

NUMBERS 15-18 SABBATH-BREAKER; KORAH'S REBELLION; TITHING

In the last study, we ended in a very sad note. After the Israelites rebelled ten times against God and his appointed leaders, God said that was enough. He saw the first generation of Israelites were still too mentally tied up with their Egyptian culture and would never allow themselves to be truly converted in their minds and have faith. As Stephen so aptly noted in Acts 7:38-39, "This is he [Moses] who received the living oracles to give to us...whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their *hearts* they turned back to Egypt."

Yet, not all was lost. God did not attribute the same faults to their children and knew these were still pliable enough to develop true faith. So he told them, "But your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in, and *they* shall know the land which you have despised" (Num. 14:31).

So now in chapter 15 God explains to them the proper attitude to have before Him. He is to be honored with free-will offerings from the flocks and lands. "Because the adult generation of Israel had been sentenced to die in the desert," says *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, "it became necessary for the younger ones to understand the requirements of their covenant relationship. Nothing was more central to this than the presentation of *offerings*...These burnt and freewill offerings were votive, fellowship, and thank or praise offerings. All the people of Israel were enjoined to make these offerings whether they were native-born or alien." One example of these offerings we have today are the Holy Day offerings, expressing gratefulness.

God says, "*One ordinance* shall be for you of the assembly and for the stranger who dwells with you, and ordinance forever throughout your generations, as you are, so shall the stranger be before the Lord" (Num. 15:15). We see here the principle that God is not a respecter of persons. "The point in these notes about the alien was to *ensure* that the commonwealth of Israel would *always* be open to proselytes [Gentile converts]. Indeed, the charter of Israel's faith embraces "all peoples on earth" (Gen 12:3). Because the stranger, the one who sojourns with Israel, was under the same Law, he also was able to bring pleasure to the Lord. If the stranger continues to be a pleaser of God, soon he might become a part of the community as a whole. In Israel the concept of

native and alien was not designed to enforce the distinction forever but to provide *a process for assimilation*. While still an alien, the proselyte must *learn* to worship in the same manner as the native populace; and together they needed to learn their worship from the Lord." This principle still applies today as potential converts learn God's laws in the congregation until they become full members.

We now see a wrong example of not honoring God--a grievous violation of one of God's commandments. God says what is the penalty for deliberate and rebellious sin. "But the person who does anything *presumptuously*, whether he is native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the Lord, and he shall be cut-off from among his people. Because he has *despised* the word of the Lord, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be upon him" (15:30-31).

Immediately after this comes the case of a rebellious Sabbath-breaker. "Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him under guard, because it had not been explained what should be done to him. Then the Lord said to Moses, 'The man must surely be put to death, all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.' So, as the Lord commanded Moses, all the congregation brought him outside the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died" (15:32-36).

The decision might seem unnecessarily cruel, but consider the facts: 1) Moses and the leaders weren't sure whether this was a deliberate sin or from ignorance. 2) They placed the guilty man in jail until the correct sentence was decided. 3) They consulted God, who knows all the hearts. 4) God saw this was a deliberate, intentional sin and that the person was rebellious to His laws. So if people want to question the judgment, they have to blame God for the decision—not Moses or the people.

"Quite another case is presented by defiant sin," says *The Expositor's Commentary*, "The Hebrew idiom is 'sins with a high hand,' a posture of arrogance, blasphemy, and revolt. Unlike the unintentional sins, for which there are provisions of

God's mercy, one who sets his hand defiantly to despise the word of God and to blaspheme his name must be punished. The punishment is one of death, not just banishment or exile. Such a person is gone! Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., compares the "sin of the high hand" of this passage with the NT expression of the offense of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 10:26-39). He writes, 'As such it becomes an unpardonable sin, since it represents high treason and revolt against God.' This verse should not be understood to include all manner of evil actions; for most were subject to forgiveness. The verse deals with outrageous behavior of blasphemy, not mild infractions...The point of the story is that Sabbath breaking is the *act of a raised fist* in defiance of the Lord; the offense strikes at the very center of Israel's responsibility before the Lord. By his action this man was *thumbing his nose* at God. The penalty for breaking the Sabbath was death (Ex. 31:15). As in the case of the willful blasphemer (Lev. 24:10-16), the Sabbath breaker was guilty of high-handed rebellion and was judged with death." This is still a lesson for all of us about keeping the sanctity of the Sabbath and not thumbing our noses at God.

Next, as a reminder of the importance of keeping His commandments, God gives the carnal Israelites a physical symbol to remember His commandments—the wearing of tassels. *The Expositor's Commentary* says: "The story of the execution of the high-handed offender is designed to bring fear to all people that they, too, might be led to the breaking of the demands of the Lord in his Law. Hence, a most practical device is given, the wearing of tassels on one's garment as a perpetual reminder of the demands of God in his Torah or Law. Again, this is a mark of grace—as is all of the Torah. The reason for the tassels is given in this paragraph. As one would walk along, the tassels would swirl about at the edge of his garment. These would be excellent memory prods to keep faith with the Torah, to obey the commands of God. Each step of the believer was to be encircled by tassels that symbolized the restraints and freedoms of knowing Yahweh. The tassels were on the fringes of the garment, with special cords on the corners made of blue (or violet) color. This passage is the legislation that establishes the wearing of the tallis (or tallith), the traditional prayer shawl of

Israel (and which is the pattern for the flag of the state of Israel today)."

We do not need to use tassels today as memory devices to remember all of God's laws. Instead, God's Spirit writes His laws on our hearts and minds (Hebrews 8:10), helping us to remember all of His commands (John 14:26).

Now the attention turns to more murmurings from the Israelites. Some were resentful at the news of not entering the Promised Land and the recent defeat by the Amalekites.

This time, the rebellion was led by a relative of Moses, Korah, and many other leaders. "And they rose up before Moses with some of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, representatives of the congregation, men of renown. They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, 'You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?'" (16:2-3).

The real reason though was blind ambition by a trusted relative of Moses. In Ex. 6:18-21 we read that Korah was the next in line after Moses in the leadership of the Kohath family, descendants of Levi. Amram, the firstborn of Kohath, was the father of Aaron and Moses. Izhar, brother of Amram, was the father of Korah, and so Korah is Moses' first cousin!

When Moses saw this rebellion, his selfless nature made him worry more for them than for himself. "So when Moses heard it, he fell on his face, and he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, 'Tomorrow morning the Lord will show who is His and who is holy, and will cause him to come near to Him. That one whom He chooses He will cause to come near to Him. Do this: Take censers, Korah and all your company; put fire in them and put incense in them before the Lord tomorrow, and it shall be that the man whom the Lord chooses is the holy one. You take too much upon yourselves, you sons of Levi! Then Moses said to Korah, 'Hear now, you sons of Levi: Is it a small thing to you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the work of the tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to serve them...Are you seeking the priesthood also?'" (16:4-10).

Moses saw the true reason—Korah and his Levitical brethren were not content with their high functions—they wanted to be part of the Aaronic priesthood—it seems you can never have enough!

When Moses ordered them to meet with him, they refused, saying, “We will not go up! Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of *a land flowing with milk and honey*, to kill us in the wilderness that you should keep acting like a prince over us? Moreover you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up!”

Moses was greatly offended by their accusations and ingratitude. Notice they called Egypt “the land flowing with milk and honey!” What an insult to God! So he said to God, “Do not respect their offering. I have not taken one donkey from them, nor have I hurt one of them.”

So when they finally met, God was ready to consume the entire group, but again, Moses and Aaron intervened, asking why all had to suffer when this was the work of a few. So God accepted their petition, and then caused the earth to open up and swallow all the rebellious people. Their censers were melted and made a covering on the altar, “as a memorial to the children of Israel that no outsider, who is not a descendant of Aaron, should come near to offer incense before God” (16:40).

You would think the rest of the Israelites would have learned the lesson and become respectful toward Moses and Aaron, but that was not the case.

“On the next day all the congregation...complained against Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘You have killed the people of God!’”

God again intervenes, saying, ‘Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.’ And they fell on their faces. So Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take a censer and put fire in it from the altar, put incense on it, and take it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them; for the wrath has gone out from the Lord. The plague has begun.’ Aaron was able to intervene and the plague was stopped. Still, it was important to teach the Israelites who were the priests, and that no one else would challenge this. So God had all the leaders of the tribes inscribe in their staffs the name of their tribe. God then said, “and it shall be that the rod of the man whom I choose will blossom; thus I

will rid Myself of the complains of the children of Israel, which they make against you” (17:5).

The next day, it was Aaron’s rod that blossomed and produced ripe almonds—a great miracle since the rod was actually a dead branch! The rest of the rods were the same, so it showed who God was working through. God then said, “Bring Aaron’s rod back before the Testimony, to be kept as a sign against the rebels, that you may put their complaints away from Me, lest they die” (17:10).

There are two lessons to be learned here. 1) We should be respectful of the leaders God chooses, and follow them as long as they are faithful to God’s laws. 2) Aaron’s rod inside the Ark is a reminder of what God will give His people in His kingdom—they will be priests to Him (Rev. 1:6; 5:10).

In chapter 18, God continues explaining the rights of the priests and Levites. He says, “Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance” (18:21). To Aaron and his sons, and their families, belonged all the tabernacle offerings for their sustenance. This required Aaron and his sons to live by faith. Having no worldly jobs or income, they depended entirely on God. The Levites would only have small lots of land for the purpose of keeping a few animals to provide their daily needs. Today, as the book of Hebrews explains, God has directed that tithes and offerings go to different recipients—those who represent the Melchizedek priesthood (see Hebrews 7).

Leadership today, as in ancient Israel, carries great responsibility and accountability. Every consideration must be given to lead in a righteous way, using mature wisdom in following all the laws and principles of God. Those in God’s Church are told not to take too much upon themselves. Just as the Levitical priesthood was not for all Israelites, so being ordained as a minister of Jesus Christ is not for every member. As James said, “Let not many of you become teachers [which was anciently the responsibility of the priests and Levites], knowing that we [teachers, as James was] shall receive a stricter judgment” (James 3:1). Leaders today will “bear the iniquity” if they misuse their offices.