

“Between the Dead and the Living”

In the Wilderness | The Gospel in the Book of Numbers

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Numbers 16:41-17:13

But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, "You are the ones who have caused the death of the LORD'S people." 42 It came about, however, when the congregation had assembled against Moses and Aaron, that they turned toward the tent of meeting, and behold, the cloud covered it and the glory of the LORD appeared. 43 Then Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, 44 and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 45 "Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them instantly." Then they fell on their faces. 46 Moses said to Aaron, "Take your censer and put in it fire from the altar, and lay incense on it; then bring it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone forth from the LORD, the plague has begun!" 47 Then Aaron took it as Moses had spoken, and ran into the midst of the assembly, for behold, the plague had begun among the people. So he put on the incense and made atonement for the people. 48 He took his stand between the dead and the living, so that the plague was checked. 49 But those who died by the plague were 14,700, besides those who died on account of Korah. 50 Then Aaron returned to Moses at the doorway of the tent of meeting, for the plague had been checked.

17 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 "Speak to the sons of Israel, and get from them a rod for each father's household: twelve rods, from all their leaders according to their fathers' households. You shall write each name on his rod, 3 and write Aaron's name on the rod of Levi; for there is one rod for the head of each of their fathers' households. 4 "You shall then deposit them in the tent of

meeting in front of the testimony, where I meet with you. 5 "It will come about that the rod of the man whom I choose will sprout. Thus I will lessen from upon Myself the grumblings of the sons of Israel, who are grumbling against you." 6 Moses therefore spoke to the sons of Israel, and all their leaders gave him a rod apiece, for each leader according to their fathers' households, twelve rods, with the rod of Aaron among their rods. 7 So Moses deposited the rods before the LORD in the tent of the testimony. 8 Now on the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony; and behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds. 9 Moses then brought out all the rods from the presence of the LORD to all the sons of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod. 10 But the LORD said to Moses, "Put back the rod of Aaron before the testimony to be kept as a sign against the rebels, that you may put an end to their grumblings against Me, so that they will not die." 11 Thus Moses did; just as the LORD had commanded him, so he did. 12 Then the sons of Israel spoke to Moses, saying, "Behold, we perish, we are dying, we are all dying! 13 "Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the LORD, must die. Are we to perish completely?"

In the fall of each year we look at the unfolding drama of the Hebrew Bible, the older testament, the Israelite Church and THIS year we've looked at the third and fourth books, i.e. Leviticus and Numbers.

In Exodus (Genesis-Exodus-Leviticus-Numbers) in Exodus, they were brought out of slavery, then to Mt. Sinai where they were told how to build the Tabernacle (the portable sanctuary/worship space where they meet with God). In Leviticus they are told how to USE this sacred space – the whole system of worship with priests and sacrifices and calendar.

Now in the Book of Numbers, the Israelites are journeying to the Land of Promise... but very early in the journey, they begin to complain and rebel. The way it's recorded makes clear that the real problem in all their grumbling and in

all the SEVEN rebellions at the center of the story, the REAL PROBLEM is always their failure and refusal to depend on God. They (and WE) are doers not receivers...we want control and we resist grace.

Grace is received by faith...by dependency... by rest...by trusting God to DO WHAT HE PROMISED.

All seven rebellions (though it's MOST clearly seen in the central rebellion) all their revolts are rooted in self-reliance and mistrust toward God.

Today, we see this mistrust directed at the way God has arranged our relationship with Him. There is a non-negotiable, fixed, foundational, basic element in knowing God...and IF this element is MISSING...then we're really NOT in relationship with the God of the Bible... it's a component you MAY not highlight or underscore in YOUR spiritual life...and if you don't, I'm hoping you'll reconsider it.

It's the reason that Christians pray quite often ending their prayer with the words "in the Name of Jesus Christ"... it's the whole truth that the Gospel way of relating to God is a MEDIATED relationship.

Let's look at what that means today:

- 1) The Fifth Revolt
- 2) The Go-Between Arrangement
- 3) Many Implications

We only read a little of this very long section... CH 16 is 50 verses long and it's about a group and their two protests against Moses the leader and Aaron the priest.

A man named Korah and his group were Levites... They were the appointed assistants to the priests. The priests were the sons and direct descendants of

Aaron...and they needed a lot of help with all the sacrifices and ceremonial preparations...so the wider tribe of Levi was appointed by God to help the priests.

And Korah was one of these helpers (he brought 250 men to make the point!)... They felt slighted and felt that they were Levites and should be able to enter into the holiest place and do all that Aaron and his sons could do. He reminded Moses and Aaron, (QUOTE) “All the congregation of Israelites are HOLY...not just Aaron... every one of them, and the LORD is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the people of the LORD? (3)”

And he was right about that “everyone is holy” part ... but, on the other hand, NOT everyone was a priest...and that was God’s arrangement!

So Moses gives a two-part answer: 1) let’s put it to the test – burn incense from the altar as only the priests are allowed to do and we’ll see if God has changed His mind and 2) Is it not enough for you to be adopted by God...to be a Levite...to have this calling?

Then the second complaint comes...a man named Dathan (one of the 250) and his subcommittee and they ask, “As far as we’re concerned, you, Moses took us OUT of the Land of Milk and Honey i.e. EGYPT and have NOT TAKEN US TO A BETTER PLACE...and you’re a self-serving tyrant and a deceiver (v. 14b) and we’re done with you!”

Moses says, “Self-serving?! Are you kidding me? I haven’t even taken a single donkey as payment for anything I’ve done! And I never harmed anyone!”

So... they go through with their experiment... “let’s show Moses, show Aaron... SHOW GOD (!) that we want a more democratic way ... a pure democracy where everyone is treated exactly the same and (God gets a vote too...we’re not going to cut Him out of the process or anything!)”

And God says, “Move away from them, Moses... I will put an end to the entire congregation.” But Moses pleads with God... “please don’t punish everyone for

the sins of a few rebels...” So, God has the rebels stand alone...and a sinkhole opens up and they’re all swallowed...and gone...

Then the larger nation is in a panic...and they’re worried that more sinkholes will swallow them ALL... and Moses says, “No – but remember – that this is God’s arrangement...that (v. 40) that no layman who is not of the descendants of Aaron should come near to burn incense or that person will be like Korah and his company...”

But then the larger congregation takes the night to think about it and they end up blaming Moses AND Aaron, “You’re the ones that made this happen... YOU CAUSED THE DEATH OF THESE PEOPLE...” And the LORD says once again, “Stand back, Moses, I will put an end to this entire nation...”

But Moses and Aaron fall down and plead with God and Moses sends Aaron, “Quickly...Aaron...DO WHAT A PRIEST DOES...what only YOU can do...a plague of justice is sweeping over the people...take your censer (the burning incense) and fire from the altar in the Tabernacle...make atonement for the people...

No time to waste! Cover them (“atone”) with prayer, and intercede for them...”

VERSE 48, “So he took his stand between the dead and the living so that the plague was checked...” And then the next chapter is the famous story of Aaron’s staff...the walking stick that was a form of identification among nomadic peoples and a symbol of justice and authority... Aaron takes this rod/stick and a representative from each tribe takes his own staff and writes his name on it.

Each leaves his staff in front of the Tabernacle and they reclaim them the next day...and Aaron’s stick has ...come alive. It was dead and behold it lives. It blossoms and produces fruit (the first fruit of spring, Almonds, a sign of new life)... and Aaron and his priesthood is vindicated.

And that rod of Aaron’s is then memorialized...it was put into the Box, the Ark of the Covenant so that Israel could NEVER forget: GOD ESTABLISHED THIS

SYSTEM OF MEDIATION, an arbiter to stand between the dead and the living...an intermediary between the Holy God and sinful people...an advocate.

That rod...that symbol of justice...that was bursting with life...that OUT OF JUSTICE and punishment there would come life...an emblem/symbol of the absolute NEED FOR A MEDIATOR...that dead shepherd's staff that flowered would forever be remembered at the center of Israel's life.

The priesthood, the mediation system, the go-between arrangement was never Aaron's idea or some novelty invented by Moses... NO! It was from the mind of God... IT RECOGNIZES AN ETERNAL TRUTH, "the deeper magic" (Narnia), the reality that THIS IS NOT A DEMOCRACY: someone must approach God for us.

There is a God who is holy and all people are NOT... and we need a go-between. We need someone to stand in the gap, to plead our cause, to advocate and intercede for us... THAT'S HOW GOD ARRANGED IT.

We can no more change this arrangement than we can stop the revolutions of the planets or the tides or the law of gravity... It is enshrined forever in the Ark of the Covenant...God has established it and when it was called into question, God vindicated this arrangement and hallowed it forever.

At God's heart (in the symbol of His presence) is the sign of His holiness, the Law, the Ten Commandments, AND the reminder of His care and provision for His people, the Bread that came down from heaven, a jar of manna AND lastly, the emblem of His mercy (Aaron's staff), the priesthood vindicated: "I will give YOU an Advocate to plead your case... He will turn the justice you deserve into mercy; He will turn death into life; He will make the deserts bloom and bring fruit out of barrenness; He will turn an executioners Cross into a source of life."

In the heart of God is mercy for sinners...there's a Great High Priest for those who deserve the plague of justice ...people who are crushed by a Law they can not keep... At the center of the Temple and at the center of history there's a symbol of an Advocate for failed people like YOU and me.

Jesus Christ IS the Advocate we need. He is the Great High Priest, a better Priesthood than Aaron's (Heb 7) who faced the Rod of Justice and whose Cross is forever blooming and producing fruit.

The New Testament *Book of Hebrews* answers the *Book of Numbers*, "*For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*" (Heb 4.15-16)

And this has a ton of implications.

It means the Church's claim that there IS a way to God, not just an opinion or a guess or a whole array of equally valid shots-in-the-dark... when Christianity says that Jesus Christ IS the way to God, it's not that we're saying, "Hey! We are better than the others... our way is superior...our choice is smarter..." NO, we're acknowledging that the holy, unapproachable, unfathomable God has made Himself known by a Mediator, a Go-Between, who fulfilled the arrangement... God has made His heart known.

We're not saying we're better; in fact we're saying we are WAY worse than you think...we Christians should be the first to admit, "We are not better; we're worse; we're needy and our only hope is in God coming to US...and He did...in Jesus, the Great High Priest who stood between the dead and the living and advocated for us...took justice for us and brought beauty out of our ashes...flowers out of the staff...fruit and life out of what we deserved."

It makes the church "the priestly nation" (1 Pet 2.9-10) ... we stand in the gap for a world in need. It makes us aware of our neighbors and praying for them because we have a Great High Priest who ever prays for us...He has called us out of darkness in order to brag on Him ...proclaim His excellencies among the nations.

It's why we pray, "in Jesus' name" or "in the name of Jesus Christ".

I don't want to critique anyone's prayers (don't want to have that atmosphere here!) but sometimes I hear prayers that start, "Our Father..." and they end "...in Your name we pray" and this misses a huge and wonderful truth: WE ARE NOT PRAYING IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER – we pray in the Name of the Mediator and His name is Jesus Christ... "Our Father...in the Name of Jesus Christ". It's a joyous acknowledgement of the whole arrangement of grace at the heart of God.

It celebrates the fact, "Father, I don't deserve what I am praying for but our Advocate does...I come because of Him...as if I were as lovely as HE! He was swallowed by the earth that my prayers would ascend to heaven."

Lastly, woven through these episodes is a picture of leading and following we desperately need to see. Moses and Aaron are laying down their lives for these stubborn, ungrateful people and even pleading for them when they're about to face God's justice.

They are types of Christ who also prayed for those who were crucifying Him... He, Jesus Christ, enables those who trust Him to lead OR to follow with grace and forgiveness...with courage...and without envy because they are secure in who they are: a people represented.

I can relax in the way that God arranged things because I know in the end, it's NOT about climbing over people...or making sure I get my due recognition or making sure "the man doesn't stick it to me"... I can STOP being so worried and self-defensive and I can rest knowing I have an advocate who loved me and gave Himself for me (Gal. 2.20) and that really changes the way I lead (with other's welfare in mind) AND the way I follow... my cause is in the hands of Another...and He has already won my case.