

# "The Gospel Illustrated"

*Numbers 17:1-18:7*

We've seen in Numbers how God's people have grumbled and complained about God's choice of Moses and Aaron as leaders. In Num. 16 we saw that Korah gathered 250 other discontented leaders [funny how they always find each other] to attempt to overthrow Aaron, yet God provided three miracles: 1) the opening of the ground that destroyed the three ring leaders of the group and most of their families; 2) the instantaneous fire that destroyed the 250 rebel leaders; and 3) the plague that destroyed 14,700 others, mercifully stopped because Aaron interceded before God with incense to atone for the people's sins.

God responded to Aaron because He appointed Aaron as the first high priest. Now in Ch. 17, God wants to settle this dispute once and for all not through a reactive, destructive miracle but a proactive life-producing miracle that will be a continual witness for generations to come that God and God alone

## Chooses the One Mediator Who Will Stand Before Him (17:1-9)

What we have here in Num. 17-18 is an Old Testament illustration of the gospel. That shouldn't surprise us since Jesus Himself taught His disciples that the Law, the prophets and the writings teach about Him:

*Luke 24:44* He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Here God showed the nation of Israel and prepared them and us by giving us an illustration of the gospel in these verses. Just as God chose Aaron to be the High Priest of the Tabernacle, God would choose Jesus our great High Priest before God's very presence.

**Heb. 5:1** *Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. <sup>2</sup> He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. <sup>3</sup> This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. <sup>4</sup> No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. <sup>5</sup> So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."<sup>6</sup> And he says in another place, "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."*

"No one takes this honour upon himself." Korah tried to but God dealt severely with him. God was showing us early on that there is only one way to Him and that is through his appointed mediator. This was the message He was reminding Israel of after Korah's rebellion through a powerful illustration:

**17** *The Lord said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> "Speak to the Israelites and get 12 staffs from them, one from the leader of each of their ancestral tribes. Write the name of each man on his staff. <sup>3</sup> On the staff of Levi write Aaron's name, for there must be one staff for the head of each ancestral tribe. <sup>4</sup> Place them in the Tent of Meeting in front of the Testimony, where I meet with you. <sup>5</sup> The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout, and I will*

rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites.”<sup>6</sup> So Moses spoke to the Israelites, and their leaders gave him 12 staffs, one for the leader of each of their ancestral tribes, and Aaron’s staff was among them.<sup>7</sup> Moses placed the staffs before the Lord in the Tent of the Testimony.

What was God’s point? God’s appointed mediator

### ***Is set apart from everyone else (vv.1-7)***

So all the leaders of each tribe give Moses their staff. A staff was a symbol of leadership. Often they are called sceptres of a king/ruler. King Xerxes extends his sceptre to Esther as she approaches him. God says of Jesus in Ps. 110,

<sup>2</sup> *The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies.*

A staff is a dead stick of wood. It’s hard and dry and cannot produce fruit. Moses takes these 12 dead pieces of wood and places them before the Ark in the Holy of Holies. The next day he brings them out showing that, not only has Aaron’s staff sprouted, but it’s also produced buds and some buds have blossoms and we are told they are almond blossoms because there were almonds growing on this dead stick of wood that belonged to Aaron. God affirmed that Aaron was the high priest and that his sons would be the only ones who could take on that role. The whole point of Aaron’s rod producing fruit was a reminder that it is only through following the

### ***One mediator that we can produce fruit (vv.8-9)***

I don’t think God making a dead branch produce fruit is a coincidence. He’s sending a message to His people that when you follow My words, obeying the sacrificial laws that remove your sins, that life will be fruitful. In Deut. 28 God does say that He will send rain as Israel obeyed. Yes, Jesus’ sacrifice has done away with the Law, but the principle that obeying our High Priest produces fruit continues. In John 15:5 Jesus, our great High Priest said,

<sup>15:5</sup> *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

I also don’t think it’s a coincidence that God chose Aaron’s staff to produce almond blossoms and almonds. The almond buds and blossoms were the design of the menorah, the only light in the Holy Place by which the priests could do their ministry. In Ex. 37:19-20 we read,

<sup>17</sup> *They made the lampstand of pure gold and hammered it out, base and shaft; its flowerlike cups, buds and blossoms were of one piece with it.* <sup>18</sup> *Six branches extended from the sides of the lamp-stand—three on one side and three on the other.* <sup>19</sup> *Three cups shaped like almond flowers with buds and blossoms were on one branch, three on the next branch and the same for all six branches extending from the lampstand.* <sup>20</sup> *And on the lampstand were four cups shaped like almond flowers with buds and blossoms.* <sup>21</sup> *One bud was under the first pair of branches extending from the lamp-stand, a second bud under the second pair, and a third bud under the third pair—six branches in all.* <sup>22</sup> *The buds and the branches were all of one piece with the lampstand, hammered out of pure gold.*

When Jesus declared “I am the light of the world” in John 8:12, He was probably at the Feast of Tabernacles which Ch. 7 ended with. Many suggest Jesus declared this during the feast because they lit a giant menorah that could be seen from miles away at night. Jesus was saying ‘I am the menorah that provides the only source of light by which people can find God’. Certainly, Moses’

audience were not aware of any of this, but the Spirit wrote this, preparing the reader for the coming of the true mediator between God and us, Jesus.

And then the Lord tells Moses to put this in front of the Ark of the Testimony, so that this ... will put an end to their grumbling against me, so that they will not die.”

In other words, Moses symbolically places the symbol that represents God’s choice of High Priest,

***Whose presence will always before God (vv.10-11)***

This was to settle any more arguments about the high priesthood. God chose Aaron and symbolically reminded people that he was the only mediator between them and God. That this staff would forever be alive and show buds and fruit on it. Again, we see the groundwork being laid for Jesus, who was once dead and came back to life, continues to live and produce fruit in us as He lives in the presence of God today, interceding on our behalf as Heb. 7:25 says.

We’ll come back to vv.12-13 at the end. In Ch. 18, God reminds Aaron of the privilege and responsibility of what it means to be the one mediator between God and man.

**The High Priest Bears the Guilt of Those Who  
Try to Enter God’s Presence on Their Own  
(18:1-7)**

God didn’t want any more Korah’s, Dathan’s or Abiram’s trying to usurp Aaron’s role and come into God’s presence without going through the mediator. No one can.

**18** *The Lord said to Aaron, “You, your sons and your father’s family are to bear the responsibility for offenses against the sanctuary, and you and your sons alone are to bear the responsibility for offences against the priesthood. <sup>2</sup> Bring your fellow Levites from your ancestral tribe to join you and assist you when you and your sons minister before the Tent of the Testimony. <sup>3</sup> They are to be responsible to you and are to perform all the duties of the Tent, but they must not go near the furnishings of the sanctuary or the altar, or both they and you will die. <sup>4</sup> They are to join you and be responsible for the care of the Tent of Meeting—all the work at the Tent—and no one else may come near where you are. <sup>5</sup> “You are to be responsible for the care of the sanctuary and the altar, so that wrath will not fall on the Israelites again.*

Korah was a son of Kohath, one of three sons of Levi. They were able to carry the covered furniture but not go into the holy place. God told Aaron and his sons they must see that no one tries to get to God any other way than through the mediator. If they do, the mediator bears their sins and will be held accountable.

Jesus, our Great High Priest, takes this even further. He bears the responsibility of everyone’s sins in the whole world because all our sins are our attempts to bypass the mediator to God, thinking that we are good enough. This is such a powerful illustration preparing the reader for Jesus who would take away sin once and for all & God’s wrath that hangs over all of us if we don’t repent. Paul says the same in 1 Thes. 5:9

<sup>9</sup> *For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>10</sup> He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.*

Aaron's role was to keep people from trying to get to God by passing him, the mediator and the sacrificial system

### ***To spare God's people from His wrath (vv.1-5)***

That's what it says in v.5. However, it doesn't mean others can't be involved in serving God. The Levites served God by assisting Aaron and his sons, not by usurping them. Likewise, Aaron and his sons needed to be thankful for the Levites ministry

### ***By appreciating ministry as God's gift (vv.5-7)***

Aaron and his sons were chosen by God's grace to have this ministry. Aaron's tribe, the Levites, were chosen by God's grace to assist Aaron in ministry. All ministry is to help people get access to God. First, by seeing their need for their sins to be atoned for and forgiven. That's what the sacrificial system was all about. Reminding people that everyone sins, no one can come into the presence of God where His glory dwells apart from the shedding of blood. And this is the language Paul uses in Rom. 3

*<sup>21</sup> But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— <sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

The second way ministry helps people get access to God is to direct them to His Word so that we will all grow in Christlikeness and want to spend more time in God's presence. Listen to the author of Hebrews in 10:19,

*<sup>19</sup> Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, [initial access] <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup> Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. [continued access].<sup>24</sup> And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. <sup>25</sup> Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. [[encouraging others to spend more time w God]*

Every ministry we have is a gift from God to help each other know and experience that the greatest joy in life is God. Sadly, when the Korahs, Dathans and Abirams think ministry is a way to advance our self-importance, we lost out on God's joy because we're more focused on our idea of joy than true joy in God's presence.

And we need to more burdened for the lost to find initial access to God because we're also shown here in Num. 17:12-13

## **People Will Perish if They Try to Come to God on Their Own** **(17:12-13)**

When God blessed Aaron's rod and showed that he alone is God's appointed mediator, the people over-reacted yet in their overreaction, pointed out some gospel realities.

*<sup>10</sup> The Lord said to Moses, "Put back Aaron's staff in front of the Testimony, to be kept as a sign to the rebellious. This will put an end to their grumbling against me, so that they will not die." <sup>11</sup> Moses did just as the Lord commanded him. <sup>12</sup> The Israelites said to Moses, "We will die! We are lost, we are all lost! <sup>13</sup> Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die. Are we all going to die?"*

The people wrongly thought that God was going to wipe them all out, but no, God was saying I want all of you to have access to me but you can only get to me through My appointed Mediator. Yet the one thing that was true is that

### **Everyone is perishing (v.12)**

Life is temporal. It can last up to a hundred years but at some point we all die. So, because we're all sinners we are all perishing. And we're all separated from God so we need a mediator. That's what John 3:16 is all about isn't it?

*<sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

We are perishing physically but God is more concerned with our spiritual separation from Himself if we think we can get to Him apart from Jesus, His eternally appointed Mediator. Aaron and his sons were temporal until Jesus came, but what they and the sacrificial system did was show us the way God works. Jesus didn't come to condemn us – we're already condemned to an eternity without God if we don't repent and accept Jesus as the only way to God. Then we receive eternal life. And the Jewish people in Moses' day illustrate that too in 17:13,

*<sup>13</sup> Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die. Are we all going to die?"*

Great question. Everyone is perishing (v.12)

### **But not everyone has to (v.13)**

God wasn't condemning Israel here; He was showing them how to have life in Him. Go through My appointed mediator. Come before me with shed blood and receive forgiveness of sins. And that's the gospel. We are all perishing because we have sin and need to come before God through His Mediator Jesus. We need to choose:

*John<sup>12</sup> Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

Jesus died on the cross for us, shedding His blood for the forgiveness of sins. We're all perishing, but we don't have to. We can't get to God on your own; you can only get to Him through his appointed Mediator, Jesus Christ.

*<sup>1 Tim. 2:5</sup> For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.*

Most of us have already made that decision. We have access to God through Jesus by faith, having confessed we're sinners in need of saving. But some Christians think that's all you need to do. No, now we need to develop our relationship with God, growing in Jesus and trusting Him to help us produce fruit. The Spirit gifted all of us to do ministry, which is helping all of us continue to draw near to God. And when we do, we experience His joy. And don't we all want joy in life? When we try to find joy outside of God and Jesus, the best we get are samples of happiness. Like Costco, they taste good but it's not a real meal.

One of my favourite verses shows us the need for initial access to God followed by ongoing access to God now so we can enjoy life now and forever.

*Ps. 16:11 You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

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If you have any comments or questions about this message, please contact us at [olivet@rideau.net](mailto:olivet@rideau.net)