of the Lord.

There seems to have been enough power in this final demonstration of the leadership of Moses and Aaron to convince the people. The final proof to us of the rightness of the Lord's guidance is the joy that comes in doing His will. Until we see and taste this satisfaction we are constantly tempted to turn back toward self. And we, too, must "lay up the fruitful rod before the ark" as a constant reminder. That is, the Lord's laws must be written in our hearts. In times of trouble and temptation we must remind ourselves of the blessings that have come to us in the past through obedience, and so hold steadfast.

Adult

Discussion material is suggested in the Adult notes in the references to modern humanism and rejection of revelation. The lesson, however, should be directed toward self-examination rather than toward criticism of society.

We have studied the story of the destruction of two of Aaron's sons—Nadab and Abihu—because they offered "strange fire" in their censers (Leviticus 10:1-7); the story of the sending out of the twelve spies from Kadesh and the condemnation of all the adults who voted to follow the advice of the cowardly ten (Numbers 13, 14); and the story of the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Numbers 16). All these stories show the steady disposition of the Israelites to set up their own will and their own intelligence in opposition to the Lord's commands and instructions. In these striking and dramatic stories it is easy for us to see and condemn the folly of the tendency in the Israelites to set up their own intelligence and their own will against the Lord, but we are slow to recognize this same tendency in ourselves and to acknowledge its foolishness. Yet it is an almost universal tendency. In national life it results in the belief in force rather than in righteous-

ness, in social life in the struggle for money and power, in our individual lives in contempt for those who are different from ourselves and for anyone who disagrees with us. It appears most clearly of all in one modern theory that the Bible is the work of men—rather pretentiously described as “man’s ascending search for God”—and in the tendency of churches, including our own, to measure themselves and their members in terms of external activities instead of in terms of justice and righteousness.

In our chapter for today the Lord gives the people a sign. The story is a simple one and we may wonder why the mere miraculous blossoming of a rod should have convinced the people. Yet the last two verses of the chapter indicate that, coming on top of the terrible events described in the preceding chapter, it did convince them, for the time at least.

What does this story mean for us? The Lord at Sinai had appointed Aaron to be high priest. His sons were also to be priests, and the high priesthood was to descend in his line. Aaron and Moses were descendants of Levi, who among the twelve sons of Jacob represents charity. In AC 342 Swedenborg says: “The church conceives and brings forth nothing else than faith and charity. The same is signified by the first children of Leah from Jacob; ‘Reuben’ denoting faith; ‘Simeon’ faith in act; and ‘Levi’ charity, wherefore also the tribe of Levi received the priesthood, and represented the ‘shepherd of the flock.’” He says elsewhere that charity is love to the neighbor in the heart, springing from love to the Lord, and that recognition of the Lord and charity are the essentials of the church.

But among the Levites Aaron was singled out to be high priest. Aaron, like other individuals in the Bible story, has his basic correspondence, but it takes on various colorings according to the context in which he appears. Basically he represents “the Lord as to Divine good or the priesthood.” But before he became high priest, when he was assigned to Moses “for a mouth,” he represents “the doctrine of what is good and true.” We saw this representation in our lesson on the battle with Amalek. Whenever Moses and Aaron

are named together, Moses represents the divine law as it is in its inward sense, and Aaron the same law in its literal sense. In our present chapter it is Aaron as high priest whose authority has been called into question. Since in that office he represents the Lord as to good, to question his authority is to refuse to recognize that “there is none good but one, that is, God.” Whenever we find ourselves thinking of ourselves as good, finding fault with others because they are not doing what we do, assuming that our own motives are above reproach and that what we think the Bible ought to mean is what it must mean, we are rebelling against the high priesthood of Aaron. It is a sad commentary on our inherited nature that it is so hard for us to learn the lesson of humility which is taught throughout the Word and emphasized again and again in the writings. Swedenborg tells us that without innocence there can be no charity and, as we saw in our lesson on the Passover, he defines innocence as “to know, acknowledge, and believe, not with the mouth but with the heart, that nothing but evil is from one’s self and that all good is from the Lord.”

The rod is a symbol of power, specifically of the power exercised by truth. The twelve tribes represent all the goods and truths of the church in a complex. The rods of the tribes are symbols of the power exercised by these. We need them all, but each has its specific place and use, and their immediate importance varies with the circumstances in which we are from time to time. We learn this, for example, as we study the shifting order in which the tribes are named in different stories in the Word. But the office of the tribe of Levi remains constant. Levi is given no separate lot in the Holy Land but is established in cities in every part of it. When the rods of the twelve tribes were laid before the ark in the Holy of Holies, only the rod of Aaron for the tribe of Levi blossomed and bore fruit.

We are familiar with the correspondence of the seed-plant series. The seed is truth from the Word, the tree itself represents a certain principle, the leaves thoughts from that principle, the blossoms particular thoughts leading to uses, the fruit the uses themselves.

Nuts, because they last a long time, represent lasting goods. Of the almond Swedenborg says in AC 5622: “This tree itself signifies in the spiritual sense a perception of interior truth which is from good, its ‘blossom’ interior truth which is from good, and its ‘fruit’ good of life thence derived.” So the sign of Aaron’s rod means that only the acknowledgment—from the heart—that the Lord alone is good can produce genuine good in the life. The laying of the twelve rods before the ark shows us that it is the Lord’s judgment and not man’s which counts.

The later laying up of Aaron’s rod before the ark, “to be kept as a token against the rebels,” tells us that the principle pictured by the fruitful rod should be taken to heart and never forgotten, so that we may not be guilty of setting ourselves up in judgment upon the Lord, the sin which caused the earth to open and swallow up Dathan and Abiram and fire from the Lord to consume Korah and the two hundred and fifty “princes of the assembly” who supported him in his rebellion. This is a lesson which is much needed today when some people are making a cult of the worship of humanity, claiming the innate goodness of human nature, attempting to build up a moral code without belief in revelation, and making external benefactions the test of goodness. The second of the two great commandments cannot be obeyed independently of the first; and the Lord’s “new commandment”—“as I have loved you, that ye also love one another”—points with equal positiveness to the necessity of looking to the Lord for the understanding of what love to the neighbor involves and for the power to develop and exercise this love.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 5622²⁻³: “‘Almonds’ signify goods of life corresponding to the truths of good of the interior natural . . . This tree itself signifies in the spiritual sense a perception of interior truth which is from good, its ‘blossom’ interior truth which is from good, and its ‘fruit’ good of life thence derived. In this sense the ‘almond tree’ is spoken of in Jeremiah (1:11-12) . . . By the ‘almonds which budded from the rod of Aaron for the tribe of Levi,’ are also

signified goods of charity or goods of life.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. What set of laws did the Lord first give the children of Israel at Sinai?
ten commandments
- J. What other instructions did He give them there? *many tribal laws*
- J. Why did the people at one time think that Moses was gone for good?
gone forty days
- J. What did they demand of Aaron? *“make us gods”*
- P. What did Aaron make for them? *calf*
- P. What did he use to make it? *gold earrings*
- P. What did Moses do when he returned with the first tables of the law?
broke them
- J. What did he do with the golden calf? *destroyed it*
- P. Whom did the Lord appoint to be high priest of Israel? *Aaron*
- J. Why were the people kept wandering in the wilderness for forty years?
lack of faith
- P. Whom did they blame for their troubles? *Moses and Aaron*
- J. What happened to the men who rebelled against Moses and Aaron?
destroyed
- P. In this lesson, what did the Lord tell Moses to have the leader of each tribe bring? *rod*
- P. How were the twelve rods distinguished from one another? *names put on them*
- P. Whose name was written on the rod of the tribe of Levi? *Aaron’s*
- P. Where did Moses put the rods? *in front of ark*
- P. What did they find the next morning? *Aaron’s rod bore almonds*
- J. What did this show? *Aaron to remain priest*
- J. Where did the Lord tell Moses to keep Aaron’s rod? *near ark*
- I. What does Aaron represent? *love of obeying the Lord*
- S. What spiritual quality do almonds represent? *lasting goodness based on perception of spiritual truth*