

The Holiness of God

Numbers 16–19

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Four Chapters, One Question

We are looking at four chapters today: Numbers 16, 17, 18, and 19. Usually, because of the nature of a sermon, the passages preached are just a few verses. But sometimes, to understand a passage, we need the larger narrative. That is what we are doing today. These four chapters also sit in the very middle of the book of Numbers, and I believe they represent the central theological issue of the entire book: the holiness of God.

By way of review — the book of Numbers begins with the people of Israel still at Mount Sinai. It is there that they entered into a covenantal agreement with the Holy God and received from him the law that defines how this Holy God will dwell among the people. In the first nine chapters, a census is taken, the different tribal units are arranged around the tabernacle, the families of the Levites are assigned their separate duties, and the Passover is celebrated. Then, in chapter 10, the people depart and head toward the promised land. They arrive at its southern border and send out spies to report on the land and its inhabitants. The spies return with a report of fear, and that fear causes the people to say to God: we would rather die in the wilderness. And God says, so be it. This begins the forty-year journey in the wilderness.

Chapter 15, our passage from last week, is a chapter of instructions from the Lord for this time in the wilderness. Those instructions could be summarized simply: keep your eyes fixed on the future promises of God; practice forgiveness; and remember the Lord — his salvation, his presence, and his commands. Good instructions for us today.

We come now to chapter 16, which is, I think, the first and only truly *organized* rebellion in the book. All the other moments of rebellion are reactionary — grumbling in response to circumstances. This time, the rebellion has been thought out and planned, and its goal is twofold: to displace Moses as leader and to displace Aaron as high priest.

The Test of Holiness

It begins in Numbers 16:1–2:

Now Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men. And they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men.

I want to pause and highlight something here. When the different tribes were organized around the tabernacle back in chapter 2, the family of Reuben was positioned to the south. In chapter 3, when the Levites are arranged around the tabernacle according to the descendants of Levi, the families of Kohath are also in the south. This means that Korah — a descendant of Kohath — and Dathan, Abiram, and On — descendants of Reuben — all share the same campsite. That is what connects them. I imagine that after those four spent their days complaining about everything, their discontent spread to others, until they had enlisted 250 chiefs of the congregation to join them. They all come before Moses and demand that he resign.

They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, “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?”

In other words: you have messed up, you have crossed a line, the laws are too strict, the food is too plain, you promised us a land of milk and honey that now we will never see. It is time for you to step down.

Moses responds to them, in effect: you want this job? Let’s find out who is qualified for it. He does not exactly say that, but this is what he says:

When Moses heard it, he fell on his face, and he said to Korah and all his company, “In the morning the LORD will show who is his, and who is holy, and will bring him near to him. The one whom he chooses he will bring near to him.”

Notice that this is not simply a test of leadership. It is a test of *holiness*. The people have come before Moses saying, “We are holy” — and Moses is saying, then let us put that to the test. The standard against which their holiness will be measured is the holiness of God himself.

Here is how the test will be carried out:

“Do this: take censers, Korah and all his company; put fire in them and put incense on them before the LORD tomorrow, and the man whom the LORD chooses shall be the holy one.”

A censer was likely a small shovel used to tend the fire. The instruction is to take a hot coal and hold it in the censer, with incense placed upon it — and notice the detail — *before the*

Lord. You are placing yourself into the very presence of the Holy God. Moses ends these instructions by saying plainly: “You have gone too far, sons of Levi!”

Meanwhile, Dathan and Abiram have a different strategy for removing Moses from office. They are going on strike. They refuse to participate in anything Moses says. In verse 12 we read:

And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and they said, “We will not come up.”

They have chosen to disengage from the assembly of God’s people. And unfortunately, in their rebellion, their own families will face the consequences. What follows is a litany of complaints against Moses explaining why they reject his leadership. Moses’ response is essentially: it is not me you are rejecting, but the Lord.

The next day comes, and it is time for the test of holiness.

So every man took his censer and put fire in them and laid incense on them and stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron. Then Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

And then look at what happens:

And the glory of the LORD appeared to all the congregation.

The Lord stepped from behind the curtain, so to speak. He is saying: you claimed you were holy, able to come before me — well, here I am, in the full presence of my holiness and my glory. And what follows is sobering:

And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, “Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.”

Moses and Aaron — because they understand the holiness of God — fall on their faces before the Lord and pray:

“O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and will you be angry with all the congregation?”

They are presenting an argument to the Lord that we will return to in a moment. But it is here, before the conversation is finished, that we see the first consequence of standing in the presence of the Holy God without the holiness to match it.

What Does It Mean for God to Be Holy?

Before moving further into the narrative, I want to stop and do some careful theology about this word *holy* and what it means for God to be holy.

The word *holy*, as used in Scripture, carries three distinct but related meanings.

First, holy means *purity* — moral purity, and the complete absence of sin. In our Scripture memory passage from 1 John 1:5, we read that “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” The Greek is even more emphatic: *κα σκοτία να τ ο κ σιν ο δεμία* — not even a trace of darkness exists in him. That is holiness. When we as God’s people are called to be holy, I believe this is the primary meaning in view.

Second, holy means *set apart* — to be chosen and consecrated for a particular purpose. Growing up, my mother had dishes that were only brought out when company came. They were set apart, and if I tried to microwave a hot dog on one of them, there would have been consequences. That is the sense of *sacred* or *sanctified*. In our passage today this definition is woven all through the narrative: *the LORD will show you who is holy, who he has chosen*. To be holy is to be set apart by God for God.

But third, and most importantly, undergirding both of these definitions is the truth that holy means *other*. Not just different in the sense of being chosen, but different in terms of *essence*. God is wholly other. This wholly-otherness of God refers to his transcendence, his glory, his sovereignty, his power, his being the Creator. There is nothing in creation that is like him.

Let me try an analogy, a rough one, to describe what it means for God to be wholly other. Think of a large coal-fired power plant. Such a plant might generate 50,000 megawatts of electricity in a day. Your cell phone needs roughly five watts to charge. Fifty thousand megawatts is fifty billion watts, and you need one hundred-millionth of one percent of that output to charge your phone. What would happen if you walked up to that power plant and tried to plug your phone directly into the current being generated? You would die. The power would be so immense that the attempt itself would be fatal. Thankfully, we have substations and transformers that step down the power so that by the time it reaches our homes, we can use it safely. There is still enough electricity in our walls to cause serious harm — but proper wiring and following the instructions allows us to enjoy its benefits without being destroyed.

God is like that power station, only infinitely more so. You cannot simply plug into him. You cannot simply walk into his presence. There is a need for substations and transformers — and in a very real sense, that is what the tabernacle provides. The tabernacle, with all of its laws and regulations, creates the conditions under which the Glory of God may dwell among the people and the people, represented in the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, may approach the Holy God who is wholly other.

Our God is so holy that he is, in his natural state, unapproachable. Not because he is aloof or keeps himself at a distance by disposition, but because he is so glorious, so powerful, so pure in such a magnitude that to approach him unaided is to court death. This is exactly what is happening in our passage. The people have come before Moses and said, “We are holy — we can stand in the presence of God.” And so their claim is put to the test by having them do precisely that.

When the 250 leaders of the revolt came before God with their little censers burning incense, God showed up. As we read in verse 19, “the glory of the LORD appeared to all the congregation.” The first to die are the leaders of the revolt: Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. The Holy God *creates* something new — that is the precise word used in verse 30, the same word used in Genesis 1 — the ground itself comes alive and opens its mouth and swallows their entire households:

And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.

And as for those men who had tried to plug their censers directly into the holiness of God:

And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men offering the incense.

They all failed the holiness test when measured against the holiness of God.

The very next day, the people complain: “You have killed the people of the LORD.” And the glory of the LORD appears again. Moses had argued back in verse 22 — do not kill all for the sins of one. But here we begin to see the problem with that argument: there is not one among the people who is sinless, not one who is holy and pure. And so the plague breaks out, and Moses and Aaron rush to make atonement to stop it:

So Aaron took it as Moses said and ran into the midst of the assembly. And behold, the plague had already begun among the people. And he put on the incense and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped. Now those who died in the plague were 14,700, besides those who died in the affair of Korah.

Who Is the Holy One? The Vindication of Aaron

Chapter 16 was the test of holiness. Chapter 17 is a second test, this one to vindicate Aaron as God's chosen high priest. The instructions are simple: each tribe is to write its name on a staff and place all of them in the tabernacle overnight. Aaron writes his name on the staff of the tribe of Levi. The next morning, the people go to look, and one staff is different from all the others:

On the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony, and behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds.

Aaron's priesthood was vindicated. God's choice was made clear by something that had been dead coming back to life.

And it is now, at the end of chapter 17, that we arrive at the most important question in the entire book of Numbers:

And the people of Israel said to Moses, "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?"

If the Lord is so wholly other that he causes the earth to swallow people alive, fire to consume people, and plagues to break out that kill thousands — how can anyone approach this Holy God and live?

Maybe for the first time, the people understand what it means for God to be holy. Not just what it means *for him* to be holy, but what it means *for them* to be near one who is holy. No one can come near. Are we all to perish?

How Shall We Approach the Holy God?

Chapters 18 and 19 are the answer to that question. They describe how it is possible to approach the tabernacle where the glory of God dwells, and together they give two answers.

The first answer is found in chapter 18: you approach the tabernacle not on your own, but through a priest chosen by God who intercedes for you. This priest — who represents the people and intercedes for the people — is described as a *gift*:

And behold, I have taken your brothers the Levites from among the people of Israel. They are a gift to you, given to the LORD, to do the service of the tent of meeting.

Reading through the rest of chapter 18, a picture of the priestly role takes shape. The priests enter into the veil. They guard and protect the things that are holy. They carry the concerns and burdens of the people before God, sharing in the suffering of the people through their participation in the sacrifices and offerings. They lead the people in thanksgiving and praise. They live differently — set apart — from the people around them. God himself is their inheritance. And they do the work that the Lord requires. The first part of the answer to “are we all to perish?” is this: you come near to God through a priest who represents and intercedes for you.

The second answer is found in chapter 19. You come near to the Holy God through an atoning sacrifice that washes away your impurity. The instructions given here concern what is called the “water of impurity.” They begin with the sacrifice of a red heifer — unblemished, the most prized and honored animal imaginable — as a sin offering. After the sacrifice, the priests take the ashes of the red heifer, place them in a jar, and store that jar outside the camp. When a person has been made impure by contact with death, some of those ashes are taken from the jar, mixed into water, and used to wash the defiled person. That water, carrying the ashes of the red heifer, removes the impurity and restores the person’s ability to approach the tabernacle. The key verse is verse 13:

Whoever touches a dead person, the body of anyone who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from Israel; because the water for impurity was not thrown on him, he shall be unclean. His uncleanness is still on him.

There are many Jewish people today who hold the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem as a present goal, believing it is necessary for the coming of the Messiah. And central to that rebuilding, as we have just read, would be the sacrifice of a red heifer — because without the waters of impurity, no one can approach the tabernacle without defiling it. Those conversations about the future temple are inseparable from conversations about the red heifer.

I do not believe another temple needs to be built. And I do not believe a red heifer needs to be sacrificed today. I say this because I believe that Jesus has fulfilled the law. Which means that everything these chapters describe — how a person approaches the Holy God — is fulfilled in Jesus. All of it.

Jesus is the high priest chosen by God to represent and intercede for us. Jesus is the one who enters the veil. Jesus shares in our suffering. Jesus, who represents us before the Father, gives full glory and honor to the Father through his perfect obedience. Jesus is the one who does the work that the Father requires. Jesus is the inheritor of all things. Jesus is the one who is holy —

seen in his sinless life and moral purity. And Jesus is the priceless sacrifice without blemish, whose atoning work must be applied to you and me who are stained by death.

We are washed and made pure through faith in Jesus Christ. Just as those who were leprous — even those who were dead — were made pure when Jesus touched them, so too are we. Our impurities are removed when, through faith, we are washed by his atoning sacrifice. And it is only through Jesus — exclusively through Jesus — that we may approach, pass through the veil, and enter into the very presence of God. As the writer of Hebrews says:

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

— Hebrews 9:13–14

The Exclusive Claim of the Holy One

Whenever that word *exclusive* is used today, people push back: you cannot say that, you are being exclusionary. Well, it is true — I am being exclusive. There is no other name under heaven by which a person is saved except through Jesus Christ, for he alone is the Holy One of God. There is no other.

How do we know this is true? His name was written in blood upon a staff, inscribed by nails. Jesus died. He truly died. And just as Aaron's staff — which was dead — came back to life, vindicating Aaron as the one chosen exclusively by God to be high priest, so too with Jesus. The resurrection vindicates God's choosing of Jesus. It reveals him to be the one appointed by God as the Christ and our great High Priest.

Jesus is holy because he is sinless — morally pure.

Jesus is holy because he is the chosen one of God, vindicated by the resurrection — he who was dead has come to life.

And Jesus is holy because he is wholly other, begotten of the Father. That word *begotten*, as in John 3:16 — “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son” — does not mean that Jesus is the Father's progeny or a created being. It means that Jesus shares in the same essence as the wholly other God. It means that Jesus is Holy, Holy, Holy.

How are we to approach this Holy God? We do so through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

What Does It Mean for Us to Be Holy?

We close with a question we cannot avoid. Scripture calls us to be holy, as God is holy. What does that mean for you and me?

It means, first, that we are chosen by God for a purpose — set apart, not as an end in itself, but for his mission in the world.

It means, second, that we are wholly other to this world — not conformed to its patterns, not shaped by its values, but marked by the God whose people we are.

And it means, third, that we pursue moral purity — not as the ground of our standing before God, which rests entirely on Christ, but as the genuine fruit of being washed by the one who is holy.

Are we all to perish? No. Not those who have been washed by the water of the one who offered himself without blemish. Thanks be to God.

Amen.