

Lesson 14 – Israel Rebels
Numbers 16:1-17:13; 20:1-29
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In my first lecture for this series, I shared with you one of my greatest frustrations with one of the “fruits” of this pandemic. That frustration was the growing, and more blatant than ever, presence of deception in our society. For me, the news is unwatchable as my hope for fair and unbalanced reporting has been overrun by liberal agendas designed to shape my views. This situation was further magnified by a national election with media sources skewing information to favor the candidate they were promoting. Without a truly complete picture about something or someone, you can end up drawing an inaccurate opinion.

The following is taken from an article from an unknown newspaper. Suppose tomorrow is election day. It’s time to elect a new world leader – and your vote counts. Here are your choices:

Candidate A: he consults with astrologers, has had two mistresses, chain smokes, and drinks 8 to 10 martinis a day.

Candidate B: he was kicked out of office twice, sleeps until noon, used opium in college, and drinks a quart of brandy every evening.

Candidate C: he is a decorated war hero, a vegetarian, is monogamous, doesn’t smoke, and drinks only an occasional beer.

Would you like to know who these candidates are?

Candidate A was FDR.

Candidate B was Winston Churchill.

Candidate C was Adolph Hitler.

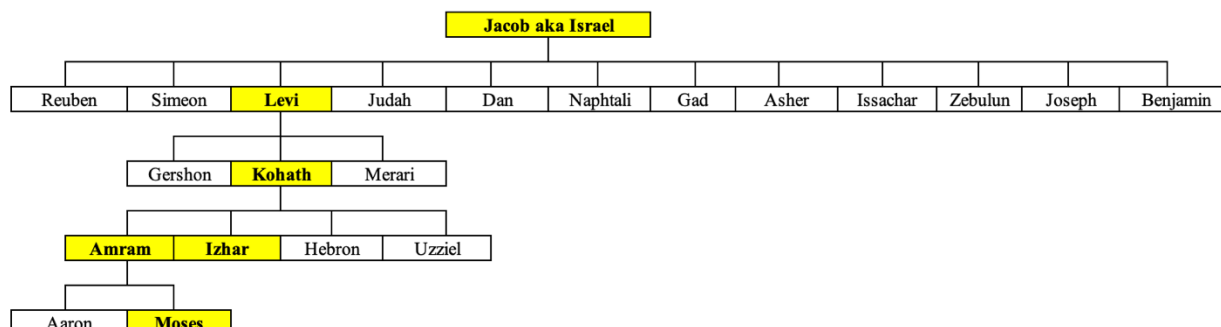
I have a gavel on my desk – it is a symbol of judgment. On the gavel is inscribed, “*This is My job – not yours - God.*” The reference is Matthew 7:1, which says, “*Judge not, that you be judged.*” My point is between this article and my gavel, there is great risk in trusting anything but the Word of God to size up a situation or an individual.

Today’s reading in Numbers offers up three profiles that I want to share with you.

- A rebel
- A Godly leader
- The High Priest

Let’s begin with our profile of the rebel. Our reading kicks off with a rebellion that, initially, appears to be against Moses and Aaron. Korah is identified as the

son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, and the son of Levi. As you can see from the below chart, Moses' father was Amram, and Korah's father was Izhar, so that makes Moses and Korah cousins.



Along with Korah, there was Dathan and Abiram, who were from the tribe of Reuben. The fact that we're given their genealogies indicates these were important men. From Numbers 16:3, they had assembled 250 community leaders likely from multiple tribes. So, this was a broad-based rebellion, not an impromptu revolt.

They laid out their charges against Moses and Aaron, "*You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?*" In other words, they felt Moses and Aaron had been ruling too long and were lording their positions over the "holy" community.

J. Vernon McGee wisely notes that this claim against Moses was bogus. When God called him to be the leader of the people, he refused. Even after God trained him, he didn't want the job. He asked for a helper, and God gave him his brother Aaron.

Given the obvious falseness of this claim, we should look a little more deeply behind its motivation. What were Korah's and the rebels' real issue? – Pride. C.S. Lewis calls pride the "Great Sin." Pride metastasizes into things like jealousy and envy. All of these things have no place in the Kingdom of God. This truth brings up a greater revelation of this rebellion. While Korah and his band of traitors were making their claims against Moses and Aaron, was their problem really with them? Since Moses and Aaron were specifically chosen *by* God, the rebellion was really *against* God as Moses confirms in verse 11. We should take this to heart the next time we feel compelled to make charges against God's chosen leaders in our lives. We should first ask ourselves is our issue with the leadership or with God?

As we begin to build the profile of a rebel, we indeed see that the typical root of the rebellion is pride. Where do you think pride comes from? Isaiah 14:13-

14 provides the source. The following statements are from Satan's heart, *"I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High."*

One of the more obvious negatives of pride is that it distorts your perspective of what is true. Satan, a created being, actually thinks he can be like the Creator, God. Scripture describes the character of Moses as the meekest man on earth, so Korah's perspective of Moses lording his leadership over the people is just as distorted.

When Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram, they refused to respond saying, *"Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness?"* Again, we see pride twisting their perspective. They're calling Egypt, a place they were held captive and beaten for 400 years, a land flowing with milk and honey. And they continued in verse 14, *"Moreover, you haven't brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards."*

Again, J. Vernon McGee makes the observation that Dathan's and Abiram's malicious charge against Moses and Aaron ignores the fact that if had they followed Moses' leadership at Kadesh-Barnea, by now they would be settled in the real land of milk and honey. Pride indeed twists our perspective on what is true.

Based on the exercise with the staffs in Chapter 17, there must have been a challenge against Aaron being the High Priest. Jon Courson noted, *"Korah, Dathan, and Abiram [and those challenging Aaron's position as the High Priest] thought they were right, but, because of their pride, what they failed to factor in to the equation was God's sovereignty. God's on the throne. God's in control. Therefore, it is not up to us to pull down people or prop people up."* Psalm 75:6-7 confirms this, *"For exaltation comes neither from the east nor from the west nor from the south. But God is the Judge: He puts down one, and exalts another."*

What does Scripture say about pride and envy? Proverbs 16:18, *"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."* Job 5:2 warns, *"For wrath kills a foolish man, and envy slays a simple one."* Well, these rebels ended up having quite the "fall", didn't they? Once again, J. Vernon McGee observes, *"Because they attempted to divide the people, God judged them by dividing the people to separate them from Korah and his group, and then He divides the earth and it closes upon them. This is a testimony to what Galatians 6:7 says, 'Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.'"*

The profile a rebellious heart is rooted in pride and ends in destruction. The 250 men that joined Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were consumed by fire from the Lord. I guess you could say they were fired. I know, bad Dad pun. The terrible thing about pride-driven behavior is it rarely only impacts the prideful one. Almost

invariably, those closest to the prideful person get caught up in the destruction. We see that in the plague God put on the people for following these leaders – 14,700 people lost their lives. It's just as if a bomb goes off – who gets hurt the most? Those closest to the bomb. Be careful of those in your life who are very prideful. You may get hurt when their “pride bomb” goes off – it always does.

One final comment about our profile of the rebel. Immediately after Korah and the 250 men are killed by the Lord, the people complained Moses and Aaron had killed the Lord's people. Imagine the audacity of this claim! They've just witnessed a powerful judgment from God, yet they are still siding with the rebels. What's the real issue behind a rebellious heart? Romans 3:18 tells us, *“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”* When I take my eyes off the Lord, guess who becomes my focus? – Me. That is pride. If we choose to fear and regard the Lord's good intentions towards us, as well as trust Him as our Jehovah Jireh – the Lord who provides – we will be on a path that will prevent us from fitting the profile of a rebel.

Our second profile is that of a Godly leader. Our reading today offers some wonderful examples of Godly leadership by Moses, but it also provides a warning of what can go wrong when a leader loses focus. The confrontation with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram must have felt personal to Moses (remember Korah was his cousin). Did he lash back and get in their faces? No, he fell on his face turning the confrontation over to the Lord. This is another testimony to Moses' humility and meekness and the sign of a Godly leader. How much pain and suffering I could have avoided had I kept my mouth shut in confrontations and turned the problems over to the Lord.

A Godly leader also has compassion on the people he or she leads by telling them the truth and giving them a correct perspective. Moses tells the rebelling Levites in 16:9-10, *“Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the LORD's tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them? He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too.”*

Moses is invoking the mindset of what Hebrews 13:5 tells us, *“Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’”* Despite these very personal attacks on he and Aaron, Moses is trying to get them to see the truth of the abundance of what God has provided.

I don't know about you, but this is a lesson I am constantly needing to remember. If I look away from God's abundant provision and look to the world, which is perpetually telling me what I have isn't enough, I lose my contentment. Worse, I lose my sense of gratitude for what God has graciously given me. In this

pandemic, we have lost many of our freedoms, and there is a great risk to develop a complaining attitude. Absent the actual illness, has life really been all that bad? We still have clothes, we still have some money to buy food, and we have a home, condo, or apartment to protect us from the elements. While it's not ideal, we can still communicate with each other by phone or other technology like Zoom. These basic blessings put us in the top 5% of the most privileged people on the planet. We need our Godly leaders to remind us of the good that God continues to provide instead of getting caught up in our grumbling over a temporary restriction on our luxuries.

Godly leadership fully obeys the direction of the Lord. Upon the “firing” of the 250 men, the Lord instructs Moses to tell Eleazer to collect the sensors the men were carrying, hammer them out, melt them, and coat the altar with the materials. Notably, these sensors were bronze, and bronze is a symbol of judgment. This may have sounded like a strange request, but Eleazer did exactly as he was told. There is a pause in God providing the purpose of this task. So, the obedience of Moses and Eleazer is significant and notable. God does reveal the purpose in verse 40, *“This was to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the LORD, or he would become like Korah and his followers.”*

We've noted that Godly leadership is characterized by humility, compassion, truth telling, and obedience. Yet, we saw in Chapter 20 Moses had a failure in his striking the rock to produce water, as opposed to simply speaking to it as instructed by the Lord. When I look upon Moses' failure, I have great compassion for him. He had been leading these murmuring, ungrateful people of 40 years. I know how I feel after listening to someone complain for 40 seconds! Remember, back in Exodus 17 when, surprise, the people were again complaining and asking for water? Per God's instructions, Moses struck a particular rock and water came out of the rock to meet the needs of the people. In chapter 20, Moses has caught the virus of complaining – his failure was on several levels:

- He disobeyed God's orders to speak to the rock as opposed to striking it.
- He took the credit for getting water out of the rock when he said, “must *we* bring you water out of this rock?”
- He misrepresented the character of God. His attitude towards the people gave them the impression God was mad at them, which He wasn't.

Again, Moses was known for his great meekness, and it served him well in yielding to God. Therefore, we should take a closer look at what drove Moses to do such a thing. Jon Courson makes a wise assessment of those of us who get too comfortable in our character. *“The point of a person's greatest strength is more often than not the point of his greatest failure. Known for his meekness – which the Greeks defined as strength under control – Moses failed when he lost control and*

lost his temper. Peter was a man known for his courage – as one who walked on water in the midst of a storm and chopped off Malchus' ear. But where did he fail? He failed when he became a coward before a servant girl. Job was a man who was abundantly patient – and yet he was rebuked by the Lord for a lack of patience (Job 40)."

The penalty of not being able to enter the Promised Land may seem severe because of this one act, but there was great meaning behind this story. First, Moses is symbolic of the Law. Warren Wiersbe notes, *"The law (Moses) cannot give us our inheritance as declared in Galatians 3:18. Joshua, who would lead the people into the Promised Land, is a type of Jesus Christ, the conqueror."* The law cannot save us – it can only point to our need to find the One who can save us from our failure to fully obey the Law.

Wiersbe went on to observe, *"By striking the rock, Moses ruined a type of the Messiah who gives living water to His people. We saw this in John 7:37-39a, 'On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.'"* By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive.

1 Corinthians 10:4 tells us the rock that Moses struck was Christ. Again, Moses damaged the symbolism of the rock being a type of Messiah. Wiersbe continues, *"Our Lord gave Himself for us on the cross only once and doesn't have to be crucified (smitten) again. Hebrews 9:25-28a, 'Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise, Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many.'"*

We should not lose sight of the grace of God in the midst of Moses' failure as a leader. Despite his disobedience, the remarkable thing is God still allowed water to come from the rock. A good verse to hold close to your heart when we fail is Psalm 103:10, *"He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities."* God is so good, Amen?

A final testimony to Moses' meekness as a leader was that despite his certain disappointment, humiliation, frustration, embarrassment from his failure, along with the loss of his brother and sister, he submitted to God's discipline and continued leading the people.

We've covered profiles on the rebellious and the Godly leader, so we have one profile left to unveil – the High Priest. In the Old Testament, the High Priest was to come from the tribe of Levi. This person was chosen and anointed by God.

The High Priest was to be the spiritual leader of the Israelites and carried the great and awesome privilege of being the only person to enter the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and, eventually, the temple. Once a year, the High Priest would go through great cleansing, enter the Holy of Holies, and make petitions to the Lord on behalf of himself and the nation. He was to be an intermediary between God and the Israelites – an intercessor on behalf of his people.

As we noted earlier, there must have been a challenge to Aaron being God's choice as the High Priest. In Chapter 17, starting in verse 2, the Lord instructs Moses, *"Speak to the Israelites and get twelve staffs from them, one from the leader of each of their ancestral tribes. Write the name of each man on his staff. On the staff of Levi write Aaron's name, for there must be one staff for the head of each ancestral tribe. Place them in the tent of meeting in front of the ark of the covenant law, where I meet with you. The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout, and I will rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites."* The fact that all 12 tribes were to provide a staff, or rod, is an indication that this challenge of Aaron's position as the High Priest was widespread amongst the people.

Jon Courson comments, *"That God would use the rod as a validation for true ministry is only fitting, for in Isaiah 11:1-2, we see a rod come forth from the stem of Jesse, from the lineage of David, upon whom the Spirit of the Lord would rest, and in whom would be the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. The rod speaks of Jesus."* As we learn, the next morning, we find that only Aaron's staff budded, and not only budded, but also blossomed and produced almonds. Courson goes on to say, *"Not only did Aaron's rod blossom, but it yielded fruit. No one before Jesus, no one since Him has borne the fruit of the Spirit – of love characterized by joy, peace, and longsuffering, by gentleness, goodness, and faith, by meekness and temperance like He did."*

J. Vernon McGee makes an awesome observation about the symbolism of this event and Jesus being our High Priest. *"The rods were all made of dead wood. This is life out of death. Aaron's priesthood was confirmed by resurrection. The perfect illustration of the resurrection of Christ is Aaron's rod that budded. The priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ rests upon the fact of His resurrection. His resurrection made Him a priest. Aaron was God's called priest. The evidence was the budded rod – the resurrection."*

Hebrews 4:14-16 adds to the High Priest profile, *"Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find*

grace to help in time of need.” Later in Hebrews in chapter 7, verse 25 we read this joyous conclusion to the profile of Jesus, our High Priest, *“Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.”*

Finally, at the end of chapter 17, the fear of the Lord appears to be getting through the thick hearts and minds of the Israelites. They ask if they’re all going to die as a result of their rebellious acts. This is the most important question each human can ask; however, the death question isn’t really the question, though, is it? The real question is, *“What is going to happen when I die?”* That answer is given in the way we choose to live this life. Given we are saved by our faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection, so must we live a life that is characterized by a flesh death and a spirit resurrection. Jesus said, *“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”* Paul said, *“I die daily” in 1 Corinthians 15:31.*

When I read the Scriptures, I’m convicted of my flesh mentality and urged to surrender that mentality to the greater power and better intentions of the Holy Spirit that dwells in me. Living a death and resurrected Spirit-driven life comes with serious life challenges. As Jon Courson puts it, *“We can’t learn to be humble without being humiliated, to be forgiving without being wronged, or to be sweet without bitter experiences.”*

We’ve covered three profiles from today’s reading:

- The rebel whose pride issues lead to distorted perspectives and deadly consequences.
- The Godly leader whose character should be bathed in humility, compassion, truth telling, and obedience.
- The High Priest who is our intercessor and whose position is validated by death and resurrection.

As I look at these profiles, I see the mercy, grace, and love God interwoven through all three of them. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, so we all have rebellion in our sin nature that we must wrestle with. Yet, God was gracious to give us His Word to show us the destruction that comes with continuing with such a mindset. More importantly, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Despite the serious offenses of sin, God chose to view us in His original design for us and out of His love, made a way for us to be redeemed.

We see in a Godly leader like Moses, the blessings of a life led in humility. For 40 years the people grumbled and murmured. Most of us would have cracked long before Moses did. What kept Him going was His willingness to turn over the offenses to God to let Him handle the responses. He trusted the Lord’s power and provision in the manner Jesus seeks us to as He outlines in Matthew 11:28-30, *“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you*

rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

From the profile of the High Priest, we see the model of how to live this life in preparation for eternal life. We see sacrificial living – dying to the relentless urgings of our flesh and yielding to the greater power of the Holy Spirit that indwells in every believer. We experience and demonstrate resurrection power by becoming bold in our testimonies of lives lived for glorifying the holiness, goodness, and love of God through loving Him and loving those He’s placed in our lives. We intercede for our weaker brothers and sisters and our unbelieving family members, friends, and co-workers through prayer and sacrificial servanthood.

Chapter 20 marks the end of the wandering in the wilderness for the Nation of Israel. From this point forward, they start marching towards the Promised Land. Do you feel you have been wandering? Certainly, the pandemic has thrown many of us off our game and distracted us from what is truly important, which is loving God and loving others. This can be difficult, but difficulties either bring out the best in people or the worst; they either mature us or make us more childish. (James 1:2-8) Are you ready to turn off the news, stop listening to the doom and gloom, and live differently? If your answer is “yes”, I invite you to pick up your cross, die daily, and allow the love of God to compel you to live a life of purpose and start marching. We know our Promised Land – let’s see if we can bring some more with us. Amen? Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Holy Word. We thank You for the examples You provide us – both the good and the bad – to reveal the truth to us. As You know, we are living in a time of great deception, so we ask that You relentlessly speak Your truth to us, write it on our hearts, and, by Your Spirit, empower us to trust Your provision so much as to allow us to live sacrificially, purposefully, and lovingly. In Jesus name. Amen.