

Two wilderness prayers

Rev. S. Maljaars - Numbers 10: 35-36

Sing: Psalter 248: 1- 4

Read: Numbers 10: 11-36

Sing: Psalter 183: 2, 4

Sing: Psalter 220: 1, 2

Sing: Psalter 345: 1, 2

Congregation, with the Lord's help we would like to consider Numbers 10, verses 35 and 36, where God's word reads:

“And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee. And when it rested, he said, Return, O LORD, unto the many thousands of Israel.”

I ask your attention for two wilderness prayers.

1. When the ark set forward, or: set out (verse 35)
2. When the ark rested (verse 36)

1. When the ark set forward (verse 35)

Congregation, our text is taken from Numbers, the fourth book of Moses – a fitting name as we encounter quite a few numbers in this Bible book. For instance the number of the children of Israel. But besides that, it also contains multiple accounts on Israel's history.

In the Hebrew canon, the book of Numbers is called, “In the wilderness”. The Lord leads His people of Israel through the wilderness to Canaan. Many challenges had to be overcome in that wilderness. There were many events and circumstances that hindered the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. In that regard, there are many black pages in the book of Numbers which tell us of the sins of the people. Nevertheless, the Lord persisted with them. After wandering for forty years, the people finally arrived in Canaan. Only because of God's faithfulness! That is why, even today, Numbers is a source of comfort for God's children.

Our text is in the context of Numbers 10 – a chapter that records the departure of the people of Israel from the Sinai wilderness (verse 11). The people had spent a long eleven months at Sinai. Children, you know what happened at that mountain, don't you? The Lord gave His law, the Ten Commandments, which we read every Sunday morning. The Lord

revealed His Covenant of Grace at Sinai to Israel, now in its national form. It signified that the Lord would especially gather His children from the tribes of Israel. He had set this people apart to be His possession and thus He gave them His law, the Ten Commandments, and instituted the tabernacle service. This people, the people of Israel, was favored to live under the ministry of reconciliation; its center point being the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holiest: “And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat” (Exodus 25:22). Take note of how low the Lord stooped down to His people!

However, the Israelites shamed themselves terribly during their stay in the wilderness of Sinai. Think of their sin with the golden calf. But in spite of their backslidings, the Lord continued to be faithful to them. The Lord’s steadfast faithfulness, congregation, is clearly manifest in this chapter from the book of Numbers.

As the people left the wilderness of Sinai, the cloud went before them till it rested in the wilderness of Paran (verse 12). They travelled in a north-westerly direction from Sinai. Everything took place in an orderly fashion – both their departure and the journey itself. God is a God of order and that can also be seen here as they travelled in the wilderness. The tribes journeyed in the sequence determined by God. Judah, Issachar and Zebulon formed the vanguard. Dan, Asher and Naphtali travelled at the rear. Between these tribes were the remaining tribes, as well as the Gershonites, Kohathites, and the Levites who carried the tabernacle and all the attributes belonging to it.

The Lord went in front of the people, even in front of the army of Judah. In the last part of the chapter from which our text is taken, we read, “And they departed from the mount of the LORD three days’ journey: and the ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them in the three days’ journey, to search out a resting place for them. And the cloud of the LORD was upon them by day, when they went out of the camp” (verses 33-34).

The people were led by the cloud and they were also led by the ark after leaving Sinai. The priests walked with the ark in front of the tribe of Judah. The cloud hung above the ark. Thus, the Lord went in front of them to look for a place where they could rest. The cloud stood still after journeying for three days in the wilderness and so did the priests with the ark.

It was a sign that the people were to rest at that spot in the wilderness of Paran. What amazing guidance! Moses had said to Hobab his brother-in-law, “You will serve as eyes for us; you will be our guide through the wilderness.” But the children of Israel already had a Guide who was better than ten thousand Hobabs, as a certain expositor says. God Himself

led His people through the wilderness. All they had to do was follow the ark. God in Christ went before them. This was the best protection possible!

Take note of what Moses did when the ark came to rest. Moses prayed before the ark left, and now, when the ark stops, he prays again. These are two prayers prayed during the journey through the wilderness. You could call them wilderness prayers. A prayer sent up when the ark set out and another prayer when the ark rested. So prayer was offered up to the Lord when the people journeyed and when they camped.

Congregation, our lives are also journeys through the wilderness. Life is not easy. Our life has become a wilderness through sin. In Psalm 90, Moses says that its strength, its best parts, are still labor and sorrow. However, the most important question is whether or not you have a Guide in this wilderness!

In a way, everyone's life is led by the Lord, because God governs the life of each and every person. He guides your lives, boys and girls, and also our lives as adults and older people. But the big question is: do we know the special guidance of the Lord in our life? Do we know if God in Christ is our Guide? He becomes your Guide in the hour of regeneration, and then the pilgrimage through the wilderness of life starts. Beg the Lord that we may know Him as our Guide!

In the wilderness, God's children have to strive against deadly enemies, which are intent on their destruction. They have to face many threatening dangers as they journey in the wilderness. That is why prayer is so necessary when they journey and when they rest. "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward." The expression "set forward" is used very often in Numbers. Take a look at Numbers 33 - you can read all about the places they rested at during the wilderness journey. It sounds like a chorus: "And they set forward... and pitched in..."

Maybe you have heard of the well-known book by Rev. G. van Reenen, "Israel's Wilderness Journey". He describes each encampment in a dialogue form and draws spiritual lessons from them. Each place of rest had a particular meaning for the people. And so they journeyed on.

In verse 33 the ark is called "the ark of the covenant of the LORD". That is a very special name! It was named that because the Lord had made a covenant with the people. Inside the ark were the two tables of stone as a sign signifying: "These are My words and Israel must keep them." The mercy seat covered the Ark of the Covenant, and once a year blood

was sprinkled on it. That was the only way the Lord could dwell with the people. And so the ark - which was covered with a veil during the journey - clearly proclaimed that the Lord was always near the Israelites.

The ark and the cloud were always together. When the ark set out, so did the cloud. And whenever the cloud would rest, the priests with the ark would rest. When the cloud and the ark journeyed on, the people of Israel had to follow. Wherever the cloud and the ark rested, Israel had to rest too. The Lord defined the itinerary. He was the Guide! They only had to follow.

Congregation, both young and old, when God is your Guide through life's wilderness you will journey safely. That does not mean that everything will go smoothly, however. The introduction to the Canons of Dordt describes the life of God's children as being a "miserable pilgrimage". That means that there are many challenges, disappointments, and discouraging circumstances during the wilderness journey of God's children. But the fathers of Dordt also pointed to Christ's promise which He has left for His people in this pilgrimage, "And, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20).

Therefore, take courage, people of the Lord! You will surely pass through the wilderness, because your Guide is leading you. God in Christ goes before you. He will lead you through the wilderness even if you don't always realise it. But you won't get lost in this wilderness. He will bring you into Canaan as He has promised.

Moses prayed for the people when the ark set out. Boys and girls, can you see him standing there? Moses raises his hands and prays to the Lord. While the cloud is lifted and the priests reverently carry the ark, this servant of the Lord prays for his people. He makes earnest supplication, "Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee."

He prays for the children of Israel just like a father prays for his children. Moses sends this prayer upwards every time the Israelites begin their journey again. This prayer is necessary, because the people must go further through the wilderness. And how could they do that without being guided? Often it seems as though things are not going well at all during the journey of God's children. Often they can't see the cloud or ark. At times they intensely struggle with God's leadings in their lives. But God's ways - however incomprehensible they may be to us - are always straight ways and He makes the wilderness passable for His people.

Children of the Lord, you must travel unknown paths and roads. But God will make the

darkness light for you, and the crooked He will make straight. The Lord has declared that He will not forsake you in the miserable and dangerous wilderness.

Moses pleads, "Rise up, LORD." When someone is seated, it often represents that they are resting. But if someone gets up, it is a sign that they are active, it shows their strength. Likewise this prayer means, "Lord, show us Thy power!" Moses prays, "Arise, o Lord, and be our help when Thou settest forward! O Lord, when the ark sets forward, show Thy might. Go before us! For is not Thy Name LORD? Surely Thou art Jehovah, the covenant God? Oh show it to Thy undeserving people!"

That is Moses' fervent prayer. He knows from experience that the enemies are strong and that the people of Israel are weak. This prayer shows the love of Moses, the intercessor for his people.

"Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered." The people had already met many enemies in the wilderness during the year that they had been traveling. They were confronted time and again with many adversaries.

First, the enemy in Egypt, Pharaoh with his army, chased after the people at the start of their journey. They trapped Israel: the Egyptians were behind them, mountains were on their left and right, and the Red Sea was in front. Where could they go? But then Moses exclaimed, though with different words, "Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered." Moses stretched out his staff over the Red Sea and the people went through the sea on a dry path, whereas their enemies were swallowed up by the water. And so Moses prays, "Lord, wilt Thou scatter Thine enemies once again, as Thou didst to the Egyptian enemies?"

The Israelites arrived at Rephidim a few weeks after the exodus from Egypt. That was where they received water out of a rock in a miraculous manner. But then Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim. They caught Israel by surprise by attacking the rear of the procession. As the Israelites floundered, Moses climbed up a mountain with the staff of God in his hand. "Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered." At one point Moses' hands were so tired they couldn't hold up the staff any longer. But Aaron and Hur supported him. The Lord scattered the enemies. Joshua fought back the Amalekites with the edge of the sword. They were forced to flee. The Lord had undertaken for the people. "Lord, surely Thou art the same God as at Rephidim, wilt Thou also at this time scatter Thine enemies?"

However, the struggle would not end there. Moses knew that. What would happen to the people after leaving Sinai? As the leader of Israel, Moses had many worries and

concerns about the remainder of the journey to Canaan. There was only one thing he could do: lift up his hands to heaven and pray, “Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered.”

This prayer was constantly necessary as the ark journeyed on. New enemies would emerge, as we read in the next chapters in Numbers. There were the Edomites, who refused Israel’s passage through their country. “Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered.” Sihon, the king of the Amorites would fight them in a coalition with Og, King of Bashan. “Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered.” And upon entering the Promised Land they would face the Canaanites, for the country to which they were travelling was not uninhabited. On the contrary, it was a land full of enemies. Therefore this prayer, “Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered.”

And so the people passed through the wilderness and arrived in Canaan. Only by the power of God! “Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee.”

Congregation, you might know that parallel sentences often occur in Hebrew. It is a cultural style. The second sentence of the sequence expands on the first. If we place the sentences of Moses’ prayer underneath each other, we read:

“Let thine enemies be scattered;
and let them that hate thee flee before thee.”

“Thine enemies” are the same as “them that hate Thee.” So Moses uses two words for God’s adversaries: enemies and haters. Actually it says: “God’s enemies” and “God’s haters”. Very solemn words! They show our state before God, “enemies of God” and “haters of God”.

Do we realise that these words apply to us in our unconverted state? By nature we are enemies, inclined to hate God and our neighbor. Congregation, think about this truth for a moment.

And then there is something else. It says: “*Thine* enemies”, “them that hate *Thee*, flee before *Thee*.” You would expect Moses to say, “Let our enemies flee from before us, let our haters be scattered.” No, he is talking about *Thine* enemies, them that hate *Thee*. The enemies of God’s people are God’s enemies and the haters of that people are haters of God.

When it talks about the Second Coming in Lord’s Day 19 of the Heidelberg Catechism, it

is recorded thus, “He will cast all his and my enemies into everlasting condemnation.” His enemies and my enemies are the same people, they are one. If God’s enemies are not our enemies, it is a sign that we are living unconverted. Then God’s enemies are our friends. It is sad, congregation, very sad if it stays that way! Oh young and old, pray that God will break your friendship with His enemies, the Devil, the world and sin. They have nothing to offer you. Ultimately, they will carry us unto perdition.

On the other hand, it is also comforting for God's children to know that their enemies are also God's enemies. They have an alliance with God. God stands up for His people and will conquer their enemies.

“Let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee.” Three times reference is made to the Lord: “Let *thine* enemies be scattered; and let them that hate *thee* flee before *thee*.” Moses is really saying here, “Lord, isn't this Thy cause?” Moses is not revengeful here! The man of God stands up for the honor of God. “Lord, surely this is Thy Name, surely this is Thy cause, surely this is Thy people that are being led through the wilderness? Oh, let Thine enemies flee and be scattered!”

God's people will experience strife in the wilderness. They will begin to experience their weakness more and more. In Lord's Day 52 of the Heidelberg Catechism, we hear someone praying who is experienced in the Christian strife. What does he say? “Whereas we are so weak in and of ourselves, so that we could not exist for one moment, we plead that Thou preserve and strengthen us through the power of Thy Holy Spirit.”

The longer a struggling Christian pilgrim sojourns in the wilderness the more he learns: “I am so weak in myself. And the three-headed mortal enemy is so powerful. The Devil, the world, and my own flesh do not cease to afflict my soul.” This is why the humble suppliant's dependant prayer is so necessary. He calls upon the Lord for help and assistance in the wilderness.

Moses pleads for the people, “Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee.” Are there any pilgrims here or at home, who in the wilderness of life cannot do anything but call out:

*Be Thou my helper in the strife, O Lord my strong defender be;
Thy mighty shield protect my life, Thy spear confront the enemy.
Amid the conflict, O my Lord. Thy precious promise let me hear.*

The faithful reassuring word: I am Thy Savior do not fear. (Psalter 92)

God will hear this supplication and He will answer it. Moses, the mediator of the old covenant, raises his hands towards heaven and prays for his people, “Rise up, LORD, and let

thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee.”

But, dejected and supplicating people, there is a Mediator, who is much greater than Moses. His name is Jesus Christ, the Just One. And He prays for His people that journey in the wilderness. He prays for them when they are trodden underfoot by all sorts of enemies. When the Devil, the world, sin and their own flesh threaten to prevail, then there is a praying Mediator in heaven for that weak and helpless people. His hands are always raised up to His Father. The apostle said of Him, “Seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

Oh, pilgrims in the wilderness, you may have nearly given up and you cannot resist the enemy that is ready to overpower you. But hear these words, “Seeing He ever liveth.” Listen! More than Moses is here! And that is why unworthy people find grace with God in the wilderness.

You can find a rich shadow of that other Mediator in this wilderness prayer. There is something on every page of the Old Testament that points to the lustre of the New Testament. Everything has been fulfilled in the Christ of Scripture. He it is, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who has passed through the wilderness of this world. He had to sojourn here among His enemies and His haters. All enemies swooped down upon Him. He fought with the Devil, His mortal enemy. Just think of the temptation in the wilderness. But this great Conqueror sent the enemy away with these few words, “Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written...” He was assaulted by the world, but they were never able to accuse Him of sin.

Ultimately, this Conqueror gained the victory at Golgotha. “Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered.” This happened when He proclaimed His victory on the cross of Golgotha, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). He conquered all His enemies with those crowning words. He bruised Satan's head, conquered the world and took away the curse of sin.

Did not this “Rise up, LORD” become true on Easter Morning, when this Conqueror rose from the dead? This Conqueror ascended up into heaven after forty days. He is the Mighty One, Who grants His help to His afflicted people in the wilderness. His people may share in His blessing. They are more than conquerors in Him.

Congregation, this wilderness prayer also carries a serious warning. By nature we are all enemies and haters of God. We are born enemies and haters. That enmity is in our every heart, from young to old. There were many that remained enemies, also among the Israelites. But those enemies are also here in church.

Do you know what happens to enemies? They will be chased and scattered, made to flee

from before God. It is terrible if we are and remain an enemy; if we are a hater of God and remain a hater of God! Then we will have to flee before God, without ever being able to find a hiding place. Congregation, how dreadful that will be!

But I may still preach to you today that enemies can become friends. Today, I may still proclaim that haters of God can be turned into lovers of the Lord. Just read the chapter about Hobab, the brother-in-law of Moses. This unwilling Midianite said, “I will not go; but I will depart to mine own land, and to my kindred.” But we know from God’s word that he did go with them, and it turned out to be for his eternal good.

Hear now, the most unwilling Midianite can still be engrafted in Israel and be counted as born on Zion’s holy mount! Therefore, there is no-one who has wandered that they cannot return to God. There is mercy with God for the greatest enemy. This is also the message of the wilderness-prayer, prayed during the journeying's of the ark.

Congregation, plead with the Lord that you may learn to fight the good fight in the wilderness of life. And that you may learn to know God through the great Conqueror Christ, Who alone is our deliverance and protection.

First we will sing together Psalter 220: 1, 2

Verse 1

*Great Shepherd Who leadest Thy people in love
'Mid cherubim dwelling, shine Thou from above;
In might come and save us, Thy people restore,
And we shall be saved when Thy face shines once more.*

Verse 2

*O haste, Lord, to hear us and pity our woes,
Affliction our portion, despised by our foes;
O Lord God Almighty, in mercy restore,
And we shall be saved when Thy face shines once more.*

Congregation, we are considering two wilderness prayers: one prayer when the ark set forward, and one prayer...

2. When the ark rested

We read in verse 36: “And when it,” (that is the ark) “rested, he” (that is Moses) “said: Return, O LORD, unto the many thousands of Israel.”

“And when it rested.” The ark did not only travel, it also rested. We read that the ark of the covenant travelled three days journey before the children of Israel to search out a resting place for them (verse 33). As they travelled through the wilderness, the Lord led them from resting place to resting place. A resting place was a place where the people could settle for a longer or a shorter period of time.

When the cloud stopped, and also the priests and the ark stood still, Moses prayed again. This is the second wilderness prayer, “Return, O LORD, unto the many thousands of Israel.”

It was a prayer for protection in the wilderness. Maybe someone is wondering, “Was that prayer really necessary since they were resting?” Congregation, perhaps we should say: this prayer is essential especially at the times of rest. “Return, O LORD, unto the many thousands of Israel.”

“And when it rested.” God, in Christ, created a resting place in the wilderness. How wonderful, because the people had not earned a resting place. They deserved to always wander restlessly in the wilderness. However, God granted resting places in the wilderness for that ungrateful people - a people of which the Lord, after the wilderness journey, had to say that He had been grieved with this people for forty years.

Has that ever been brought home to us? Forty years of grieving (and you can fill in your own age here). All those years, the Lord was grieved with us because of our sins. If that is experienced, then you can understand what a child of God once said during a visit, “The Lord - I say it reverently - can never enjoy me any more.” That will cause a heartfelt anguish. But the Lord looks for resting places for these people.

“And when it rested.” When the ark rested, the people set up their tents in the wilderness. Can you imagine them, children? Thousands of black tents belonging to the different tribes: Judah, Issachar and Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali and all the others. And in the middle was the most beautiful tent of all, the tabernacle, where the sacrifices were offered, and where the priests and the Levites were busily occupied in the service of the tabernacle. The ark was set down in the Most Holy Place, where it would remain during the time of rest. The ark would stay there with the cloud above it. And thus the children of Israel could rest for a while. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would sprinkle blood over the ark – which represented that the soul that sinned, died.

Our blood is our life. Sin brought death, it costs us our life. Sprinkling blood also represented that there is no remission of sins without the shedding of blood. In this way, visible instruction was given while the ark rested. It demonstrated why that blood was

necessary and what that blood signified.

Congregation, ask the Lord to instruct you while the ark is at rest in your life, that He will teach you about the necessity of that blood, that you will learn, “I must die because I have sinned; I am guilty unto death before God because I have sinned.” When the Lord shows us our sin we will try to make things right again between God and our heart. We will try hard to please God! “Just have patience, Lord, I will try this, and do that, and stop doing something else...”

It is a great mercy if you can see that there is a way of salvation with God! That gives a sinner hope. It is so profitable when the Lord teaches us that He wants His righteousness be satisfied. Payment must be made, either by us or by Another!

There were Israelites who were privileged to receive this instruction at a resting ark. Discovering instruction! The Lord launches out into the deep with His people. He makes room for the work of Christ by way of breaking down. Deepening instruction is necessary, over and over again!

The time when the ark rested was also the time that instruction was given about the preciousness of the blood of reconciliation. The ark pointed to the one and only means of salvation and cleansing: the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son!

When the Lord opens a hardened sinner’s eyes, in the wilderness of this life, to the preciousness of the blood of Christ, he will sing of his desire, “Jehovah's beauty to admire, And in His Temple to Inquire.” Everything can be found in that blood. This blood is precious, it is indispensable. It justifies and cleanses. It purifies and sanctifies. Such a sinner is then blessed to see something of this blood, according to the degree with which the Lord reveals it, and they will never be finished discovering the secrets which lie in the blood and in the wounds of the Saviour. O pray then continually for discovering grace, so that room is made for comforting and foundational mercy!

“Return, O LORD.” The whole camp had to be set up when the cloud stood still and the ark rested. There was a lot of work to be done! All the tents had to be set up; the tabernacle had to be erected; and while the Israelites were busily doing this, Moses stood in the camp and raised his hands to heaven again. It must have been a moving scene to hear him praying the wilderness prayer, “Return, O LORD, unto the many thousands of Israel.”

Moses knew that if the Lord did not join them and provide protection during the time of rest, things would go terribly wrong. And thus the intercessor pleads, “O Lord, rest among

the ten thousands of Israel! Oh, may we feel Thy nearness when the cloud descends and when the ark rests? If the ark stays here, wilt Thou then also remain with us? We really need Thy protection. We needed it when we were journeying, and we cannot do without Thy protection when resting.”

There are many dangers and hidden enemies while resting. You can learn all about them if you read further into Numbers. The people complained bitterly at Taberah, and thus the Lord sent a burning fire among them. A little later while resting at Kibroth-hattaavah the people started grumbling about the manna. The Lord sent quails, but many died with the flesh between their teeth (Numbers 11). Then Aaron and Miriam rose up against the lawful authority of Moses. Miriam was punished with leprosy (Num. 12). And at the resting place Kadesh-barnea, on the border of the Promised Land, a general murmuring broke out after the spies came back from Israel and reported their findings. Their punishment was that they had to roam the desert for forty years before entering the Promised Land (Numbers 14). Later still, they became angry again, and snakes bit them (Numbers 21). In Shittim they joined themselves unto Baal-peor and committed abominable prostitution (Numbers 25).

Can you see how necessary this wilderness prayer was? “Return, O LORD, unto the many thousands of Israel.” Only if the Lord remains with His people things will go well. They experienced this at the border with Moab. When they were resting there, King Balak summoned the false prophet Balaam (Numbers 22). He was hired to curse Israel, but what happened? Balaam went to the top of a mountain to pronounce his curses over the ten thousands of Israelites, but when the Lord laid His protecting hand over the people Balaam was not able to curse, he was only able to bless the Israelites.

This wilderness prayer was wonderfully heard. It became true for God’s resting people in the wilderness what we read in Psalm 91:1, “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” God laid His protecting shield over His people.

“Return, O LORD.” There is an urgent tone to this wilderness prayer. Here, Moses once again uses the Name LORD. That is the Covenant God, Who led the people of Israel out of the house of bondage in Egypt. His Name and His cause are at stake. That is why it is such an earnest prayer, “LORD, surely these are Thy people? Surely Thou shalt lead them according to Thy counsel? Surely Thou shalt bring them into Canaan? Surely Thy honor depends on their safe arrival in the Promised Land?” “Return, O LORD unto the many thousands of Israel.” “O LORD”, says Moses, “I cannot count this people, they are ten thousands of thousands. But that innumerable multitude is defenseless, if Thou dost not

protect them.”

The well-known English Commentator Matthew Henry says it so concisely: “These cyphers are numbers; He is the figure.” Our boys and girls will understand this. If you write out the number 10,000, then that is a 1 with four zeros. If you only write out the four zeros, then that is not a number. But if you place a 1 in front, then it becomes the large number of 10,000. So what Matthew Henry is really saying is that all those Israelites are really zeros without God. Without God they are nothing.

“Return, O LORD, unto the many thousands of Israel” - a very fitting prayer in the wilderness where the ark rested. Do you know who feels their need for this prayer? God's children! They experience that the periods of rest can at the same time be periods of danger. David had fought the wars of the Lord. He often must have prayed, “Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered” as he faced the enemies. But when his kingdom was at peace and he relaxed on the roof of his palace, he saw a woman, Bathsheba. We know the consequences. David fell into sin in a time when the kingdom was at rest. This rest caused David to forget to pray, “Return, Lord, and protect me, also during a time of rest.” The enemy prowls around especially in a time of rest. He is powerful, strong and cunning.

And so the prayer must be even more insistent:

Weak and wounded, I implore Thee;

Lord, to me Thy mercy show;

All my prayer is now before Thee,

All my trouble Thou dost know.

(Psalter 102:4)

“Return, O LORD.” This second wilderness prayer also points to Christ. Moses, the mediator of the old covenant, offers this prayer for the resting people in the wilderness. Likewise the great Intercessor Christ is engaged in continuous prayer for His people who sojourn in the wilderness of life. On the way to Gethsemane He prayed the high priestly prayer, “And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me” (John 17:11). The Father's Son prays for the protection of the Father's people in the world. The Mediator still prays this prayer at the right hand of His Father. That is why God's people are safely and surely kept. Children of the Lord in the wilderness, there is an Intercessor of Whom it can be said, “Seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25). Oh, that you would understand more of this!

Let us once more consider the people of Israel. As they arrived at the new resting place, busily setting up their tents and preparing their place in the wilderness, they might not have even noticed that someone was praying, saying, "Return, O LORD." It can be like this in the life of God's children too: they can be so occupied with the dust of the earth, that they forget their heavenly Intercessor Jesus. Yet, despite their forgetting Him, He never forgets His people! He always has an eye on them, because He carries them in His heart.

Congregation, you will understand that safety is only to be found under the cloud and with the ark. God's power is needed in order to turn enemies into friends. It is His almighty work that changes a hater of God into a lover of God. We may say it boldly, also to you, children and young people: there is still room among the many thousands of God's people. Fall at God's feet to learn His ways.

Children of the Lord, we heard two pilgrimage prayers: "Rise up, LORD," and: "Return, O LORD." This is how defenseless people travel through the wilderness, on the way to Canaan's rest! Soon a multitude of many thousands will stand before God's throne. It will be a great multitude, which no man could number, as the apostle John saw and wrote (Revelation 7).

There will be people from all over the world - also from this congregation. Those people did not get there in their own strength, no, they stood before the throne, through the might and power of the great Conqueror and perfect Intercessor Who is at the right hand of His Father, the Lord Jesus Christ. And so the Psalter applies for these defenseless pilgrims in the wilderness, notwithstanding all their struggles and impossibilities.

From strength to strength Thy children dear

Go forward, till they all appear

In Zion's courts, God's holy mountain.

Only because the great Intercessor lives!

Amen.

Concluding Psalter: Psalter 345: 1, 2

Verse 1

*To the hills I lift my eyes;
Whence shall help for me arise?
From the Lord shall come my aid,
Who the heav'n and earth has made.
He will guide thro' dangers all,
Will not suffer thee to fall;
He Who safe His people keeps
Slumbers not and never sleeps.*

Verse 2

*Thy protector is the Lord,
Shade for thee He will afford;
Neither sun nor moon shall smite;
God shall guard by day and night.
He will ever keep thy soul,
What would harm He will control;
In the home and by the way
He will keep thee day by day.*