

Sanctification And Holiness (Part 3)

The Three Miracles of Numbers 16 & 17

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Given 21-Jul-01; Sermon #512

We are going to continue on the theme of sanctification, the sacrifices, and Pentecost, and just as a reminder we are going to go back to I Peter 2.

I Peter 2:5 You also, as lively [or living] stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

I Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that you should show forth the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Two times Peter reminds us that we are called to be part of a priesthood. It is not just an ordinary priesthood, it is a *royal* priesthood.

In the last sermon we went through about one-half of Numbers 16, setting the stage for what God is going to do in order to make *clear* who was appointed to the priesthood responsibilities, and who was not. This is very important to us in regard to what Peter said that we are called to. We are called to be part of a priesthood. The church *is* a priesthood.

In Numbers 16 we saw in verse 5 four elements given regarding the qualifications that one must need in order to be able to officially function as a priest. They are:

Number One : There must be no possibility of election by people. Thus we find under the New Covenant that no man comes to Christ unless drawn of the Father. There is no volunteering. That would be electing oneself to be part of the church. Instead God calls. God elects, God appoints, and God appoints on the basis of His judgment only. This is not a matter of people's intelligence or being able to discover this on their own.

Number Two : Very important to practical application is that the priest must understand that he belongs solely to God. He is not his own, and technically he does not even belong to his own nation either. His life is entirely given up to God. Paul says, "We are not our own. We are bought with a price." In another place he says, "Our kingdom is in heaven." It is not an earthly kingdom, an earthly nation to which we now belong.

Number Three : Since the priest was the property of God, like everything else belonging to God, he becomes holy in a more specific way. Throughout the New Testament we are called "saints," and the word "saints" means "**holy ones**"—those set apart. We are seeing that we are "set apart" to be a king and a priest. Right now we are concentrating on the priestly aspect.

Number Four : Being **holy** was the qualification for the fourth element, which is *the priests must draw near to God*, and that is their exclusive prerogative and duty. Nobody else is permitted to do what they do in the service of God. Whatever they do in their function, it is dominated by the fact that they must "draw near" to God in order to perform it.

More is going to be said about this later on in the series, but one of the features of Numbers 16 is to show that everybody is not holy in exactly the same way. And though everybody God calls is holy in terms of being part of either Israel or of the church, not everybody is called to the same functions within those institutions. For example, in the Tabernacle only those of the Levitical family of Kohath were appointed to carry the ark, the candlestick, the table, and the altar whenever it was transported. Nobody else was *holy* for that purpose. Those from the Levitical family of Gershon carried the Tabernacle coverings, hangings, and cords. Those from the Levitical family of Merari carried boards, bars, pillars, and sockets. The priesthood was from the family of Aaron, who was of Kohath.

None of this was or is intended to imply that these people were better than anybody else. It was rather an administrative appointment, and the purpose of it was to keep things organized. However, whenever God makes an appointment He expects it to be carried out, and He does not want others thinking that He has made some kind of a mistake choosing those whom He chose. If His choices are not respected, chaos is the inevitable result.

In addition, Numbers 16 reveals that God interprets disrespect of His appointing as a calling of *Him* into account, and at the very least a lack of faith, and depending upon the attitude involved, as outright rebellion.

In Numbers 16, the rebels' carnality and lack of faith is clearly seen in that they did not see God at all. Their attack was on what they could see: Moses and Aaron. They refused to cooperate and made very serious accusations against them. Moses and Aaron though, and especially Moses, revealed their spirituality in that they saw it, they perceived it, and they judged what was happening as an attack against God. They saw God. Understand what I mean about the word "saw." It is not that they literally saw with their eyes, but in their mind's eye their spirituality was such that they saw it, perceived it, judged it, as an attack on God.

We reached the place at the end of that sermon where Moses was setting the stage for the next morning's appearance before God of both groups. It was set so that both would be prepared to carry out their responsibilities with all of Israel watching what was going on. At the end of that sermon I mentioned that God performed three miracles in order to show who it was that He chose to be the head of the priesthood.

Turn now to Numbers 16:15 What we are going to look at here is miracle Number One: the execution of the rebels.

Numbers 16:15-19 And Moses was very wroth, and said unto the LORD, Respect not you their offering: I have not taken one ass from them, neither have I hurt one of them. And Moses said unto Korah, Be you and all your company before the LORD, you, and they, and Aaron, tomorrow: And take every man his censer, and put incense in them, and bring you before the LORD every man his censer, two hundred and fifty censers; you also, and Aaron, each of you his censer. And they took every man his censer, [By now it is the next morning.] and put fire in them, and laid incense thereon, and stood in the door of the tabernacle of the congregation with Moses and Aaron. And Korah gathered all the congregation against them unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation: and the glory of the LORD appeared unto all the congregation.

So Moses was there standing, let us say, somewhat apart from Aaron. Aaron though was right at the door of the Tabernacle with his censer, with coals in it, and the incense wafting up before him. Apparently not too far away, certainly within the camp, we have the 250 men, and we have Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. They have censers. At least the 250 men do, and Korah, Dathan, and Abiram are somewhat near there.

They all did at least that much, but it appears that the 250 men did not come to the Tabernacle, but remained somewhere near their tents. Already we see a defiant attitude carried right through. They did part of what Moses said, but they did not follow through completely with what he said to do, and so one piece of layer to this is being added for everything that goes on, and we can begin to see very clearly that God is justified in what He is about to do here.

Suddenly the glory of the Lord appears in their midst, and it must have been dramatic, sort of like one second there was nothing, and all of a sudden—Whoosh!—a great light appeared.

Numbers 16:20-22 And the LORD spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, Separate yourselves from among this congregation that I may consume them in a moment. And they [Moses and Aaron] fell upon their faces, and said, O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and will you be wroth with all the congregation?

Moses and Aaron again display their mindset by appealing for mercy for the rebels, even for them, and for the rest of the congregation which was not leaders.

Numbers 16:23-27 And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the congregation, saying, Get you up from about the tabernacle of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. And Moses rose up and went unto Dathan and Abiram; [Apparently he had to walk a bit to get to where they were] and the elders of Israel followed him. And he spoke unto the congregation, saying, Depart, I pray you [I plead with you, I beg you] from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be consumed in all their sins. So they got

up from the tabernacle of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, on every side: and Dathan and Abiram came out, and stood in the door of their tents, and their wives, and their sons, and their little children.

That is really interesting that Dathan and Abiram came out and stood in the door of their tents, because apparently they did not even come outside of their tents up till this time. This shows what an attitude they had.

Now God acceded to part of Moses' and Aaron's request about sparing those who were innocent of what was going on there by sending Moses to instruct those not directly involved in the rebellion to get away from the living quarters of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, thus assuring Moses that God was not going to kill innocent bystanders even though the judgment was going to be very severe.

There is a very interesting play on the word "tabernacle" that appears in verse 24, in that the word that is used there is normally used for *God's* tabernacle rather than the word that would normally be translated "tent." Is there a bit of dark humor from God that He is about to destroy their tabernacle, which was their tent? He is saying, "The tabernacle you are serving is not *My* tabernacle. It's *your* tabernacle."

By the time verse 27 takes place, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram must have been standing with their families near their tents, but apart from the 250. In verse 28 Moses makes an announcement to the entire congregation.

Numbers 16:28-29 And Moses said, Hereby you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these works; for I have not done them of my own mind. [Now here comes the proof.] If these men die the common death of all men, [In other words, that they die in bed, or die of a disease], or if they be visited after the visitation of all men; then the LORD has not sent me.

Moses is doing this to validate his own position, and of course Aaron's as well. And he is assuring them.

Numbers 16:30 But if the LORD make a new thing, and the earth open her mouth, and swallow them up, with all that appertains unto them, and they go down living into the pit; then you shall understand that these men have provoked the LORD.

So we have the parameters of the judgment. This was done in order to make it very clear that God's judgment and the vindication of God's choice of Moses and Aaron was from God, because something was going to happen that was so far beyond the power of a man that you would think nobody would be able to deny what they saw. The judgment was going to be a frightful thing, because as the way this is described, Moses said that the earth was going to open its mouth like a huge ravenous monster and was going to eat them alive.

Numbers 16:31-34 And it came to pass, as he had made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground clave asunder that was under them. And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up, and their houses, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods. They, and all that appertained to them went down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them: and they perished from among the congregation. And all Israel that were round about them fled at the cry of them: for they said, Lest the earth swallow us up also.

Immediately on the heels of what Moses said, it occurred. The earth split open, and it must have made a horrible wrenching, grinding sound. As it split open, it swallowed Korah, Dathan, Abiram, their tents, and all of their households.

There is something very interesting in Numbers 26:9.

Numbers 26:9-11 And the sons of Eliab; Nemuel, and Dathan, and Abiram. This is that Dathan and Abiram, which were famous in the congregation, who strove against Moses and against Aaron in the company of Korah, when they strove against the LORD: And the

earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up together with Korah, when that company died, what time the fire devoured two hundred and fifty men; and they became a sign. Notwithstanding, the children of Korah died not.

Is that not interesting? Dathan died. Abiram died, their wives and children, and grandchildren died. Their tents were all swallowed up. Korah died with them, but somehow or another Korah's children were separated away, and they did not die. Now why? As we are going to see in just a little bit, God could have sought them out, but He did not. He let them live. Not only did He let them live, we find their names later on in the Bible, that the sons of Korah were honored to be among the singers of Israel, performing before God. Not only that, the sons of Korah are responsible for eleven psalms that appear in the Bible.

I can only think of three reasons why this occurred. One is that they did not join with their father in the rebellion. They did not agree with him, and so when those people gathered together, they went with the whole group rather than with the 250, and their own father. They abandoned their father. But like I said, even if they had abandoned their father, God could have still sought them out with what happened in just a minute.

There is another reason. Maybe He did not kill them because they were Levites, and the Levites indeed did have part and parcel of the work in the Tabernacle, whereas Dathan and Abiram were Reubenites, and not Levites.

A third possibility is that God let them continue to live as a witness of His mercy, so that He made a clear distinction here, and as a witness to the whole rest of the Levites, showing that when God forgives He really forgives. He allowed them to carry the shame, if I can put it that way, of what their family—their forefather—did, and they had to bear that for the rest of their existence before all Israel.

So there are three reasons. I am sure it was done really to glorify God.

Numbers 16:35 And there came out a fire from the LORD, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men that offered incense.

The 250 men did not go down into the pit when the earth opened its mouth. They were standing off a little bit to the side. This is why I said that God could have sought out the sons of Korah with the lightning bolts that He had apparently sent among the 250, and He could have burned the sons of Korah the same way that He burned these others, but He did not. It provides a dramatic effect to the fact that He did not do that with the sons of Korah as He did with the 250, and even to their own father.

Numbers 16:36-40 And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest, that he take up the censers out of the burning, and scatter you the fire yonder; for they are hallowed. The censers of these sinners against their own souls, let them make them broad plates for a covering of the altar: for they offered them before the LORD, therefore they are hallowed: and they shall be a sign unto the children of Israel. And Eleazar the priest took the brazen censers, wherewith they that were burnt had offered; and they were made broad plates for a covering of the altar: To be a memorial unto the children of Israel, that no stranger, which is not of the seed of Aaron come near to offer incense before the LORD; that he be not as Korah, and as his company: as the LORD said to him by the hand of Moses.

The next thing was that Eleazar, and of course I am sure it was done by those that Eleazar appointed to the responsibility, was to gather up the 250 censers of the rebels. They were given specific directions regarding the fire. They not only had to gather up the censers, but they had to make sure that the coals were taken somewhere away from where the rebels had either done their thing, or maybe beyond the camp.

That spurs a question. Why pick up the censer but scatter the coals? He specifically says that the censers are holy, but He does not say the coals are holy. Is it possible that the coals did not come from under the altar from where they were supposed to come from, but that they did like Nadab and Abihu, and took coals from a common profane fire, and since it was not holy fire, it had to be distributed somewhere outside of the *holy* camp? We are going to come back to this later on, because this becomes very interesting. I do not know whether we will get to it in this sermon, but it begins to become very interesting a little bit later.

Now this thing is not over yet, because verse 41 tells us something that happened the very next day.

Numbers 16:41 But on the morrow all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron, saying, You have killed the people of the LORD.

This thing is getting worse by the day. It is amazing how such a large group of Israelites, after seeing the earth open up, and seeing 250 men killed by lightning that came barreling out of heaven (and I am sure the lightning was accompanied with thunder all over the place which followed the path of those lightning bolts that were charging out of the heavens), even after *seeing* that with their eyes, still blamed Moses and Aaron as being responsible for the deaths of these people.

Here is a witness of how twisted the thinking of human nature is, that after witnessing this thing that they would have the gall to think that somehow Moses and Aaron could do this, that they had the power to open up the earth and cause lightning bolts to flash out of the heavens.

What we are reading here is a monument to the disbelieving, faithless, accusing, and stubbornness of human nature. You are probably looking right now at the lowest point in Israel's relationship with God in the wilderness, showing how unreasonable and twisted human nature can be thinking, despite these demonstrations. We might wonder how it could possibly get any worse. How much does God have to confront us with to make human nature submit to Him, and believe? I think you can see that their level of faith was very low. This seditious attack on Aaron and Moses shows why our calling, our believing, our repentance, our submitting, and our overcoming is a miracle.

If you want an illustration from the world of today, of something that is not hidden from any of us, to me I cannot think of a better illustration than of man's persistent faith in evolution. These people theorize a creation without a

creator, and that somehow or another living things create themselves through what they call "natural selection." These same people cannot name anything in the world of real kind that created itself.

Maybe you saw this joke in the last issue of *Reader's Digest*. I think it illustrates what I am talking about here. It seems that there was a scientist who decided to challenge God. He said, "God, we don't need You anymore. We can create anything that You can create. Anything You can do, we can do." And God says, "Well, is that so? I'll take up the challenge. How about you and I each create a man?" The scientist said, "Okay. Let's go," and he immediately knelt down in the dirt and he picks up a clod or two and begins to shape it. Then God said, "Now wait a minute! Wait a minute! Go over there and create your own dirt." End of story.

Men always begin their thinking with a creation already existing, and all the materials for what men do are already there. Who did that? But that is how stubborn these very intelligent people are, because they do not want to submit to that God who says, "Thus and thus shall you do." That is what was happening here in Numbers 16. They were unwilling to accept what God had appointed. Even when God created miracles right in front of their very eyes that no man could do, they still found ways to accuse Moses and Aaron

Now Satan will not submit, and neither will human nature. Human nature is tenaciously stubborn and hard-headed. It will deceitfully follow its inclinations and habits which are to be independent of God, while at the same time surreptitiously submit to the invisible master—Satan, and then feel justified in doing what they do. That is what we are dealing with inside of ourselves. This episode here in Numbers 16 tends to show why we need such a long period of time for us to grow and truly come to trust God and to overcome.

This episode also reflects how patient God is in dealing with us, because He would be completely justified in doing with us as He did with these Israelites in Numbers 16. We may not have done *exactly* what they did, but in principle we *have* resisted God and not submitted in other areas, just like these people did. That's why it is in the Book, to remind us of that.

Numbers 16:42 And it came to pass, when the congregation was gathered against Moses and against Aaron, that they looked toward the tabernacle of the congregation: and, behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD appeared.

Numbers 16:45 [And God says to Moses and Aaron] Get you up from among this congregation, that I may consume them as in a moment. And they [Moses and Aaron] fell upon their faces.

There is an interesting thing in this phrase in verse 42: "They looked toward the tabernacle." The way that is written in the Hebrew it indicates an intention; not just that they turned their heads and looked, because God is reporting to us that these people were getting ready to charge, invade, take over the Tabernacle. And that is when "Whoosh!" the glory of the Lord appeared, and they must have had a momentary fright that turned their stomachs inside out, because they knew that the day before when the glory of the Lord appeared before the people that something terrible was about to occur. Well, Moses did the job of a mediator, and he and Aaron fell down on their faces and began appealing to God, "Please don't do this!" So they were following through with their responsibilities.

Numbers 16:46 And Moses said unto Aaron, Take a censer and put fire therein from off the altar, . . .

Here comes *fire, the altar, and censers* again. This whole situation turns on people's attitude. The censers and the fire has very much to do with coming to understand what was going on here.

Numbers 16:46-47 . . . and put on incense, and go quickly unto the congregation, and make an atonement for them: for there is wrath gone out from the LORD; the plague is begun. And Aaron took as Moses commanded [meaning he picked up a censer, he ran to the altar, he hurriedly shoveled coals from under the altar, and put incense on it], and ran into the midst of the congregation.

I want you to remember that this is an old man doing this. Moses was 80 when they went into the wilderness. Aaron was 3 years older than Moses, so he is over 85 when this took place.

Maybe I am saying this because I am 68, and I will tell you, I cannot run like I used to. In fact, even though I exercise every day (I go walking), I cannot run, because when I begin running the muscles in the calves of my legs bunch up. They will no longer take the stress of running, and immediately I get cramps. All I have to do is take five steps, and "It's over, John," and I cannot run.

Aaron, at the age of 85, ran into the midst of this hell that was taking place. People were dying left and right from some kind of a very fast-working plague that God put on them. I do not know what it was. It gives the indication of some kind of a disease invading these people's bodies and tearing them apart in very short order. I guess that goes to show how much better shape they were at 85 than we are today at 68.

Numbers 16:47-48 [Aaron] ran into the midst of the congregation: and behold, the plague was begun among the people: and he put on incense, and made an atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living: and the plague was stayed.

Let us review something in Revelation 8.

Revelation 8:3-4 And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer: and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand.

Incense and its wafting aroma becomes the symbol of the prayers of the saints, and this is one of the major responsibilities of a priest—intercessory prayer, interceding on behalf of the world, interceding before God on behalf of the church, interceding in behalf of our brethren within the church.

Now he did this even as the plague was devastating lives over the campground, killing numerous people. It says that "Aaron stood between the living and the dead." He was not literally standing. He was running, going from place to place, spreading the incense all over the camp as much as he could possibly cover running. But God says he "stood," meaning that Aaron, with his censer and the wafting aroma of the incense, was the wall of protection between the people and God. Now this is really ironic, because it becomes the way of the future in which the very One the people are persecuting becomes their Savior.

Here is given a very definite picture that it was the attitude and the work of Moses and Aaron and their intercession on behalf of the people that caused the abatement of God's anger away from the whole camp, for, according to what He said, He was set to destroy everybody.

I think that it is understandable that God knew the hearts of these two men so well that He knew the way that they would respond, that they responded according to His will. He honored that response, because they followed through with what they understood was the right thing to do. It was their responsibility to stand between the people and God, or we might say "between God and the plague." The plague was stayed, but in these two incidents alone, the 250 plus the 14,700 people—15,000 people died in two days. Do you know what? We are not finished yet!

I am going through this in some detail because I want us to be impressed about how important sanctification is to God, and how important it should be in our thinking in relation to our calling.

What we are going to see in chapter 17 is miracle Number Three, because God is not done yet to show how important sanctification is to Him.

Numbers 17:1-2 And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and take of every one of them a rod [a staff] according to the house of their fathers, of all their princes according to the house of their fathers twelve rods: write you every man's name upon his rod.

I take that to mean that each one of the leaders of the tribe, the prince of the tribe, brought forth a rod. It does not stipulate what kind of wood the rod had to be. It only stipulates that it turned out that the rod for Levi—meaning Aaron's staff—came from an almond tree. It is possible that twelve different kinds of wood were represented here. And then the names of the tribes were written on the rods. There was one rod for Joseph, another rod for Reuben, and another rod for Benjamin, and of course the rod that had Levi's name written on it.

Numbers 17:3-4 And you shall write Aaron's name upon the rod of Levi: for one rod shall be for the head of the house of their fathers. And you shall lay them up in the tabernacle of the congregation before the testimony, where I will meet with you.

That verse gives the indication that all twelve rods were then taken into the Holy Place; not the Holy of Holies, but inside the Holy Place. It gives the indication that they were either laid on a table, or they may have even been laid on the ground right before the veil, at the foot of the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place—the Holy of Holies.

Now symbolically what does this mean? Who was sitting on the Ark? God was sitting on the Ark, and so at His feet, as it were, were the twelve rods. In other words these twelve rods were basically, as we might say, sitting in God's lap. He could not avoid them. They were right there for His scrutiny.

Numbers 17:5 And it shall come to pass that the man's rod whom I shall choose shall blossom: and I will make to cease from me the murmurings of the children of Israel, whereby they murmur against you.

So God tells why He is doing this. He wants to end the griping.

Numbers 17:6-8 And Moses spoke unto the children of Israel, and every one of their princes gave him a rod apiece, for each prince one, according to their fathers' houses, even twelve rods: and the rod of Aaron was among their rods. And Moses laid up the rods

before the LORD in the tabernacle of witness. And it came to pass that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness: and behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds.

Understand that these rods were dead. Who knows how long they had been a walking staff, because that is really what they were. They were a staff that a person would carry along with him as he walked. They may have been cut years before, so they were dead. What we have here is a miracle in which life comes out of that which is dead. Now is there anybody who could possibly deny what had occurred here?

Please understand that God is going through this so that we will understand how important sanctification is—the setting of us apart—for His use, for His service, and nobody is going to horn in on what He has appointed His people, either as a body or as individual, are responsible for.

Numbers 17:9 And Moses brought out all the rods from before the LORD unto all the children of Israel: and they looked, and took every man his rod.

The one for Joseph was handed to the prince of the tribe of either Ephraim or Manasseh. The one for Benjamin was handed to the prince of that tribe, and I am sure that those men took those rods and went to their camp and showed the people what had happened. Except for Aaron's, nothing happened, because only Aaron's blossomed. Aaron's rod did more than God said. In verse 5 He said that the rod would blossom. It not only blossomed overnight, it produced almonds overnight. So He went above and beyond what He said He was going to do.

Numbers 17:10-11 And the LORD said unto Moses, Bring Aaron's rod again before the testimony, to be kept for a token against the rebels: and you shall quite take away their murmurings from me, that they die not. And Moses did so: as the LORD commanded him, so did he.

Now there is something very interesting here. It is another one of those question marks. He said that it is a testimony against Israel, that they

grumble not. Now wait a minute! Those people in that generation saw that rod, but what about every generation after that? I can guarantee you virtually that they did not see it. They never saw it again. Why? Because of where it was placed. Who could possibly see it in the Holy Place? Who of any importance could see it in the Holy Place?

Now if it was in the Holy Place, the priests, in carrying out their responsibilities, would see it. The indication though in the New Testament is that it was in with the Ark. Where was the Ark? It was in the Holy of Holies. It was in there with the Ark, the manna, and the Ten Commandments. Aaron's rod was placed on a level with those three things.

The only one really who could ever see it, let us say on a regular basis, would be who? Who would be the only human who would be able to see it? Only the high priest. Once a year on the Day of Atonement it would be a reminder to him that he was appointed personally by God to bear this responsibility. But there is somebody else who could also see it: God.

I think that we can say, if we can understand that God would have any kind of a failing (and you know what I mean here), that rod served as a reminder to Him of His mercy to the family of Aaron and to the Israelites as well. So the only ones who could see it were God and the high priest. But I am sure that it was the high priest's responsibility to keep reminding the people, generation after generation, after the Day of Atonement, that the rod was still there.

In verse 12 this thing begins to get a little bit dicey again.

Numbers 17:12-13 And the children of Israel spoke unto Moses, saying, Behold, we die, we perish, we all perish. [Why? Because . . .] Whosoever comes any thing near unto the tabernacle of the LORD shall die: shall we be consumed with dying?

I said it begins to get a little bit dicey, but in this case it begins to get dicey in a good way. Finally they have seen the light! They are saying there, "We have sinned." "We have done something wrong." They are asking him, "Save us from the wrath of God, lest we all die." Their attitude is very definitely changing, at least for the next half hour or so!

Now we are not done yet, because this thing goes right on into chapter 18. God is spending three chapters on this thing.

Numbers 18:1-2 And the LORD said unto Aaron, You and your sons and your father's house with you shall bear the iniquity of the sanctuary: and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity of your priesthood. And your brethren also of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, bring you with you, that they may be joined unto you, and minister unto you: but you and your sons with you shall minister before the tabernacle of witness.

What do we have going on here? When it says, "You shall bear the iniquity," it means that God is separating them away to bear the responsibility, the burden of. There "the iniquity" means "to be responsible for."

Numbers 18:3 And they shall keep your charge, and the charge of all the tabernacle: . . .

Here is the responsibility of the Levites, excluding the family of Aaron. All the rest of the Levites bear the responsibility of serving the priesthood. In addition to serving the priesthood they have the charge of all the tabernacle, meaning its furniture as well as the building itself.

Numbers 18:3 . . . only they shall not come near the vessels of the sanctuary and the altar, that neither they, nor you also, die.

I am going to begin to emphasize things here because I want you to begin to appreciate how specific God is, and how serious this is, because God warns them, "If this is not followed through, I am going to kill you." Is that sobering? The Levites had certain responsibilities, and the priesthood had certain responsibilities, and the responsibilities, though related to one another, were set out specifically, and one was not allowed to interfere with the other.

Numbers 18:4 And they [the Levites] shall be joined unto you [Aaron and the priests], and keep the charge of the tabernacle of the

congregation, for all the service of the tabernacle: and a stranger shall not come near unto you.

Now this is going to get very interesting, but we will not cover that today, but hopefully, God willing, in the next sermon. Remember for next sermon the censers, the fire, and stranger. Remember we are leading up to Pentecost, but I feel that in order for us to understand what happened at Pentecost, and why I made the decision that I did, that we have to first come to an understanding of how important holy things are to God, and holy things are the appointments that He made regarding this, that, or the other thing, whether it be a person, or whether it be a thing, or whether it be a day, like the Sabbath. If God has appointed it as holy, it is done. It is used exactly the way He says it is to be used, and He has His reasons. We may not know the reason, but He still has His reason.

I am sure these people did not understand what they were going through here. God is laying the foundation so that we will understand, if I can put this crudely, that He is "the Boss." And though He is our Father, He has good reasons for everything that He says. You parents know very well that your kids do not understand your decisions and your reasons, because your maturity level and your thinking level and your experience is so far beyond theirs they cannot grasp it. It is the same thing in relation to us and God. He has His reasons, and so what we need to consider is, are we going to act like little kids and rebel and get angry, and throw a fit, or what? Or are we going to patiently submit and see what God has in mind for the reason why He gave the commands that He did? They are not suggestions.

Numbers 18:5-6 And you shall keep the charge of the sanctuary, and the charge of the altar: that there be no wrath any more upon the children of Israel. And I, behold, I have taken your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel; to you they are given as a gift for the LORD, to do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation.

Later on, in Ephesians 4, Paul took this principle and applied it to the church. He said that Christ ascended to heaven, and He gave gifts unto His church, and among those gifts is the ministry. The ministry is a gift from Christ to the church to serve the people in *their* service of God. In the same manner,

God chose the family of Aaron out from the tribe of Levi, and then gave the remainder of the tribe of Levi as a *gift* to Aaron so that he could carry out his responsibility by having others perform work that the priests are not going to be involved in that are necessary for the maintenance of, the transportation of, the care of, and so forth, of the tabernacle.

Numbers 18:7 Therefore you and your sons with you shall keep your priest's office for everything of the altar, and within the veil; and you shall serve: I have given your priest's office unto you as a service of gift: . . .

He is saying that the priests are a gift to Israel even as the Levites are a gift to the family of Aaron. Notice this final warning.

Numbers 18:7 . . . and the stranger that comes near shall be put to death.

When the Israelites were camping in the wilderness, each side of the tabernacle had three of the tribes of Israel. Judah and two others were on the east side. I think that Ephraim and Manasseh—the tribes of Joseph—were on the west side opposite the Judahites. On the south were three other tribes, and on the north were three other tribes. The tabernacle itself was in the middle of the camp. The next time I speak we will find that one family of Levi was on the east. Do you know what that one was? That was Aaron's. The priests camped on the east side. That is where the door was.

On the south was another family of Levi. On the left was another family of Levi, and on the north was another family of Levi. We just saw what their job to do was whenever they were camped. Anybody who came near that tabernacle who was not a priest was to be put to death. It did not matter who they were. If they were not a priest, it was the responsibility of the Levites to put that person to death. Now let me give you a more modern version of that.

Paul mentions this in Ephesians 2:14 when he talks about the middle wall of partition being broken down. This is what he was talking about. He was using a wall as a symbol that separated those who were unclean from those who were clean. As far as the Israelites were concerned, the Israelites were

clean, the Gentiles were unclean. Now Paul says the middle wall of partition is broken down.

Do you know that in Christ's day there was a court of the women, and no woman was allowed to go past the court of the women. Then was a court of the men—the common ordinary Israelite. No common ordinary Israelite was allowed to pass beyond the boundary of that court. Then there was the court of the priests, and only priests were allowed to go into that, and only the priests were allowed to go into the Temple itself.

I remember seeing in *The Plain Truth* magazine while it was being published under Herbert W. Armstrong, a sign that was in the Temple ground, because at that time the Jews had a little more influence, and there was a sign there, in modern times, that read "Any Gentile that proceeds beyond this point is going to be killed." They were following through with what they understood of what we have just read there, because to them they felt this would have taken them into the area of the Temple, even though it was not standing there, and they were going to put to death any Gentile who stepped in there. It is probably not there now because the Palestinians have gained a great deal more influence and authority over the Temple Mount. But that is what they were following through with.

In the light of what happened here, God makes very clear that He is going to hold the priests responsible, and the Levites who are with them, to guard God's dwelling place from incursions by anybody who is not qualified to step beyond the bounds that He has set.

The next time we will take this one step further, and we will get ourselves involved in the importance of the censers and the fire and this word "strangers." I think you will find it very interesting.