

# TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD WHO DIVIDES PEOPLE BY THE GOSPEL

## Numbers 16:1-17:13

### INTRODUCTION

The last scene of the last episode of the enormously popular TV show, “Lost”, which was shown last Sunday, portrayed most of the characters who were lost after their plane crashed on that strange lost island going together into heaven. While there are many unanswered questions from the show and much debate about what it all means there was no mistaking the view of the writers of this show that human beings are, for the most part, good and will end up in heaven enjoying the company of those they love. The writers were merely reflecting the majority opinion of most Americans. According to a 2005 ABC News poll “Among all Americans, 75 percent think they'll go to heaven.... 5 percent ... believe in heaven but don't think they'll get there; 9 percent ... believe but aren't sure they'll get in; and 10 percent ... don't believe in heaven.” So most of the people we live around have no concerns about the future but are confident that God will warmly welcome them into his eternal home.

In this opinion Americans are not any different from the older generation of Israelites who rebelled against Moses and Aaron when they refused to do what God said and go into the land of Canaan. In spite of Moses’ declaring God’s judgment against them, that they would wander in the desert for 40 years until everyone 20 and up is dead, and in spite of the immediate death of the 10 rebellious spies this older generation persists in their belief that God is happy with them. They do not believe what Moses has told them: God is their enemy, that he is opposed to them and determined to destroy them for their unbelief and rebellion against him. We have in chapters 16 and 17 a clear description of how most human beings think about God and their relationship to him and how most humans react to those who tell them all is not well between them and God. We also discover here how God responds to natural human thinking and acting.

Jonathan Edwards, the great American pastor and theologian preached a sermon to his congregation in August of 1736 entitled, “Men, naturally God’s enemies.” In the introduction to his sermon he said, “Men in general will own that they are sinners. There are few, if any, whose consciences are so blinded as not to be *aware* [that] they have been guilty of sin. And most sinners will own that they have bad hearts. They will own that they do not love God so much as they should do; that they are not so thankful as they ought to be for mercies; and that in many things they fail. And yet few of them are *aware* that they are God’s enemies. They do not see how they can be truly so called; for they are not *conscious* that they wish God any hurt, or endeavor to do him any.”

As readers of the book of Numbers we can clearly see that the people of Israel are behaving as if they are God’s enemies. And we have clearly seen various ways in which God has shown that he is their enemy. Yet, in the story we are considering today we discover that while acting as God’s enemies they do not view themselves as God’s enemies. They, like most Americans believe that God is happy with them and they are pleased with God even though they reject God’s prophet and mediator. They would be in complete agreement with Oprah Winfrey, when she said in a highly publicized episode of her TV show that Jesus cannot be the only way to God when there are so many kind and loving people who have their own way to God apart from Jesus. We have revealed to us in this story the way in which humans in their natural condition, that is, as they come forth from the womb relate to God and to his claim that it is only through Jesus that salvation can be obtained. We will also observe how God responds to this human optimism about our ability to approach God and be accepted by him on our own terms. I’m going to do something different this morning. I’m going to tell you the story, so you can close your bibles and just listen. When you get home, read the story and see if I missed anything.

**THESIS: Human beings in their natural condition are God’s enemies and thus can only be pardoned for their treason by his chosen mediator.**

## NARRATIVE BLOCK ONE (16:1-40)

My name is Evyasaph. You've probably not heard of me, though perhaps you've heard of my father. I'm the son of Korah, the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, the son of Israel. I and my father before me are Levites of the clan of Kohath. We are the clan of Levites entrusted with carrying the sacred furniture of the tabernacle through the desert and, eventually, into the Land of Promise. When we are encamped it is our duty to guard the southern edge of the tabernacle from any unclean person coming near to it. My father Korah has been dead over 20 years now but the events of those six days during which he died are seared into my mind and daily remind me of my need to do my work faithfully and to not permit that envy and unbelief that destroyed my father and mother and many other members of my family and friends to destroy me and my family. I was 19 at the time and can only credit God's grace for my not being swept away with my father and friends.

When we first came out of Egypt my father was full of joy and anticipation for what God was going to do for us. He was delighted with the way in which his cousins, Moses and Aaron were giving leadership to our people. Like the rest of Israel we held Moses in awe for the mighty miracles he performed in Egypt and the way in which he enabled us to cross the Red Sea as if on dry land and then, with a motion from his staff, destroyed the Egyptian army in those waters when they attempted to chase us down. My father restrained our family from grumbling against Moses when we ran out of food and water on the way to Mt. Sinai. He, like the rest of us, was terrified by God's appearing in thunder and lightning and fire and darkness on the top of Mt. Sinai. He was glad then for Moses to go up the mountain and to get the word of God and bring it back down to us. When Aaron made the golden calf and led the people in worship, my father, Korah, did not participate but kept us back from joining in. When Moses came down the mountain and confronted Aaron and the people and cried out, "Who is on the Lord's side?" my dad was among the first of the Levites to put on his sword and begin executing the leaders of the rebellion by Moses' order.

I'm not sure when Dad's attitude began to change. Maybe it was on that fateful day, one year after we arrived at Mt. Sinai, when Aaron and his sons were chosen and consecrated as priests out of all the other members of our tribe, the tribe of Levi. I remember dad mumbling that he couldn't believe that God would actually appoint the guy who had led the worship of the golden calf to be his main representative. He was more than a little skeptical when Moses appointed his own brother as the chief priest supposedly by God's command. Then, when the two oldest boys of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu were killed by the Lord for offering the wrong kind of incense, I think my father's sense of justice was deeply offended. On that occasion I heard him say, "how could it be that God has picked such a wicked family to be his chief representatives?"

His resentment and bitterness grew during those first couple of months after the tabernacle was set up and the various assignments for the other Levites were passed out. He chafed under the supposed word of God that came from Moses that he and his other clan members could not look at or touch any of the sacred objects from the tabernacle. No, they were only permitted to carry the covered objects on their backs and shoulders while the wicked Aaron and his sons were able to touch them and see them and use them. They couldn't enter the tabernacle but Aaron and his sons went into it every day. As Moses and Aaron arranged the camp, assigning each tribe to its spot and gave orders every day as to what was permitted and what was not permitted my father began hanging out with a group of other disaffected leaders in the camp. In particular, he spent a lot of time with three of the leaders from the tribe of Reuben which is the tribe we were camped right next to on the south side of the tabernacle.

Dathan, Abiram and On were regular guests in our tent and often would talk with my father long into the night. On one occasion, as I drifted off to sleep I heard them talking about how Moses and Aaron's exclusive claim to leadership, Moses as God's prophet and Aaron as God's priest, was a contradiction to the word of God which Moses himself taught. My father asserted that God had said that all of the people of Israel were holy to the Lord. The claim that only Aaron could draw near to God must be made up by his cousins to protect their own power because God had said that all of God's people were holy many times. There was nothing special about his cousins that would make them more likely to be accepted by God than any other Israelite. God loved all his

people equally they reasoned and so it was wrong for Moses and Aaron to limit access to the tabernacle to just Aaron and his sons.

When the 12 spies came back from exploring the land of Canaan and the ten spies gave their very negative report of the land, my father and his Reubenite conspirators eagerly joined in the chorus of leaders who demanded that Aaron and Moses be rejected and a new leader picked and the whole people of Israel return to Egypt. They saw the report of the 10 spies as the first honest thing they had heard which would finally expose Moses and Aaron as the tyrants they were. They were among that crowd of men who were furious with Caleb and Joshua as they sought to persuade the people to trust God and go into the land. He couldn't tolerate their self-righteous, pious talk as if they were the only ones who knew God. To my own shame I must admit that I was also present and was among those picking up stones to kill Joshua, Caleb, Moses and Aaron so that we could get new leadership and head away from that hostile land and return to the supposed safety of Egypt. We were only stopped by the glory of God appearing over the tent and overwhelming us by its brightness. When Moses entered the tabernacle we all knew that Moses was going to come out with a supposed word from God.

When Moses announced God's judgment on the people and then God killed the 10 spies my dad's friends were among those who disobeyed Moses and led the people against the people of Canaan. They barely escaped with their own lives and lost many friends and family in that fateful battle. When they returned, the hatred of my father and his friends increased as they blamed Moses and Aaron for the defeat because of their refusal to bring the Ark of the Covenant from the camp and into the battle. It was after the traitors Moses and Aaron began giving commands to us in the younger generation about how we were to live in the land of Canaan and ignoring the older generation while restating the power of Aaron and his sons as the only ones who could make atonement for sins that my dad and his congregation of followers decided they had to act. They couldn't take it anymore.

The four of them, with 250 other leaders from all the tribes confronted Moses and Aaron. I followed my dad and his friends and stood off to the side, transfixed by the sight of my dad confronting the most powerful man I'd ever known, Moses. My dad, Korah, said, "Moses and Aaron, you have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them and the Lord is among them. Who do you guys think you are? Why do you continue to exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord as if you are the only ones good enough to enter into the Lord's presence and give the word of God?" Dathan and Abiram added their complaints, telling Moses that he had not been a savior to them but had brought misery upon all Israel. They accused him of leading them away from a land gushing with milk and honey, the land of Egypt and bringing them into the desert to kill them. He had not come through on his promise to give a new land with fertile fields and vineyards. They declared to him that they would never again listen to a word he had to say. God had not appointed him but, they declared, Moses had made himself the prince of Israel and they were not going to put up with it anymore.

It was Moses and Aaron's next action that was the beginning of my coming to my senses. The first thing they did was to fall on their faces before the Lord and begin to beg the Lord to have mercy on my father, Korah and his congregation. Then Moses stood up and replied to this challenge not by simply dismissing their complaint but by proposing a test. He told them that on the next day he wanted all 250 of them to bring censers to the tabernacle and then they and Aaron would all burn incense on them and come before the Lord, outside the doorway of the tabernacle. Moses said that at that time the Lord would make evident who it was that he chose to be holy and to come before him in the tabernacle. Then Moses took my dad, his cousin and fellow Levite aside and pled with him to reconsider what he was about to do. He reminded him that he was in a very favored position in Israel. He was a member of the Kohathites whom God had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel to minister in the tabernacle, to draw near to God in ways that no one else in Israel could draw near. He questioned him as to why this grace was not sufficient for him. Why did he feel that he must be able to minister like Aaron and his sons? He told him that he was fighting against God by seeking to act like a priest instead of being content with the position that God had assigned to him. He reminded him that Aaron was not the priest because he sought out the position but because God chose him.

I know for a fact that Moses' public and private words made no impact upon my dad but only served to strengthen his determination to rid Israel of these despots. As soon as he left Moses' presence he sent word throughout Israel that on the next day the entire congregation should come to the tabernacle to see Moses and Aaron finally get what was coming to them. He told the people of Israel that on the next day they would see that all them were holy, were acceptable to God and they didn't need the hypocrite Aaron and his mouthy brother to represent them to God anymore. While my dad gathered Israel to come see his vindication, I found myself in two minds. My loyalty to my father pulled at me but yet I could not deny that everything I knew about Moses and Aaron and their words led me to believe they were the ones speaking for God and that my dad was wrong.

Words can hardly suffice to describe the horror that awaited my father and his congregation on the next day. He and the 250 other tribal leaders gathered at the entrance of the tabernacle in the morning with their censors holding burning incense. Aaron also was there with his censor burning. Crowds of Israelites were surrounding the tabernacle, awaiting my dad's promised demise of the tyrants Moses and Aaron. The cloud of God's glory appeared and my dad's face shone with the anticipation of victory, of God's accepting he and the other leaders. At that moment I could only think about Aaron's oldest sons, Nadab and Abihu who were burned up by God for approaching God with the wrong incense, a far smaller transgression than my father and his congregation were committing. We all heard the Lord say to Moses and Aaron that they should get away from the whole nation of Israel so the Lord could wipe them all out in an instant. Then again I saw the compassion and integrity of Moses and Aaron as they interceded for the people, begging God to not punish all because of the sins of a few. After praying Moses quickly arose and went to the tents of Dathan and Abiram. He commanded all the people to get away from their tents and the tent of my family lest the congregation be swept away by their sins. He declared that if these three men died a natural death, then God had not sent him but that he had taken on all this authority himself. However, if the Lord created a new thing so that the earth opened up and swallowed them and brought them alive down to the place of the dead, then the people would know that God had sent Moses and that Aaron was God's priest.

My dad had come from the tabernacle and gone to stand with my mother and sisters at the doorway of our tent just as Dathan and Abiram stood with their families at the doorway of their tents. My father's face was disfigured by the furious hatred he felt towards Moses and Aaron as he defiantly stood, confident that Moses was a charlatan. I and my brothers did not go to our family's tent. We stood apart, with Moses and Aaron and with all the rest of the young Levites. In the very next instant the earth split open under my family's tent and the tents of Dathan and Abiram. All these families went down alive into the earth. I can still hear their piercing screams of terror as God threw them into the abode of death. All of Israel, including me fled in a panic from the sight of such a horrific end. At the same time the roar of a great fire came from the tabernacle as the Lord's furious fire burned up all 250 of those leaders of Israel who were offering incense before the tent. After the fire died down the Lord told Moses that he was to have Aaron's oldest son, Eleazer, the priest, gather up all the censors and beat them into a bronze sheet that he was to cover the altar of burnt offering with in order to remind Israel forever that no one but a descendant of Aaron could draw near to God in the tabernacle. I lost my family that day but I also learned that only those whom God chooses can draw near. I learned that God will not accept anyone who comes near on the basis of his own goodness or authority. It is only God's chosen priest who has the right to enter into God's presence and it is only God's chosen prophet that can be trusted to tell the truth about God and his salvation.

#### APPLICATION:

Just like Korah and his congregation were absolutely convinced that God would accept them, that every member of Israel was good enough for God without Moses and Aaron so the vast majority of human beings in this world believe that they are good enough for God and they can come to God on the basis of their own performance. As Korah sincerely expected God to accept he and his compatriots offering of incense so the vast majority of humans sincerely believe that God will warmly welcome them into heaven based upon their own

goodness, their own sincerely held beliefs. Especially in our society, the vast majority of the people we live around and I'm sure many in this room are convinced that their faith in their own goodness and their own view of reality is adequate, just like Korah and his congregation.

Korah, Dathan, Abiram and the 250 leaders did not think they were living as God's enemies. They did not believe that they hated God and that God hated them, in spite of what Moses had told them after their rebellion at Kadesh Barnea, the death of the ten spies and their defeat by the Canaanites. They were convinced they were in the right and that Moses and Aaron's claim to be the only ones who could enter the tabernacle was false. They were sincerely persuaded that God loved them just as much as he loved Moses and Aaron and there was no reason God would not be happy with them. They were sincerely wrong. They were acting as God's enemies and so God treated them as his enemies by killing them. It is a matter of the greatest sadness that the majority of our friends and neighbors are living in the same delusional world. They do not think they are God's enemies. They do not view themselves as living in opposition to God and to God being opposed to them. They assume God will accept them at the end of all things. But they are sadly mistaken because sincerity is not the condition of entering into God's presence, rather, coming to God as he commands is the only way to be warmly welcomed into his presence as God aims to show the belligerent Israelites.

#### NARRATIVE BLOCK TWO (16:41-50)

I awoke the next morning in a state of shock as I realized how closely I had come to perishing with the rest of my family. I was fully aware that I did not deserve to still be alive but that I was alive by God's grace. My shock was intensified as I left my tent and witnessed crowds of angry people converging on the tabernacle and angrily shouting at and cursing Moses and Aaron. The people were screaming at them that they had killed the people of the Lord on the previous day. They were calling them murderers who had just yesterday, by their intercession obtained God's mercy for these accusers and preserved their lives. They were attacking the men who had so obviously been confirmed as God's representatives. What madness would lead men to act in such a way? The fires of judgment were still smoldering; the fracture of the earth was still visible; they had forgotten the terror of the previous day in their hatred of God and of his mediators even while claiming that they were the Lord's people. I could hardly believe what I was seeing.

Once again Moses and Aaron's lives were kept safe by the appearance of the cloud of God's glory. Once again the Lord declared that he was going to wipe out the people of Israel. Once again Aaron and Moses fell on their faces in intercession for the people. While the cloud blazed in glory and Moses and Aaron prayed I noticed near me that people were falling to the ground, dead. Suddenly, Aaron ran into the midst of the angry mob with his censor holding burning incense and he ran towards the people who were dying. The angry mob became again a terrified mob as the people recognized God's plague was let loose upon them. Aaron stood with his incense burning between the dead and the living, making atonement for the murderous rebellion of the people. The one who was hated by the people placed himself between God's judgment and those who hated him. The one they had rejected as their high priest and mediator kept back God's wrath from them. That day 14,730 people from the older generation died in the plague. Aaron was shown to be the only one who could hold back the wrath of God by his intercession. He was indeed the high priest who alone could make atonement for the sins of the people.

#### APPLICATION:

We human beings are schizophrenic. We cry out for God to execute his justice on the earth. We want the bank executives punished for their greed and corruption. We want the pedophiles to be banished from our communities. We want athletes who take performance enhancing drugs to be stripped of their titles and honors and jobs. We want BP executives to suffer for their negligence. We mock and despise adulterous politicians. We expect, indeed demand that people we do not like go to hell. However, when we are told that we are the evil people who deserve the punishment, that we are hated by God for our hatred of him, when we are told that our children and our parents deserve to be sent to hell, we react; we cry unfair. We protest our innocence and

the innocence of those we love. We prove that we know there are evil people in the world who deserve punishment by our judgment of others and our cries for justice but then we get mad when we are told that God considers us and our children and our families to be evil and worthy of damnation. We get mad at God when bad things happen to us or those we love as if we somehow deserve to not be treated bad. The only sane way to live life is to know in our guts that we and all those whom we love are by nature God's enemies and worthy of death. None of us by nature are the people of God who deserve to be treated well.

The most astonishing thing in this story is that God does not wipe out all these wicked people but permits his wrath to be appeased by the intercession of his high priest. He accepts the sweet aroma of the incense in the hand of Aaron as a sacrifice of atonement. How in the world can burning incense stop God's wrath, satisfy God's just anger against these people? The only possible answer is that God does not stop the plague because of Aaron and his incense but because Aaron and the incense are a foreshadowing of that high priest and that sweet smelling incense that is the Lord Jesus Christ, his death and his present intercession. Listen to Hebrews 7:22-27, "This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself." Jesus has placed himself between God's just wrath and all those who draw near to God through him so that the wrath cannot touch us because God accepts his death and his prayers on our behalf.

#### NARRATIVE BLOCK THREE (17:1-13)

The next day, after Aaron stopped God's plague from destroying all the people I watched as Moses called all the leaders of the tribes of Israel together and took from each of the 12 tribal chiefs their tribal staff. On each staff was the name of the tribe whom the chief represented. Then he also took the staff of Aaron as the head of the tribe of Levi. He placed all thirteen of the staffs in the Holy Place in front of the Ark of the Covenant. He told us that the staff of the man which sprouted would be the man whom God had chosen to represent him to the people and the people to him. The next day, Aaron's rod was covered with the white blossoms and green leaves and brown nuts of the almond tree. His dead, wooden staff had been made alive and caused to bear fruit thus showing once again and finally that only Aaron and his sons were fit to enter into God's presence, to offer the sacrifices and to atone for the sins of the people.

When the people of Israel saw Aaron's staff covered in blossoms and leaves and fruit they cried out in terror: "Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone. Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the LORD, shall die. Are we all to perish?" As I listened to the terrified cries of the people I recognized the truth of what they were saying and felt that same terror. There was no way to live with this God who is a consuming fire on my own. Neither I nor any other person is able to safely draw near to this just and holy God who must punish sin. All God's enemies must die for their treasonous rebellion against this great God. Yet at the same time, as I thought about that blossoming staff of Aaron I recognized that there was a way to live in God's presence if I would come near to God by means of the atoning work of his priest. True life, God's life can only be found by coming to God through the mediator he has chosen, his great high priest. To approach God apart from his chosen mediator leads only to death but to come to God by his high priest is to find life.

#### APPLICATION:

There is another piece of dead wood that has blossomed forth and born fruit and thus identified God's chosen priest. It is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ which was not only dead but an instrument of death but which, by the power of God blossomed forth with resurrection life. That life has born fruit throughout the world. The

dead wood of the cross which killed our Lord Jesus has now become the place of life for all who will admit that there is no way to draw near to God on the basis of their own merits and who will come near to God through the high priest, Jesus, who died on that cross and who was raised from the dead so he can always intercede for those who believe. For all who refuse to recognize themselves as traitors and haters of God who are worthy of death and who refuse to come to God through the one whom God identified as his only acceptable mediator through the resurrection from the dead, the Lord Jesus Christ, there will be only wrath and anger. But for all who know they are God's enemies and who flee to the chosen high priest, there will be life. As the Scriptures promise: 1 Peter 2:24, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." It is through the life giving cross that we are healed from the dread disease of sin. 1 John 5:12-13, "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life." John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." All who attempt to come to God on their own will perish. But all who come to God through Jesus Christ by faith will not perish, but will have eternal life. So come all enemies of God and find pardon for your treason through the intercession of God's chosen priest, our Lord Jesus Christ.

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