

# TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD REQUIRES RESPONSIBLE AND SUPPORTED LEADERS

## Numbers 18:1-32

### INTRODUCTION

In Numbers 16 and 17 the Israelite people go from one extreme to the other in their view of who it is that can safely approach God. First, Korah led the entire people of Israel in open revolt against Moses and Aaron. Korah attacked them by saying, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" Korah and his co-conspirators claimed that all Israelites were qualified to enter into God's presence. They claimed that God regarded them all equally and that Moses and Aaron were engaging in self-promotion by insisting that only the priests could enter the tabernacle and draw near to God there. They, like the vast majority of Americans claimed that God loved all his people equally and that he did not prefer Aaron and his sons over the rest of the Israelites. All Israel joined them in this opinion.

Even after God dramatically showed that only Aaron and his sons could draw near to God in the tabernacle by burning up the 250 leaders from the other 12 tribes of Israel and by causing the earth to open up under the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram taking them and all their families down to the place of the dead, still the whole people of Israel insisted that they all were the people of the Lord and that Moses and Aaron were guilty of murdering God's people. It was only after Aaron stopped the plague of God's judgment through his courageous intercession and then God caused Aaron's dead wooden staff to blossom with leaves and flowers and fruit that the people admitted that they could not draw near to God. Chapter 17 ends with them declaring the exact opposite of what they had said at the beginning of chapter 16, "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?" So now, rather than declaring that everyone may come to the Lord they declare that no one is able to safely draw near to God. All will die.

It is upon their confession of their complete inability to draw near to God that God speaks to Aaron in order to make plain how it is that the people of Israel will be able to live with this just and holy God in their presence. All will not perish because God has provided the priests and the Levites to guard them from God's holiness. If you will look at v. 7 you can see the point. The Lord says he gives the priesthood of Aaron and his sons as a gift. They, along with the Levites are to serve and work at the tabernacle as the Lord has assigned them so that, as v. 5 says, "there may never again be wrath on the people of Israel." Chapter 18 is God's provision for how sinful people can travel with him, the holy and just God. What we are going to see this morning is very good news for people who know that God is just and holy and cannot permit unclean, sinful people into his presence. If you are a person who feels guilty for your sins or who wonders if God will ever accept you into his presence, then this chapter is for you.

### MAIN POINT

**Traveling safely with a holy and just God requires...**

#### **I. A priest who bears our iniquity (vv. 1, 3, 5, 7 & 23)**

Twice in the previous two chapters God told Aaron and Moses that due to the rebellion of some Israelites he was going to wipe out all of Israel (16:21 & 45). What we discover in chapter 18 is that Aaron and his sons and the Levites are responsible for guarding the tabernacle and everything that goes on there. It is their job to make sure that all is done according to the Lord's command and that no unauthorized person comes near to the tabernacle or to the holy objects. If there is any iniquity, that is, any failure of perfect obedience done in the performance of the sacrifices and rituals it is the priests and the Levites who will die, not the whole nation of Israel. That is what it means to "bear the iniquity". You can see this in v. 1 in regard to the priests and in v. 3 with regard to both the priests and the Levites. Whatever iniquity is done in the performance of the work of the

tabernacle, it is the priests and Levites who will die for it, not the nation. The priests and the Levites have different responsibilities but they share in common the task of guarding the holy places, the holy utensils, the holy sacrifices, the holy actions of the priests from being contaminated with anything that is unclean. Again, as v. 5 says, their performance of their duty of guarding and bearing iniquity is for the purpose of keeping God's wrath from falling on the whole nation. They suffer the punishment of God in the place of the nation of Israel. As v. 7 says, the priests and Levites and their work of guarding and bearing iniquity are a gift of God's grace to the people. So it is by the work of the priests and the Levites on behalf of the whole nation that the whole nation of Israel is not consumed by God's wrath.

We have seen this reality time and again as we have worked our way through the OT books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. The priests and Levites bearing of iniquity, that is, suffering God's punishment for any infraction of the ritual codes surrounding the tabernacle points ahead to the final and complete bearing of iniquity that was performed by our Lord Jesus when he suffered and died on the cross. This idea is expressed in many places. First, in Isaiah 53:12, speaking of God's Messiah about 550 years before the coming of Jesus, "Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors." Then in the NT, "He himself, bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might die to sins and live to righteousness." The same idea with different words is expressed in Colossians 2:13-14, "...He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code with its regulations that was against us and that stood opposed to us, he took it away, nailing it to the cross."

The description of what Christ has done for us in Colossians is particularly helpful. God has a law code, a standard of conduct that he requires of all human beings. Just like every municipality has a list of codes and rules that the citizens of the city are obligated to obey and if anyone disobeys they will be subject to fines and/or imprisonment, so God has a list of rules that every human being must obey and each infraction receives a just penalty. The penalty for breaking any one of God's "written codes" is death and hell because we are not simply breaking a man-made code but we are refusing to love and obey the one who has given us everything we have and are. So each human being has a list of crimes, a "rap sheet" if you will of all the ways we have broken God's law. God has a record of every time you have failed to love him and to love your neighbor as yourself. Thus his law is against us, it condemns us as criminals who deserve to bear our iniquity, that is, to suffer his just punishment.

However, God, for every person who is in Christ, that is, for every person who is trusting in Jesus as their Savior and treasure, has taken our list of crimes and nailed them over the head of Jesus on that cross upon which he died. This is a reference to the Roman judicial system. When a person was found guilty of committing a crime punishable by death they would nail a sign stating the crime of the person over his head as he hung upon the cross, which was the Roman way of executing criminals and other enemies of the state. What Paul is telling us in Colossians is that the crimes that were nailed to the cross of Christ were not his crimes but ours. He had no crimes of his own; he suffered the punishment our sins deserved, that is, he bore our iniquities. He did this so that God's just wrath would not fall on us. Thus all of the sins of those who trust in Jesus have already been punished in Christ and so all of our sins are forgiven. If you are a person who knows that you deserve God's wrath because of your many sins, then do not go another day without fleeing to the crucified Jesus so that he will take your sins upon his cross and bear your iniquity so that God's wrath will not come upon you.

## **II. Leaders who faithfully guard the gospel (vv. 1-8)**

The main way that the NT views the priests and Levites and their work of guarding the sanctuary and the altar and the priesthood is as pointing ahead to Jesus and his work on behalf of his people. He is our priest who makes us fit for God's presence and satisfies all of God's wrath against us. However, there is another way that the NT views the priests and Levites in the OT. There are numerous passages that use the priestly service in the OT as a paradigm or an illustration of the service of pastors/elders/overseers and missionaries in the NT. I want to draw your attention to two passages that use the language of priestly service found here in Numbers 18 to describe the work of elders and missionaries. Let me just make a quick clarifying note. The NT uses 4 words

to describe the same office in the local church. The terms “pastor”, “elder”, “overseer” and “leader” all refer to the same office in the local church. Every local church is to be led by a group of qualified men whose task it is to keep watch over all the people in the local church. These men can be referred to with any one of these 4 terms.

First of all, Paul commands his young apprentice, Timothy, who is a pastor of the church in Ephesus to “guard the good deposit entrusted” to him (1 Timothy 6:20 & 2 Timothy 1:14). In the same way that priests and Levites were to guard the sanctuary, so Timothy is to guard the gospel of the Lord Jesus, which is the good deposit entrusted to him. The reason for guarding the tabernacle was so that the work of the priests might go forward with the result that no wrath would fall upon Israel but they would be accepted and loved and cared for by God. It is for the same reason that Timothy is to guard the good deposit of the gospel. Paul says to Timothy in his second letter that Jesus “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” He commands Timothy to always be ready to teach this good deposit, this gospel and to rebuke every person who attempts to teach a different gospel. Timothy, as a pastor is assigned the duty of guarding this gospel so that the people of God can be saved, can be rescued from God’s just punishment against them for their sins and given eternal life. There is only one gospel of Jesus that will protect you from the wrath of God and so it is the responsibility of the leadership of each local church to make sure that the one gospel is guarded from corruption and clearly taught within and through the church.

Second, Paul, in a remarkable passage describes his own work of proclaiming the gospel with the language of priestly work. Listen again to what he says in Romans 15:15-16, “But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit... and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel...” First, Paul calls himself a minister of Christ Jesus. That word minister is the same word used in the Greek translation of the OT for the priests and Levites, they are ministers who perform the ministry of the Lord. He says that he is engaged in “the priestly service of the gospel of God”. What does he mean by that? He doesn’t mean that he is a priest who is offering sacrifices for the sins of the people. He is not being a mediator between men and God. It is a gross error, since the death and resurrection of Jesus, for any human being to take upon himself the attitude or actions of a priest in the sense of being a mediator between God and men. Jesus alone is our high priest who has done everything to make us acceptable to God. Each person is able to go directly to God through Christ and has not need of another human to draw near to God. Paul acts like a priest in these two ways. 1) He guards the gospel from perversion. 2) He announces the gospel, the news that Christ is our high priest and mediator for the purpose of making people holy, that is fit for God. The only action that an elder or missionary can take to make people fit for God is to announce to others that Jesus has done everything. Our priestly service is the service of the gospel, of announcing God’s reconciling work in Christ.

So the holy God has made a way for sinners to safely travel with him by providing Christ as the one who bears our iniquity in our place and pastors/elders & missionaries to preach this good news to us so that we will trust in Christ to do what he promises to do. I would also add—based upon a verse like Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children, instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”—that parents share in this same priestly service. Every parent is a pastor to his or her children with the responsibility to guard the gospel and to use that gospel to train and instruct their children in the Lord. Every local church and every Christian family is to be led by pastors/elders and parents who will faithfully guard the gospel for the sake of the people, so that wrath will not fall upon them.

### **III. Leaders whose goal is God (v.20)**

Look at v. 20. After explaining which parts of which offerings belong to the priests and their families for their physical support, God says to Aaron, “You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel.” The priests will not receive any allotment of land upon which to grow crops when they go into the Promised Land. Rather, they must depend upon the Lord to provide everything for them through the contributions of the people. However,

the way in which God says this to them makes the point that God himself is to be their treasure, not the offerings he gives to them. The 12 tribes of Israel get a piece of land for their portion and their inheritance, but Aaron and his sons get God for their portion and their inheritance.

This idea is picked up by David in the psalms. Psalm 16:1-6, “I say to the LORD, ‘You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.’ ... The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply... The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup... The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.” Psalm 73:26, “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” The use of this idea by David points to the fact that every believer is to have God as their portion. We are to desire God above all other things. He is to be to us alone our salvation and our refuge and our hope, not money or people or jobs or retirement accounts or beautiful homes. This is indeed Paul’s sentiment when he says that he considers everything like a pile of dung in comparison to knowing Christ Jesus his Lord. This is what Peter means when he says that Christ died for us to bring us to God. This is what Jesus meant when he said that whoever seeks to save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for his sake will save it. It is better to have Jesus and to lose every earthly comfort than to have the whole world and not have Jesus. If nothing good happens to me for being a Christian but only bad things happen to me and yet I am loved by God and belong to him, then I am happy. Do you believe that? This is the gospel. The gospel is not simply that you get to go to heaven when you die but that going to heaven to live with Jesus forever is better than everything and you are living your life now as though that is really true.

While this is to be the goal of every Christian, God intends that every local church be led by men whose portion and whose inheritance is God alone. Paul tells Timothy, the pastor, that he is to endure suffering like a good soldier of Christ because no soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits since his goal is please the one who enlisted him. Paul is telling Timothy that the only way to be a faithful pastor is to have as your goal, pleasing God. God alone must be the one whom you seek and his opinion must be the only opinion that matters to you if you are going to faithfully shepherd God’s people. If you fear men, if you care what people think about you, if being a successful pastor is what matters to you, then you will not love them the way you need to love them. You have heard me talk about God’s mercy in my life in the early 1990’s. After 15 years of full-time Christian ministry I realized that my goal was not God. I had not made the purpose of my life to know and love God but to fulfill the Great Commission, to be a Christian husband and father, to be a great evangelist, to be a good Christian leader. All of these things are good but none of them are the main thing for which we are to live. The only trustworthy Christian leaders are those whose main passion is God, not to be a Christian leader. Parents and pastors must have God as their goal if they are going to lead anyone else to find God to be their goal. Parents and elders must have God as their goal if they are going to be faithful for a lifetime in seeking to bring others to God. Any lesser purpose will produce burnout and disappointment and anger with the people, with the children you are seeking to lead.

#### **IV. Leaders who are accountable to God (vv. 1-8 & 31-32)**

It is hard to miss that a major theme throughout chapter 18 is that the priests and Levites are accountable to God. If they do not do what God has told them to do they will die. Look at the last paragraph. In vv. 25-32 God instructs the Levites who are to receive 1/10<sup>th</sup> of all the produce and animals of the other 12 tribes each year for their support to give 1/10<sup>th</sup> of what they receive from Israel to the priests. In v. 31 they are told that once they give the best tenth of the tenth they’ve received to the priests, then they are free to eat the other 9/10ths of the tenth anywhere they please. Then in v. 32 God says, “And you shall bear no sin by reason of it, when you have contributed the best of it. But you shall not profane the holy things of the people of Israel, lest you die.” If they do the right thing and give the tenth, then they are free to eat the rest. However, if they do not give the best tenth of the tenth they receive to the priests, then God will hold them accountable and kill them.

It is this basic idea that stands behind Jesus’ telling the apostles in Luke 12 the parables about servants whose master went on a journey and who needed to be faithful to do the master’s work so that when the master returned they would be rewarded for their labor and not beaten. It is this basic idea of accountability to God that stands behind James’ saying in his letter, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you

know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” This is what stands behind Hebrews 13:17 which says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” Every parent, every pastor, every small group leader will one day give an account to God for how they carried out their assigned task of guarding the gospel for the sake of the people of God. God wants every church and every family to be led by leaders who know that one day they will have to answer to God for how faithfully they have served as a minister of Christ Jesus.

#### **V. A congregation which generously gives to God (vv. 9-32)**

The bulk of this chapter is taken up with the responsibility of the congregation to support the priests and Levites with their produce and animals. There are a couple of things to notice. First, in v. 8 the contributions that the Israelites make they make to God himself and then he gives them to the priests for their use. The Lord says this to Aaron five or six times through the chapter. The Israelites are giving their offerings of grain and wine and oil and animals to the Lord and the Lord is giving them to the priests for them and their family to eat. Second, the people of Israel are to give one tenth of all their produce and all their animals to the Levites for their provision. Again, as with the priests, according to v. 24 the people are giving the tenth to the Lord who gives it to the Levites. This means that the total giving of the people of Israel was well over a tenth of their income because they were obligated to give all the offerings that belonged to the priests on top of the tithe they gave to the Levites. Third, the main thing to observe here is that the tithe and the other offerings are the wage, the reward that the priests and Levites are owed in return for their work in the tent of meeting. It is God’s will and his command that the people of God give him their offerings and their one tenth so that he might give them to the priests and Levites so that they can do their work and thus keep the wrath from falling on the people. Thus, the ultimate motive for the gifts is that the people want to live at peace with God. They want to know God and live with him and have him as their Father. Giving is an expression of their faith in God, of their belief that having God is better than having the animals and produce they give away to support the work of the priests. We give because we believe we need God, not money.

In the NT when Jesus sends out his disciples in pairs to preach the gospel in the towns of Israel he tells them, “Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals... And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages” (Luke 10:4 & 7). Like the priests and Levites the apostles had no source of income but were to depend upon those to whom they preached the gospel for financial support. Then the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9 has a long argument to show that Christian congregations are to financially support those who preach the gospel. One of the arguments he uses is based upon Numbers 18. He says, “Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.” Here Paul combines both the OT pattern of support for priests and Levites with Jesus’ command in the gospels that the “laborer deserves his wages” to show that it is the obligation of the local church to financially support the proclamation of the gospel by called men.

This priority of support for those who preach the gospel reinforces what we saw earlier: the main task of pastors/elders is the proclamation of this good news that Jesus is our high priest, he is our sacrifice of atonement, he is the one who makes us fit for God. The only way to travel safely with a holy God and to enter into his presence for eternity is to do it in the fellowship of a local church where the preaching and teaching of the gospel holds center place. In all that we do and in all the ways we allocate money we are to remember that our only safety lies in our trusting in the Jesus who is revealed in the pages of this book and thus we, as a congregation, must be sure that we are being led by men and women who are guarding this gospel. We are to give financially as an expression of our faith that being loved by God and going to live with him forever matters more to us than money and the things that money can buy. Our giving is not for the purpose of earning God’s blessing but because we believe that having God as our inheritance is better than having an inheritance.

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