



## PROMISES, LEADERS, AND PRIESTS

Numbers 15–17

Israel’s sad example reminds us that God’s love and compassion are steadfast. He does not withdraw His promises or change His plans when we rebel against Him but patiently urges and waits for our repentance and gives us all we need to follow and serve Him.

Israel’s rebellious spirit against God and her God-appointed leaders in the wilderness tells us a lot about sinful human nature. God’s responses to their rebellion tell us a lot about God.

In our last study, we watched as Israel rejected the opportunity to enter and take possession of Canaan despite God’s promise to give them the land. Every Israelite twenty years old and upward was held responsible, and God sentenced them to wandering in the wilderness a total of forty years, during which time all of them will pass away.

If you do the math—and we can only make a rough guess, based on the census in chapter 1—a little more than one million people will die in the wilderness. That’s some 25,000 people a year. Israel’s forty years wandering in the wilderness was one long funeral.

Even though this is devastating news, and Israel has every reason to be distressed, God has not abandoned them. In spite of the death rate—and even more rebellion—God graciously gives them three very important reaffirmations here in Numbers 15 through 17.

Just listen to the opening verses in chapter 15: “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the

land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you . . .” (verses 1-2). Stop, and think about what the Lord is saying here. He hasn’t changed His mind. He is effectively *reaffirming His promise to the nation*. It might be decades away, but it’s already been decided—they will enter the land.

God now moves on in this chapter to restate various portions of the law He gave them at Mount Sinai. In verses 3-5, the Lord says to them:

*“[When] you offer to the LORD from the herd or from the flock . . . [you shall bring] a grain offering . . . and you shall offer with the*



Relief showing Queen Hatshepsut burning incense to honor a god



*burnt offering, or for the sacrifice, a quarter of a hin of wine for the drink offering for each lamb.”*

All these instructions emphasize the *fellowship* elements of the sacrifices. A portion of these food items are actually shared among the priests and the people bringing the sacrifice. They're having a little picnic out here, and this emphasizes the Lord's grace and communion with His people.

Now beginning in verse 22, the Lord summarizes some of the laws that were laid out back in Leviticus. Why repeat them here? Again, this new generation will need to know what to do when they realize they have sinned. Hopefully, they will not be like their parents who were slow to confess.

So, the invitation here to seek forgiveness is loud and clear. We read in verse 25: “The priest shall make atonement for all the congregation . . . and they shall be forgiven.”

The word *atonement* appears three times in verses 25-29. This is God's way of communicating that forgiveness is available *if* they approach Him through His plan of a substitutionary sacrifice. The methods may have changed today, but the solution is still the same—we now have forgiveness for our sins through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

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Chapter 15 wraps up with the Lord's instruction in verse 38 “to make tassels on the corners of their garments.” That might seem a little strange, but this practice was designed to serve as a continual reminder to follow the word of God.

Now in chapter 16, the Lord not only reaffirms His promise to the nation; He also *reaffirms His leaders for the nation*.

A Levite named Korah, along with two accomplices and a rebel alliance of 250 men, comes to Moses and Aaron and delivers this complaint in verse 3:

*“You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy . . . and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?”*

This complaint sounds like Miriam and Aaron's back in chapter 12, but this one is far more serious. The Levites among Korah's supporters are tired of hauling around the tabernacle furniture as the assistants to the priests. They don't want to just set up the tabernacle; they want to *run* the tabernacle. They want to belong to the priesthood. But they make their case in such a clever way here. They accuse Moses and Aaron of wanting glory for themselves. Notice, they say, “Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly?” In other words, why are *you* in charge around here? Well, if Moses defends himself, it will only look like he is as hungry for glory as they are.

So, Moses hands it all over to God. He falls on his face in prayer (verse 4). Then in verse 5, he tells Korah and these men to come to the tabernacle the next day with burning censers. Everyone will stand before the Lord, and in verse 7 Moses says, “The man whom the LORD chooses shall be the holy one.” He is simply saying, “We will let God clear up the matter. God will show us His answer.”

And the next day, they all come. Korah arrives with his two ringleaders and the 250 men who want to be



in charge of the tabernacle worship—and effectively, in charge of the nation Israel.

Now in verse 24, Moses warns the people not to come near the tents of Korah and his two ringleaders, who are now standing at the doors of their tents with their families. Verses 31-32 then give us the chilling, eyewitness account of God’s judgment:

*The ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah.*

Verse 35 also records that “fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men offering the incense.”

God reaffirms the leadership of Moses!

Now you would think that such a spectacle like this would be enough to put the fear of God in everybody. But the very next day, verse 41 says, “The people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, ‘You have killed the people of the LORD.’”

Imagine that: “You, Moses, killed these people”! How in the world can they say that when the ground opened up and fire came forth from the Lord?

Immediately, God sends an epidemic raging through the camp. It ends only when Aaron runs through the camp with an offering of incense to make atonement for the people.

God will use the people’s rebellion, not only to reaffirm His chosen leadership for the nation, but also to *reaffirm Aaron as His appointed high priest for the nation*. Here in chapter 17, the Lord tells Moses to have Aaron and the leaders of Israel’s twelve tribes bring their staffs to Moses with their names written

on them. All the staffs are placed before the Lord in the Most Holy Place.

Verse 8 tells us that the next day, when Moses brings out all the staffs, Aaron’s staff has miraculously budded, and fresh almonds are literally hanging from what was a dead piece of wood. This public miracle puts the Lord’s stamp of approval on the high priest He has chosen.

The office of high priest was not subject to a power grab or the result of an election. God *chose* the high priest. And this is so important because Israel’s high priest foreshadows our one and only, divinely chosen Great High Priest, God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And let me tell you, when you’re connected to Him, you’re no longer a lifeless stick. You are a living spirit, a child of God on your way to heaven.

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Why is fervent prayer a wiser choice than complaining when it comes to leaders you think are inadequate? How is choosing not to encourage a leader a form complaining? Why is it important for you to encourage the godly leaders the Lord has or is using in your life?

What elements of God’s character do you see revealed through His responses to Israel’s rebellion? How do these qualities comfort you? Which of them cause you some alarm to check your heart? Explain why.

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