

### NUMBERS

#### Lesson 22 - Chapters 16, 17, and 18 Conclusion

Last week we watched as the rebels of Israel were annihilated by two means: 1) fire coming from the Lord to destroy those 250 tribal leaders and Korah, the main instigator of the rebellion; and 2) from an earthquake that opened a huge split in the earth, and Datan, Aviram, and their followers plunging into it.

On the surface, the rebellion was about a group of men who wanted Moses and Aaron's jobs; underneath it all was the rebels' belief that neither a Mediator NOR a High Priest was needed to represent the people to God. And, folks, right there is the stumbling block that the entire human population faces right on up until today. Moses and Aaron were the point of the argument then; our combined Mediator and High Priest, Yeshua, is the point of that argument now.

How many "spiritual" people say that there is no need for a Mediator; that they can, and have, earned the right to be in God's presence. Usually they verbalize this by saying that "I'm a good person" or "I've lived a good life". Some years ago I went on a number of home visitations with a wonderful assistant pastor, and had a first hand look at this stumbling block in action. I would say that of the many homes we visited, and the many people we shared the Gospel with only a tiny fraction actually denied that there was a God. Yet, when they were asked if they thought they were going to go to heaven, the majority of those who said they believed in God, said that yes, they *did* think they were going to heaven. Reason: I've done more good things than bad things.

A few of these people listened to what we had to say, and accepted that they needed a Savior. A Mediator. And His name is Jesus. But, most insisted that they did NOT need a Savior, they could do it themselves. This is exactly what Korah, Datan, Aviram, and all their rebellious followers were declaring; we can do it ourselves, our way. We can declare ourselves to be holy.

Then, when God destroyed those rebels, many of the people of Israel.....friends and relatives of the now deceased.....blamed Moses and Aaron. They decided that Moses and Aaron had caused this death, when in fact they had actually pleaded to God for mercy for these rebels. And, Moses and Aaron were thought to have caused the fire and the earthquake by manipulating God to do it for them. So although the terrifying demonstration of divine wrath had indeed destroyed many rebels, the rebellious mindset of Israel remained intact. God was about to spring into action, yet again.

### READ NUMBERS 17:9 - end

A plague of some sort breaks out among the people of Israel. What it is we don't know; it was of divine source, however, and the people started dying immediately. Just as fire pans, censers, were the instruments used to foment this rebellion, a fire pan is the instrument used to atone for the people's sin against God. Aaron takes coals from the Brazen Altar and puts them on his fire pan, places incense on top it, and literally runs to the midst of the people to make atonement for their foolish rebellion. But, for 14,700 Israelites, it was too late. And, since biblical population counts invariably only include males, the total number counting females and children was likely closer to 50,000 souls that perished in what must have been but a matter of minutes. Now as High Priest, Aaron was forbidden to come into contact with the dead; so apparently he carefully avoided all those dead bodies as he worked his way to stand between the dead and the living. However, his close proximity to so much death would have meant he became defiled.

Recall that at the beginning of chapter 17, Eleazar, son of Aaron, had been the one chosen to sift through the human remains of those who had brought unauthorized fire to the Tabernacle and presented it to the Lord, in order that he retrieve the fire pans that had contracted holiness. While touching dead bodies defiled priests they were not entirely prohibited from coming into contact with the dead; the High Priest was forbidden altogether from touching a corpse. That is why Eleazar had to do it. But, the seriousness of the situation with the community of Israel being in rebellion and under the curse of a plague, required Aaron himself, as High Priest, to make atonement; and so, where danger to life is involved, the defilement he suffered in order to save countless thousands of Hebrew lives was necessary.

And, the end of verse 14 the Torah lays the blame for this whole thing directly on the shoulders of Korah. Please note that Satan, while active on Earth since the time of Adam and Eve, was not blamed, as we of the modern Church tend to do too much. It's not that Satan is blameless or harmless; it's that we are not somehow helpless against Satan's temptations. We CAN resist the Devil. We CAN choose to obey the Lord, and not succumb to Lucifer's direction. What Korah fell subject to was his own evil inclination; and that is what most of us do, most of the time, when we sin against Yehoveh.

Take note: if one man can lead thousands astray (as did Korah) how easy it is for one man to lead another man....or his wife, or his children..... away from the Lord. Korah was the Anti-Mediator, the Anti-Moses. And what a terrible fate awaits that man who deceives and rebels and on his account others are led into rebellion, and perhaps even into eternal destruction.

In verse 15, we're told that Aaron's offering of incense worked, God relented, and the plague ended as quickly as it began.

But, the issue that was at the heart of all this rebellion was obviously still not a settled matter. And, that issue was: who shall be God's set apart servants? The Levites, or some other group of Hebrews? The people needed further persuasion and so yet another test is devised: the tests of the sticks.

Now, the stick is a staff. The possessor of the staff was the possessor of tribal leadership. Therefore, there was only ONE official stick, or staff, per tribe, and the tribal prince had control over it. The Hebrew word used for stick, or rod, or staff is *matteh*. That same exact word, *matteh*, is also used to mean "tribe". So, there is great significance in the test that is to come in that it will use the tribal *matteh* to represent each tribe. Quite literally, each TRIBE is going to be set before the Lord for Him to indicate which one He shall choose to represent and serve Him. Of course, what we can all understand in hindsight is that what was about to occur was not a decision, but an affirmation of what had already been ordained.

So, each tribal prince presents his staff to Moses, with the tribe's name engraved upon it; then Aaron presents his staff representing the tribe of Levi. A total of 13 staffs...13 tribes...are represented. The Lord says He will use these staffs as a means of demonstrating once and for all just who His anointed servants are. The staffs are then placed inside the Holy of Holies, before the Ark of the Covenant that holds those stone tablets of the 10 Commandments. The reason is that it is above the Ark where the Lord's presence is said to dwell. So, the symbolism is that the 12 tribes plus Levi are presenting themselves to God for His will to be displayed.

The way the Lord will show His will is by causing the *matteh*, the tribal staff, of the tribe He chooses to be His servants to sprout. Of course, this is quite a miracle, for what is happening is that something that is long dead.....that dried and hardened staff.....is going to be made alive.

The staffs were left overnight, and the following morning Moses entered the Tent Sanctuary and found Aaron's staff, representing the tribe of Levi, in bloom. It had not only sprouted, but it produced blossoms and even fully formed almonds. Moses took all the staffs outside the Tent, asked each tribal leader to identify his own staff, and in the process verify that it was Aaron's staff that had budded. Game over.

Now, it is interesting to see various connections emerge from what went on with Aaron's budding staff, and earlier ordinances of God. The Hebrew word for bud or blossom is ***tsits***. It is the same root as used for the word we studied only a couple of chapters earlier, *tzitzit*, which indicated tassels, or fringe. Even more, ***tsits*** is precisely the same Hebrew word used for the gold plated headband that was attached to the front of the High Priest's mitre, his ritual headpiece. This gold plate, this ***tsits***, had the words "holy to Yehoveh" written on it. So the buds on the staff, the High Priest's golden head plate, and the tassels worn on the corners of all Israelites' garments are all inter-related. In varying degrees they all represent some aspect of a divinely declared holiness.

Notice as well, that the design of the Menorah, the holy candelabra of the Tabernacle, also incorporated almond blossoms.....*tsits*.....in its hammered gold construction.

There has been much speculation as to why almonds and why almond blossoms. The only real answers....if they are correct.....come from Hebrew tradition. And, it is that the almond is the first tree to blossom after the winter. It is the first to come alive after a season of death or dormancy. Further, an almond bears a white blossom, and white represents purity, holiness, and even God Himself.

The tribal leaders finally recognize, and at least to some degree accept, the position of the Levites, and so do the people. But, as people do, we also tend to go off the deep-end and make assumptions that are not true; and in verse 27 we see the Israelites do just that.

They now recognize the gravity of their questioning God, and their rebellion against Moses and Aaron and the Priesthood in general. Having witnessed the fire incinerate 250 of their top leaders, the earth open up and swallow entire blocks of tents, people, and all their possessions; and finally a plague erupt that killed thousands in a matter of minutes, the Israelites are too terrified to come anywhere near the Wilderness Tabernacle. They have seen with their own eyes that any unauthorized person who dares to venture near to the Tent gets destroyed. Yet, how are they going to carry out God's ordained sacrifices in order to atone for sin, or to simply be obedient to Him, if they can't come to the Tabernacle where the Brazen Altar resides?

Now, obviously, that is in no way what is being taught here. But, the first step of the lesson has been achieved: the people fear God and now believe it's a bad idea to challenge the authority of His earthly agents, Moses and Aaron.

Let's move on to the concluding chapter of this 3-chapter block, Numbers 18.

### **READ NUMBERS 18 all**

The Lord's answer to the fear of the Israelite general population to come near the Tabernacle is that it's all on the tribe of Levi to bear the guilt if an unauthorized person encroaches on the sacred Tabernacle. It's up to the tribe of Levi to guard the Wilderness Tabernacle and ensure that only people who are allowed to be there, and allowed to perform certain ritual functions, get in. Therefore, if someone gets by them, by accident or on purpose, it is the responsible Levite who will bear the guilt and the punishment.

Further, it is the regular Priests' responsibility to keep an eye on the regular Levites (the non-priest part of the tribe of Levi), to make sure that they do only what God has authorized them to do within the Sanctuary area, and no more. So, if a Levite fouls up and accidentally or carelessly touches a sacred ritual object (a definite no-no), then it is the Priests who are the supervisors who will bear the guilt, right along with the man who did wrong. After all, the Levites ought to know better so they are without excuse.

Priests must also monitor other priests. The Priesthood had a hierarchy within itself. It was not just the High Priest at the top of the ladder, and then all other priests as co-equals. Rather, there were higher and lower priests. In fact, in some of the ancient Hebrew documents we'll find reference to "the high priests".....high priests, plural. This does not mean THE High Priest.....there were not multiple High Priests at the same time..... it is referring to the more senior priests who were at the top end of the priest management structure.

In the end, the purpose of this system was for the benefit of the people. Because when the people trespassed on God's holiness, His justice demanded that the nation of Israel feel His wrath. This entire organizational structure led to the creation of an army of Levite guards to

guard over the Tabernacle; they had authority to kill on the spot if necessary. Yet, in God's economy, this was an act of mercy, designed to protect Israel as a whole from divine punishment. Later, in the New Testament, we'll hear of the Temple Guard and their involvement with the arrest of Jesus; this Temple Guard was composed of Levites, not Roman soldiers as it is sometimes erroneously portrayed.

In verse 6 we're reminded of the all-important principle that the not only is the tribe of Levi divided and separated away from Israel, but that those common Levites are divided and separated from the priests. And, the purpose of the Levites is to serve the priests; not as house-slaves or personal servants, but as manual labor for the needed Tabernacle maintenance, transportation, and guard duty.

While almost all of what follows about sacrifices and offerings has been given to us before.....kind of scattered throughout Leviticus.....it is now repeated in a more systematic and orderly way. And, it is done this way in response to the series of tragedies that have just occurred; among which are the refusal of the scouts who went into Canaan to lead the people into the Promised Land; the man gathering sticks on Sabbath being executed; Korah leading many of the Hebrew leaders in rebellion and 1000's of Israelites being destroyed; and then the unnamed plague that was brought upon those Israelites who complained that it was unjust for Moses and Aaron to bring about judgment (several thousand more died as a result of that).

All of these things were caused, essentially, because the people and the leaders didn't submit to Moses and Aaron's leadership, nor did they accept the special role of the Priesthood and the set-apart nature of the tribe of Levi. Therefore now that those who led that rebellion, along with those who followed, had been purged from Israel and a proper awe of God and respect of His chosen leadership and institutions was established, the Lord would reiterate what He expected of the Priesthood and what the people's response to the authority of the Priesthood should be.

So, we get a listing of those things offered as sacrifices and tithes from the people that are to be given to the Priests and Levites as pay. Now, a lot of what is spoken here is intended to be instituted not immediately, but only after they've finally conquered Canaan and set up residence there. But, the gist of it is that of the portion of the offerings to God that the priests are allowed to eat, the priests' families may also eat of it if they are ritually clean. The whole idea here is that while the regular Israelites are expected to grow crops and raise sheep, goats, etc., the tribe of Levi is expected to serve the Lord in the form of ministering to the people. Therefore, in return, the people are to financially support the tribe of Levi.

Remember, when Israel enters the Promised Land, Levi is only to get 48 villages to live in. They don't get sovereign territory of their own. So, they really have little to no means to support themselves.

We also find, interestingly enough, that priests are exempt from paying a tithe on what they receive as payment. However the regular Levites are not. Whatever the regular Levites receive as their share of tithed produce and meat and money, they must return a tenth to the priesthood as THEIR tithe. And, this is because, in the end, the Priests minister to the Levites just as they minister to the common Israelites. Further, while most of what is given to the

Priests in the form of food **MUST** be eaten on the Tabernacle grounds because it is holy and holy items cannot be removed from the holy precinct, once the Levites have given back to the Priests the tenth (their tithe) of what they have received for pay, they may now remove the remaining portion from the Temple area and eat it anywhere. That is, the act of tithing for the Levite de-holy-fied the remaining portion of their pay; what had been holy becomes just as though it was common food, and is given a different status than when it was originally food that had been offered to the Lord. Get it? The holy status of the food was **removed** by means of tithing. Understand this is a **BENEFICIAL** thing for the Levites. Because, if this process didn't happen, they would be in constant violation of removing and eating holy food outside of the holy Tabernacle area; further, they would not have been able to feed their families with this food.

Let's finish up today by discussing holiness for a few minutes. Because too often modern Believers have little idea what holiness actually is. The New Testament asserts the idea of holiness, but it doesn't actually explain holiness; fortunately the Torah does. Typically, within the church, holiness is seen primarily as some kind of pious behavior on our part. We act extra special nice. We give more. We bow our heads and clasp our hands in a certain way. We say, "I love you" and "God bless you" to people. We pay our taxes honestly, and our full tithe at church. And, while our behavior is important, holiness is much more about our personal status and a condition. It is a status bestowed by God and God alone. He sets up the rules and boundaries. He decides who and what is holy, on His terms.

Holiness and uncleanness, from the standpoint of Torah, are closely connected because although they are nearly opposite in status, they behave in a similar manner. For one thing, both holiness and uncleanness are contagious. More, both holiness and uncleanness can be dangerous. Therefore, the Brazen Altar, which carries a very high degree of holiness, infects whatever touches it with holiness. The meat offered on the Brazen Altar, (itself now holy) transmits its holiness to the vessel it is cooked in. Thus, metal pots have to be thoroughly cleaned after cooking sacrificed meat, and clay pots have to be destroyed because it's impossible to scour the holiness out of the porous clay material. The danger here is inadvertent transfer of holiness from the holy meat, to the pot, and then to whatever is next cooked in it.

After Aaron has finished his ritual duties and takes off his High Priest garments, he must wash himself, or the holiness of the High Priest garment that covered Aaron's skin is liable to be transmitted to the common garment Aaron would now put on.

Holiness is dangerous if acquired by someone who is not authorized to acquire it. Priests cannot perform their duties unless they are in a clean state, lest they touch a holy device and defile it with their uncleanness. In our just finished series of rebellion stories, we find unauthorized people (meaning people whom God had not anointed with holiness) offering unauthorized incense in a holy place to a holy God. They are destroyed because a) they disobeyed and encroached on holy ground, and b) they acquired holiness due to their nearness to God that they had no business acquiring. Yet, Priests, who are authorized holiness by Yehoveh, can offer incense in a holy place, to a holy God, safely.

The principle is that whatever is holy must never be used for a common purpose, in a common



place. Therefore, whatever is made holy must stay within the holy precinct of the Tabernacle. Conversely, whatever is common must **not** be offered to God nor brought into a holy place, or it will acquire holiness and then must be destroyed because it was not MEANT to be holy.

When those fire pans of Korah and his cohorts were presented to God in an unauthorized manner they STILL acquired holiness because of their nearness to the Lord. So in this case (rather than having the fire pans destroyed) God chose to have those fire pans melted down and formed into a protective lid for the Altar, as a sign, a warning to Israel; and He permanently keep that holy metal inside the holy precinct.

The coals used for the fire pans had also contracted holiness. The solution here, however, was that the coals had to be scattered, away from the Tabernacle, and not used at all for anything. They could not be used to start a new fire; they had to be done away with. Had those coals been used to start a new fire, the coals from that new fire would have contracted an unauthorized holiness.

Listen to Ezekiel talk about holiness:

NAS **Ezekiel 46:20** And he said to me, "This is the place where the priests shall boil the guilt offering and the sin offering, *and* where they shall bake the grain offering, in order that they may not bring *them* out into the outer court to transmit holiness to the people."

Not everyone was created for holiness or not everyone was created for the same DEGREE of holiness. And, those who were not created for holiness are not entitled to holiness. And those who were entitled ONLY to a certain level of holiness could not be allowed to accidentally receive more. Therefore holiness had to be protected and guarded.

Here's the thing: holiness is a very serious and complex matter. There are literally scores of references to the holiness of the Believer in the New Testament. Yet for some reason we take notice of the parts that sound nice, and allegorize or spiritualize the rest. Or, just as problematic, we read the words but don't bother to inquire WHAT THEY MEAN.

NAS **Romans 11:16** And if the first piece *of dough* be holy, the lump is also; and if the root be holy, the branches are too.

Paul makes an assertion that if a piece of a batch of dough is holy, then the entire batch is holy also. And, if the root of a tree is holy, then the branches attached to that tree...or if we read further in Romans, the branches GRAFTED into that tree are holy. Well, that's all well and good; but by what God- principle does the batch of dough, and the branches of the tree, become holy just because a bit of the dough, and the root of the tree, is holy? Paul doesn't even bother to explain this assertion. That's because a good portion of his audience were Jews. They understood well the Torah principle that holiness (and uncleanness) can be transmitted by means of contact. It's just an immutable spiritual law.

NAS **Acts 7:33** "But the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'

This NT passage recalls Moses standing before the Lord at the Burning Bush. Moses is told to remove his sandals because he is standing on holy ground. Why? Is it because it is a sign of respect to remove your shoes when standing before the Lord? Perhaps, but that's not the chief concern in this passage. No, rather the issue of removing the sandals is because the holiness of the holy ground Moses stood upon would have transferred to Moses' sandals; and then that holiness would have been transmitted to whatever those sandals contacted, wherever Moses walked.

NAS **Zechariah 14:21** And every cooking pot in Jerusalem and in Judah will be holy to the LORD of hosts; and all who sacrifice will come and take of them and boil in them. And there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD of hosts in that day.

What in the world does THIS mean? Well, it all has to do with what happens when you cook sacrificial meat in a cooking pot.....the pot becomes holy because of the transference of holiness from the holy meat. And, then the pot has to be cleaned or broken so that whatever else is cooked in it doesn't accidentally have holiness transmitted to it. But, here, this is speaking of time when holiness is universal among Israel, and every Israelite who uses that pot is entitled to holiness, so it's OK if that holiness is transmitted from that pot to other foods, and from the foods to the person who eats it because the danger is gone.

Are you beginning to get the picture? Holiness has a whole universe of aspects that we have known nothing about, because we hadn't studied the foundational part of God's Word. Therefore, we have some skewed ideas of what seemed to be difficult NT passages.

The concept of transmissible holiness (and uncleanness) is behind the reason that Paul tells men not to join themselves to prostitutes. Why? Because holiness can be transmitted in the joining together of a holy male to an unholy female, or vice versa. And, just as important, because the uncleanness of the prostitute can be transmitted to the holy male, that uncleanness can therefore defile God's holiness that is in him. Plus it violates the principle of sha'atnez, the prohibition of illegal mixtures. This even seems to hold true for married couples to some unexplained degree. Listen to this NT passage:

NAS **1 Corinthians 7:13** And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. 14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified (meaning separated for God, made holy) through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

Now here is an example of one those terribly difficult sayings of Paul.....sayings that even the Apostle Peter said were so hard to understand. Paul makes yet another assertion in this passage (and again with no explanation), which leads me to believe that there was some underlying and understood Torah principle that he was applying to this situation, but something that was also NOT understood OUTSIDE of Hebrew society. Paul was in Corinth, a gentile nation and gentiles have a very hard time ferreting out commonly known principles that are part of a Hebrew society but are unknown to gentile society.



The bottom line and end point of this passage is that if an unbeliever marries a believer, or if two unbelievers marry and later one becomes a believer, in either case God accepts the marriage as legal in His eyes; thus all children born from the union would be legitimate and not unclean **mamzer**, bastards. Thus there is no legal requirement from God that the marriage be ended.

The problem is that it would have been awfully easy for Paul to simply SAY that in this situation God sees the marriage of a believer and unbeliever as legal. But he didn't. Instead he invoked some understood principle (understood to him) as a means to explain it and that principle was that the believing spouse united with the unbeliever conferred sanctification upon the unbeliever; thus for that reason the marriage was legal and the righteous believer would not lose his righteousness before God because they were united in marriage to an unbeliever.

But WHAT biblical principle is at play under which the unbelieving husband is made holy by means of his marriage to the believing wife? How are the unclean offspring made holy? Well first Paul says that this is an **authorized** union between a man and a woman. This is marriage, a husband and wife who become as one flesh in the manner God prescribes. While it is strongly recommended against, it is NOT necessarily a sin for a Believer to marry an unbeliever. And so one possible explanation of why this statement about the sanctification of one spouse being conferred upon the other is possible in the eyes of Paul.....a Rabbi thoroughly trained in the Law.....is that he knows that perhaps the holiness of the believing spouse will be transmitted to the other through natural and God approved contact (in the context of his meaning, it likely means sexual intercourse). And, the resulting children, a biological product of this contact, may ALSO contract that holiness. And, Paul apparently sees this kind of transmission of holiness as a blessing and not a danger.

There is yet one other possibility as to why Paul believes that this holiness of a believing spouse somehow attaches to the unbelieving one, and then is further transmitted to their offspring. I'll need all your concentration towards me at this moment if you would, partly because this is complicated and partly because it is my opinion that THIS is the best explanation of this very strange and startling principle that Paul is speaking about.

We have to go back to our study of Tzitzit to understand it. Tzitzit are tassels that employ an exception to a rule; they are made of an otherwise illicit mixture of wool and linen. Yet they are used to REMIND people of God's holy commandments and God commands His people to wear Tzitzit. Some parts of Priestly garments contained sha'atnez (an illicit mixture), and this too was God ordained.

Interestingly we find that by wearing this mixture of fabrics in the form of a Tzitzit it confers a certain measure of holiness upon the wearer. In fact it was the new practice of wearing Tzitzit that led Korah to tell Moses that "all of Israel" was holy, not just Moses, Aaron, and the Priesthood. Essentially the product of the mixture of illicit materials in the case of a Tzitzit is that holiness is conferred upon the wearer.

Here we find a similar thing in marriage; the examples Paul gives are essentially an illicit mixture of an unbeliever binding to a believer. But.....this mixture **is acceptable** to God IF it

occurs within the God ordained institution of human binding called marriage. The marriage is still sha'atnez, a mixture that is not supposed to occur in God's eyes, yet the product of it is a legal union, both spouses attaining a measure of holiness, and the children being accepted as clean and legitimate.

I'm sure this brief discussion on holiness brings as many as answers and Lord knows, I certainly don't have all the answers to the inscrutable realities of what the full scope of holiness is.

But, at the least, I hope you can see that holiness is a far greater matter than outward pious behaviors or nice sayings. And that there are serious spiritual consequences when we misuse and abuse the holy status we have been granted as a result our trust in Yeshua HaMashiach; so we must guard and protect that holiness (that has been graciously granted to us through Yeshua) with all our mind, soul, and strength.

That'll do it for today.