

NUMBERS

Lesson 20 - Chapters 16, 17, and 18

Last week we concluded Numbers 15 by studying at some length God's remedy for the tendency of the people of Israel to ignore His laws and commands. This casual approach that many in Israel had taken towards the newly given Laws of Moses was epitomized in the story of the man gathering sticks for a fire on the Sabbath. And, the tragic result was that the man was executed for this offense against the Lord's command not to make a fire, or to work, on a Sabbath. It is clear from this incident, that the man had not actually started a fire; he had merely gathered the wood. Therefore, this story equally highlighted the principles that disobedience to God brings death, and that INTENT, even if the intended action is never fully realized, plays perhaps the primary role in God determining the severity of a sin and therefore the attached consequence.

And, the remedy God commanded was, in essence, a memory device. A visible reminder to every Israelite that God is serious about His laws, and that the consequences for disobedience could be severe. **Tzitzit**, what the English translations usually call fringe, was to be that memory device.

Every Israelite male was to wear **Tzitzit**, a tassel made of white linen threads, wrapped around a single blue woolen strand, and then worn on the corners of one's garment. Though the Scriptures do not specifically address the issue of women in this matter, it was apparently considered optional and allowable for women to attach **Tzitzit** to their garments.

The desired effect of the **Tzitzit** upon the people was not at all supernatural. The **Tzitzit** carried no power, and they had no place in ritual. Rather they played upon the most powerful of human senses, sight, to achieve the goal of reminding the Israelites of the Torah commands so that they would not risk offending God and then have to suffer divine, or civil, punishment.

But, the **Tzitzit** were also a sign; a sign of holiness. Even more specifically, they symbolized a measure of nobility and a measure of priestly service that every Israelite was both honored to have, and expected to maintain. The key to understanding **Tzitzit** is that they were an exception to the prohibition against common Israelites wearing clothing made of two different kinds of material. The law was that one could wear all wool OR they could wear all linen; but the two could not be mixed. However, since the tribe of Levi had been separated away from Israel, and assigned a special duty as God's designated servants and priests, the High Priest and the ordinary priests had a couple of items of clothing that WERE made from mixing wool and linen; this mixing of materials is, in Hebrew, **sha'atnez**.

The **Tzitzit** was the ONLY item that common Israelites could wear that was **sha'atnez**. And, it was the only item of its kind that could be worn OUTSIDE of the Tabernacle grounds. The reason for this is the law that any holy item can only be used when in the precinct of the Temple (or in Moses' day, the Wilderness Tabernacle). Sacred items of any kind had to remain within the courtyard of the Tabernacle or Temple, because that was the only holy ground. If any sacred item was taken, or worn, outside of the holy precinct, that item would become defiled. But, the reverse was also true and had to be equally guarded against: any common item that was offered to God, or used in service for God, became holy. And, this presented it's own set of problems and consequences.

Now, as we move into the next chapters of Numbers, we will find several of these principles found in Numbers 15 brought into play.

Numbers chapters 16,17, and 18 are one unit. They are really but one long story that Christian Scholars long ago divided up into more bite-sized chunks that we call chapters. This story gets much too broken up in my view, however, if we but read the first chapter of the unit, and later the next, and later the 3rd. So we're going to take the unusual approach today of reading all 3 chapters in succession without stopping for comment or study along the way. Then after we've read them all we'll go back and begin to dissect all that occurs in these verses.

Before we begin let me give you a little introduction as to what these chapters are about, so as to help you know what to look for. Essentially this is all about the indispensable nature and purpose of the priesthood and the uncompromising place that the priesthood in intended to hold in Israel's national life. And that special place of superior holiness that the tribe of Levi possesses, with the sub-group within Levi called the Priesthood at the pinnacle of the holiness hierarchy; this is going to be demonstrated by means of law and the telling of a story of rebellion against the God-ordained holiness hierarchy.

When Yehoveh first gave the Law to Moses at Mt. Sinai they were but idealistic theory to the people of Israel. Not only were those laws mostly a long list of do's and don'ts, rituals and observances, crimes and punishments, set down for Israel to obey; but they neither understood how these might apply to everyday life, nor (in many cases) why they had to do (or not do) these things in the first place. Further a major portion of them could not even be observed without Israel being in the Promised Land (in fact some of the laws were even prefaced with the words "AFTER you enter the land"). What possible useful purpose could some of these strange regulations (at least they were strange to typical Middle Eastern society) serve? So many of these commands and ordinances seemed arbitrary and capricious and much too hard.

It's kind of like when we were teenagers preparing for our first drivers license. We had to read an annoying little book about the traffic laws and retain it long enough to pass the test so we could get our license and be able to participate in that American rite of passage into adulthood: driving a car. But the purpose of these traffic laws was often a mystery to us. In fact many of them seemed to be rather ridiculous so we had no plan on obeying them when we finally got our licenses and actually started driving without mom or dad sitting next to us. For most of us it took a series of tickets, fender benders, and insurance rate hikes before we got the message

that a) the laws are real and not just theory, and b) the consequences for violating these laws.....whether we thought them wise or stupid.... could range from irritating to severe.

In other words principles have to be put into practice to move from theory to reality. If the law had been given to Israel and then they just sat there ensconced at the foot of Mt. Sinai; if they just gathered the manna God provided each day, looked up each morning at the majestic mountain top upon which the Law was given, and raised their flocks and herds in peace and quiet, most of the Law would just have remained theory to them. They needed to move on, experience life, deal with everyday circumstances, face difficulties and challenges, endure hardships, stumble and fall, and make difficult and less-than-clear-cut choices in order for the wisdom and purpose of these divine principles to become real; and for the Israelites to learn how to apply them so that God's commands became a settled matter to their minds and hearts.

So it is for our Christian walk with the Lord. It's a journey, not a sit. If we accept Yeshua and then never move forward, accept risks, take paths that look a bit fearful; if we just stay in a place of nothing but warmth, and provision, and comfort, then most of what Messiah wants us know will be remain as but theory. A nice thought; a warm and fuzzy feeling.

It's only when we step out and move forward, putting into practice those Godly principles that they become real to us and we begin to see their purpose and perfection. It's our experiences that solidify our trust and affirm our faith.

The story we're about to read begins with another in a series of rebellions by the people of Israel against God. Oh, they don't see it as rebellion against Yehoveh, they see it as rising up against mere men: Moses and Aaron. And what a mistake that perception is, as they will soon find out.

As we read this story always keep in mind that Moses is God's Mediator between mankind and Himself, and Aaron is God's High Priest another (but slightly lower ranking) mediator. Think of it this way: Moses is the OT equivalent of Yeshua the Messiah. Now, of course, that analogy can only be carried so far but their primary common trait is that both Moses and Yeshua were God's appointed Mediators. They held a special status that no other men have held, or ever will hold. And just as so many tolerant people, in our day, speak of respect for Jesus but not belief in his special role as Mediator and Savior, so the Israelites of Moses' day generally had respect for Moses as a human leader, but many still did not grasp his supreme and unapproachable status as a divinely ordained Mediator. Failure to understand the superior position that Moses held would cost many an Israelite their life.

Let's read Numbers chapters 16,17, and 18.

READ NUMBERS Chapters 16,17,18 all (in succession)

As we begin chapter 16 we have a people who have been demoralized by the reports of the 10 scouts, rebelling out of fear and the consequently Yehoveh punishes the people by turning them back into the Wilderness; and many remain disillusioned and unhappy to say the least. Even more there has been a God ordered division of duties and also a status change and

setting up of rank and order within Israel that elevated some folks and lowered others. The situation is tense and beginning to spin out of control; and those men who are supposed to be leaders and helpers to Moses now become anti-leaders and they foment rebellion. As we have all been witness of, if not party to, people on the edge of panic or despair we know that they are easily swayed by men anxious to use these fears to bring about personal agendas and hidden desires for power. And into this growing chaos steps Korah, Datan, and Aviram; their goal is to assume control of the power center of Israel, the Priesthood. This is a rather interesting mixture of allies; Korah is a Levite from the line of Kohath. On the other hand Datan and Aviram are from the tribe of Reuben. So how does this unlikely brain trust get together? They are camped together on the south side of the Israelite encampment. They lived right next to one another and their lives were thus mingled. Certainly the Levites lived on the more inner, and therefore holier, ring of tribes and clans that surrounds and protects the Tabernacle. But the close proximity obviously brought these two groups into constant contact.

Yet these weren't the only ones involved in the coup attempt; we are told in verse 2 that 250 other men of Israel.....leaders from various other tribes.....sided with Korah, Datan, and Aviram. It is clear from the account, though, that it is the Levite Korah who is the chief instigator.

In a short while we'll see that Datan and Aviram, Reubenites, had a little different agenda than Korah. But at the moment they are united in their accusations against Moses and Aaron, who are generally seen as a team (they are brothers, after all). And their accusation is that Moses and Aaron have taken too much power for themselves and set down too many rules that put them and their families over the others. They also assert that they were self-appointed. But it goes even further and what they next claim is a direct result of what we read about at the end of chapter 15, about the **Tzitzit**.

By now all or most of Israel was wearing **Tzitzit**. And for some it went to their heads. They apparently grasped (though in a rather twisted way) that the wearing of **Tzitzit** brought them a measure of nobility and priestly status; and now they wanted to cash in on it. So they say, "hey Moses, all the community is holy, not just you and Aaron." They deduced (for self serving reasons of course) that with the wearing of the **Tzitzit** that they were now of equal status with the Priesthood, and with Moses. Wrong.

Now we begin to see why the Levite, Korah, was the one leading the charge. As a Levite from the clan of Kohath, Korah was not eligible to be a priest. Priests carried the most authority and a higher status and so Korah was jealous. None of his clan was eligible to be priests. Let me remind you that just as the entire tribe of Levi was divided and separated from Israel, so was the tribe Levi divided and separated into two groups: the Priests (who came ONLY from the line of Aaron), and the remaining Levites who worked for the priests. Those remaining Levites of which Korah was one were guards, and musicians, and transporters of the Tabernacle when it moved, and maintenance workers of the Tabernacle grounds. But NEVER could they perform rituals or wear the priestly garb or enter the Sanctuary Tent, all of these activities displaying a higher status than allowed for regular Levites. So from Numbers forward when we get the repeated phrase "Levites and Priests" it's not two ways of saying the same thing, it is speaking of two different groups each with different status levels, and therefore different

gradients of holiness.

So Moses instantly devises a test as a means to demonstrate the superior holy status of the Priesthood versus the inferior holy status of the remaining Levites, and still lower holy status of common Israelites.....even WITH the newly authorized wearing of Tzitzit. And, the test is that each are to bring fire pans, censers, filled with burning coals and incense, and they are to be presented to the Lord at the door to the Sanctuary Tent. Moses includes a warning in this by telling Korah and his henchmen that it is not Moses and Aaron who have overreached their authority, it is those who have stepped forward to challenge the men Yehoveh has installed as the leaders of Israel.

The way the test works is that God will permit access (presumably inside the Holy Place, that front room of the Tent) to those whose incense He accepts. In other words, Korah wants he and his men to be the Priests, and the chief indication of a priest is that he gains access to God by means of being able to go inside the Holy Tent.

Now it has already been made clear in the Law that ONLY Priests may present incense to the Lord, and anyone else who attempts it is doing so at their own risk. In verse 9 Moses tries to remind Korah and those Levites who are following him that God has already given them a great honor in being chosen and separated from Israel as His own servants, and that their service to the Priests is the same as service to Him. And those Levites, even those assigned to the lowliest tasks, are a step above in holiness and privilege from any of the members of the other Israelite tribes.

Then in verse 12 the story takes a turn. Moses sends for Korah's partners in crime: Datan and Aviram, members of the tribe of Reuben and, naturally they are defiant. Here we see that they have a bone to pick that is more with Moses than Aaron. Korah wanted the priesthood, and was after Aaron's job as High Priest. Datan and Aviram were after Moses' job. Recall that Datan's and Aviram's tribal founder, Reuben, was the rightful firstborn of Jacob and by custom should have been handed the leadership of Israel upon Jacob's death.

And then in the most blasphemous response (that illustrates just how far out of touch they were with God and His plans for Israel) they say to Moses that it is not Canaan that is the land flowing with milk and honey, but Egypt. And that the only reason Moses brought them out of Egypt was so he could lord over them (something he couldn't have done there). This is then finished off with an idiom of the day where it says, "you would gouge the eyes out" of the people. This idiom corresponds to our modern "pull the wool over the eyes". That is, they are accusing Moses of deceiving the people about the prospect of a better life and homeland in Canaan.

In Christianity it is often said that the one "unforgivable sin" is to blaspheme the Holy Spirit and there has been heated debate for centuries over just what "blaspheming the Holy Spirit" amounts to. I'm not sure I can tell you; however, I do believe we've just been given a pattern, if not an outright example, of what that unforgivable sin looks like in action.

The Lord has ALREADY redeemed Israel. The deed is done and Israel no longer is in the hand

of the enemy, Egypt, but is now safely in God's hands and being led by His appointed Mediator Moses. These rebellious leaders in Israel say that they wish to give back their redemption, and turn back into the hands of the enemy. I think you see where I'm going with this. As Believers when we accept our redemption, several NT passages make it quite clear that we can, with our own will, give that redemption back. Not accidentally. Not by committing some unknown sin. But by deciding in our minds that we desire what the enemy can, and has in the past, provided us with (MORE than what our Savior and God has provided us with). While this may not be the sum total of all that blaspheming the Holy Spirit is, it is at least a good example.

Look; Satan is always tempting us and then accusing us when we fall to his temptations. But his goal isn't to just be a thorn in our sides; the tempting is not merely to have us failing and then reconciling with God, over and over again, driving us crazy. His real goal is to get us back. His end game is to get us to make the decision to give up our allegiance to Yehoveh and go back to subservience to the enemy who had us until we made that decision to accept our redemption. And that is because in the same way that by our own will we first came to Yeshua, by that same will we must surrender our redemption.

That ought to make us shudder when we think about what it is we do when we, even in the secret places of our hearts (which God knows), at times long to go back to the ways of the World and its pleasures and comforts we were used to. Or almost as bad, to mix the ways of the World that we have so enjoyed with the ways of the Kingdom of God.

Korah rejected his redemption. Korah rejected the Priesthood of God, which was the only means to atonement. Therefore Korah also rejected God's method of atonement for his sins. Datan and Aviram also rejected their redemption. Several dozen others rejected it right along with them. We're about to find out just what rejection of our redemption buys us.

But, before we close for this week, allow me to point out one thing: notice that Datan and Aviram were of the tribe of Reuben. Reuben was the natural firstborn of Israel, and by all rights should have been the natural leader and authority over Israel. But, a couple of hundred years earlier, Jacob rejected Reuben and bypassed him and gave the firstborn rights to Judah and Joseph, for Reuben had slept with Jacob's concubine. These descendants of Reuben, after all this time, still had not accepted God's will, given through Jacob, that THEY would not lead Israel. Over 2 centuries of bitterness was boiling over. The problem for Korah, Datan, and Aviram is that God took this personally and nothing good ever happens when that's the case.