

The end of the beginning

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[0:00] There's a small town, well I don't know how big it is actually as a town, on the northern coast of Africa, goes by the name of El Alamein. And the only reason most people have ever heard of it is that a famous battle took place there, where the 8th Army, the Desert Rats, and some Americans and Commonwealth allies, halted the advance of the previously unstoppable German Africa Corps.

You could say they drew a line in the sand, although actually more accurately they dug some anti-tank defences in the sand, and said no further.

And many consider this battle, where the Africa Corps was stopped, to have been the turning point of the Second World War. It's been said that before El Alamein, the Western Allies never looked like winning, but after El Alamein, they never looked like losing.

And Winston Churchill described it like this, This is not the end, it's not even the beginning of the end, but it is perhaps the end of the beginning.

There was much trouble and fighting and ups and downs still to go, but it was the turning point.

[1:32] Then, from then on, the Allies looked like winning the war. Well, why have I brought this to your attention? Well, because this passage here, one might say, marks the turning point of the Exodus.

Things started off so well in Sinai. But since leaving Sinai, as we've seen, matters got progressively worse.

And here, all the concerns of the malcontents come to the fore, and come out, and seem likely to produce chaos.

And you might have thought that this was when the whole thing would unravel. But we're told that Aaron stood between the living and the dead, and said to the plague, no further.

And from this point, we find a slow and uncertain process of rebuilding. It's certainly not all downhill from then on, by any means. There are all sorts of problems and challenges and ups and downs from that point.

[2:35] But, nonetheless, it is true that this was, in a sense, the turning point. From now on, there's a slow process of rebuilding and things getting back on track.

Now, of course, numbers is one single narrative, and any attempt to divide it up can be misleading. And so, where do we draw the lines?

I've chosen to draw the lines where the chapter division is. That's not part of the original text, of course. There's not a good place to divide it up, really, because certainly these references to Aaron here point forward to the next chapter, where we read about Aaron's rod that budded.

And all this discussion about the people being holy, the assembly being holy, of course, comes out of this business of the tassels that we read about last week, where these were meant to show that the assembly as a whole, that all the people were indeed holy to the Lord.

But, anyway, we have to divide it up somewhere. And that's where we're going to, this is the passage we're going to look at tonight. So, this is the point where populist sentiment almost leads to chaos.

[3:58] These events took place over 3,000 years ago, yet, as I was preparing this, they seemed almost unbelievably topical. Ancient Israel, of course, was not strictly speaking a democracy, but it was a nation governed by popular consent.

There were no secret police to ensure loyalty. Moses and Aaron couldn't, in a sense, count on the support of a professional army, because the assembly of the people was the army, and they had a very devolved command structure.

The clan elders, we know, in practice, had a great deal of influence, and even power, as we see from verse 2 of the passage. It says there were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders, who had been appointed members of the council.

These were people of some influence. So, this was a people governed by popular consent. Any form of government that's based on popular consent, of course, suffers from the risk of what happens when there's popular discontent.

[5:16] When things go wrong, you can always persuade people to vote against the government, can't you? You can always find somebody to blame.

And it's characteristic, actually, of these popular uprisings. And you notice that's exactly how this is described in verse 2.

They rose up against Moses. And what's the point of view is that they result in unlikely and unstable alliances between disparate groups who don't really want the same things, necessarily, but just brought together by a particular circumstance.

And, in fact, you could say that about all the sons of Korah and the Reubenites had in common was that they happened to camp next to each other. If you look at the description of the camp in the early chapters, you'll find that it's the case.

The Reubenites camped to the north of the camp, and next to them, between them and the tabernacle, were the Korahites. And so, this, presumably, was what provided the opportunity for them to do some private plotting, the fact that they'd pitched their tents next to each other.

[6:32] And, of course, as we read, it's also going to result in their shared destruction, the fact that they'd pitched their tents close to each other. And these alliances, of course, are intrinsically unstable, because, actually, the Allies have quite different objectives.

The only thing, really, that was uniting them was their mutual discontent. And how topical that seems. One commentator's pointed out about the recent election.

How is Labour going to reconcile the aspirations of older, northern, working-class Brexiteers with young urban Remainers? It's all very well.

When you're not in government, you can get people to vote for you and that sort of thing. But when you're actually the one holding the baby, as it were, holding the chalice, then how do you do it?

How are Irish unionists going to make common cause with Scottish conservatives, who actually, of course, share a common heritage?

[7:35] Many of the Irish unionists are, of course, Scottish emigrants. But now they seem to have very different political objectives, don't they? So our account in Numbers 16 reflects, actually, a very similar situation.

These alliances, you see, are far from solid. Because verse 12 says that, when challenged, the Reubenites didn't actually turn out to support their Levite allies. You see that in verse 12.

And I suggest here we actually have three distinct groups. There is Korah and his party. There are the clan elders. And there are the Reubenites.

And they have different and even mutually contradictory objectives. The thing they have in common is a dissatisfaction with the status quo. Dissatisfaction with the rule of Moses and Aaron.

So I'm going to look at these three groups and see what it is they want. And then we'll look at the response of Moses and Aaron, and most importantly, the response of the Lord, of course. And then what I'd like to particularly look at, actually, this evening, is what happened next on the next day.

[8:47] So I can't resist, I'm afraid, calling these groups the Leavers, the Remainers, and the Opportunists. But then we'll look at the response to the unrest, and we'll look at the next day.

So what about the Leavers? Korah. Korah has no real interest in returning to Egypt, because that would make him and his clan actually rather redundant.

What they were doing was carrying the tent. They didn't want to go back to Egypt. But his objective is to remodel the Israelite religion, the religion of Yahweh the Lord, according to his own desires.

Verse 3, we read that, don't we? Where he says, the whole community is holy, every one of them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?

What he wants is a bit of shifting in power, and a few shifting of roles. Gordon Wenham, in his commentary, says, Korah is the archetypal heretic.

[9:54] He grabs hold of one doctrine, a true doctrine, that the whole assembly is holy to the Lord, and twists it to his own ends.

That, if you think about it, is what heretics always do. They take a truth, a half-truth, part of the truth, and bend it to mean something different.

And Korah's argument really makes no sense. How does the fact that the whole assembly is holy negate the need for stable government? If we took Korah's argument seriously, the result would quite literally be anarchy, wouldn't it?

He's suggesting that there should be no government at all, almost. I'm sure that's not really what he meant, but that would be the logical outcome of his argument. But that's not what he really wants, because, as Moses points out in verse 10, what he really wants, of course, is the priesthood. They've been given the job, the Korahites, of carrying the holy things, the ark and the other holy items. And yet, that's not good enough for him.

[11:07] He wants Aaron's job. He wants to be the high priest. And why? Well, it's a matter, ultimately, of personal ambition.

And I would suggest that, ultimately, that's true of all heresses and all heretics, all who try to make the gospel mean something different. In the end, they do it out of personal ambition.

Certainly what John says in his letter, isn't it, when he's writing his polemic in 1 John against the heretics of his day? He says, Do not love the world or anything in the world.

If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world, the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does, comes not from the Father, but from the world.

That's what Korah was trying to do. He was really loving the world. He coveted Aaron's job, because he coveted the power and influence and praise that it would give him.

[12:12] But it's very dangerous to pervert religion to one's own ends, because the Lord reveals himself.

And so no amount of spin or reinterpretation or spurious argument can obscure that fact, that it is the Lord who reveals himself. And so Korah is making a big mistake here, and it's going to cost him his life.

But what about the Reubenites? Well, by contrast, they're Remainers. In their opinion, this whole Exodus project is a bad idea.

I was trying to make it something like I-exit or jexit or something, but it didn't quite work. But you know where I'm coming from. They were definitely against the Exodus altogether by this stage. And in fact, their argument is expressed in this rather neat chiasm. It starts and finishes. Actually, what it literally says is, we will not come up, in verse 12 and verse 14.

[13:21] Up, presumably meaning to the tent of meeting. Excuse me a second. And so they have this rather neat chiasm spinning the situation.

You promised us, Moses, milk and honey, but you've not delivered on that promise. And actually, we left a land of milk and honey, Egypt. Well, actually, they hadn't, but at that point, they can persuade people that they had.

And so you left a land flowing with milk and honey. You're going to kill us in this wilderness. Verse 13. Why do you make yourself a prince or a lord over us?

They're challenging the government again, aren't they? Of course, Moses had been a prince in Egypt at one point. But can he be a prince over the people of God or lord over the people of God? Because he says, you haven't delivered the milk and honey. You're going to blind us. You're going to kill us in this wilderness. Now he's going to say, are you going to blind your opponents? In a way, they got this particular idea of gouging out the eyes.

[14:37] Why they thought Moses were going to do that. But they seem to have got this idea. What they did understand was that this was, something was going to happen at this confrontation. And suddenly, they weren't quite sure they were up for it.

And so they said, no, we will not come up. But notice the way they try to put all the blame on Moses. Yet they are a bit cautious. They realize a confrontation of some kind is coming. But they would like to distance themselves from it. But the Reubenites are making a big mistake too. Of course, in rebelling against Moses, they're rebelling against the Lord, and they can't slide out of it.

The only thing they could have done is repented, and that's what they weren't prepared to do. Well, what about the clan leaders? The 250 Ezerite community leaders who were members of the council?

Well, are they leavers or remainers? Well, we don't know that. They don't actually, they don't appear to care one way or the other about going forward or back.

[15:45] Why are they in this? Well, it seems they're just out to exploit the situation for their own political ends. They were already leaders of the people, men of the council, men of influence.

And of course, what they should have done is to deny the rebellion any legitimacy at all by supporting Moses and Aaron. But instead, they take the opportunity to enhance their own position. Only how are they going to do this? Well, of course, they're members of the council, I presume some sort of civil council, some community council and assembly. But of course, Israel is actually a theocracy.

And so to do that, they need to blur the lines between the priesthood and the civil authority. And so they pick up Korah's argument and say, look, the whole assembly is holy to the Lord.

Which is, as I said, is true. But again, they make it mean something different. They make it mean that they have the authority of the priesthood again.

[16:57] Their claim is that they represent the assembly of the Lord, not Moses and Aaron. And that is why they then decide that they're going to bring these censurers, as Moses suggests, to show if they are really the ones that the Lord has chosen.

And this is perhaps the most subtle argument of them all, because it does contain an element of truth. Because there is a certain authority in the assembly. These were the men of the council. And sometimes, indeed, the assembly does have to call its leaders to account. That's, in a sense, why you have a council in the first place. And that's why we call the congregation together for important decisions.

But then one would have to say that this particular assembly has a rather poor track record, doesn't it? Just a couple of chapters ago, we'd realized that they'd refused to go up into the land and take possession of it as the Lord had commanded.

It has a history of bad decisions. And what they were trying to do was say that the authority of the assembly, and the authority that the assembly does have, is independent of the Lord, effectively.

[18:13] That's what it amounts to. They were saying the whole assembly is holy, but they were really claiming an authority independently from that of the Lord.

And you can't have it both ways. That's what they were trying to do, wasn't it? They're trying to say that the assembly is holy, but if the assembly is holy, then it's holy to the Lord to do what the Lord commands.

And so in perverting the assembly for their own ends, the elders also are making a big mistake. And that holiness, which is there, which is true, but it's going to lead to their own destruction.

So, what's Moses' response to this? Okay, says Moses, let's put these claims to the test. Let's see who is truly holy, verse 6.

The assembly claims to be holy to the Lord. But in Moses' judgment, that in fact, in verse 11, they have assembled against the Lord.

[19:23] They haven't assembled as the assembly of the Lord, the holy people at all. They were actually assembled against the Lord. That's what he says in verse 11. So, let's put it to the test.

And so the whole congregation, we see, is assembled at the tent of meeting. And the Lord does indeed appear. And his reply is to warn Moses and Aaron to get away from the people so that the whole congregation can be destroyed, verse 26.

But as on many other occasions, you might see that Moses and Aaron intercede, verse 22. And so the Lord proposes a different separation.

A separation from the tents of Korah and Dath and Abiram. What he said, that really all they had in common was their campsite.

They camped next to each other. But that was to be their downfall. It's not necessarily very surprising what happens here. In this Middle Eastern desert, one does apparently get boggy areas. [20:33] But the, it's kind of quicksand, but the hot sun dries the crust of the earth dry on top. And of course, it's very dangerous.

And it seems that this is exactly the place where the conspirators have chosen to pitch their tents. And Moses seems to be aware of this in verse 29, because he seems to know what's going to happen.

Is it whether he, perhaps the Lord told him directly, or maybe he'd had a tip-off from his desert-wise father-in-law, I don't know. But either way, they're going to show, this is going to show that Moses is the appointed leader.

Dathan and Abiram had refused to come at Moses' command, as we've seen. And so Moses formally warns the congregation, get away from these tents, move.

You're standing on dangerous ground. But once again, Dathan and Abiram and their families fail to go up, fail to move.

[21:39] And so they stay there as the rest of the people move away. And the ground indeed splits and swallows them, as it says in verse 32. And again, Wenham in his commentary suggests that with this Mesopotamian idea that the place of Sheol, the dead, is immediately below the earth, this must have seemed like a particularly horrific death, as if they had indeed gone straight down into the place of the dead or the grave, which of course they had, they had gone to the grave, they were buried alive.

And so just because they camped together, Dathan and Abiram and their family and Korah's family suffered the same fate of being swallowed up by the earth.

There is, interestingly enough, and it's worth, this is not actually in this passage, but it is worth just noting, there is a slightly ironic twist to this story of Korah, though. If we just had this passage, we would think that all Korah's family died in this disaster.

Verse 32 certainly tells us that Korah's household was destroyed, but if you just turn over briefly to Numbers 26, verses 10 and 11, you can look it up if you like, where again, there is a reference to this event, but that tells us that some of the least of Korah's descendants survived.

I think it literally says in the Hebrew, Korah's sons did not die. The NIV translates it as Korah's line survived or something like that, but that's what happens in Numbers, tells us that, but some of Korah's descendants did survive.

[23:24] Perhaps there were some that did heed Moses' warning. And interestingly enough, in a sense, they got their desire for a different role in the temple worship because if you're familiar with the Psalms, you might know that the sons of Korah actually founded one of the two temple music schools and actually wrote many of the Psalms.

So even in this, the Lord was in a sense gracious to the descendants of Korah. In a sense, he did give them what they wanted, the ability to have a new place in the temple worship.

But he did it on his terms, not on theirs. So that's what happened to the Korah and that's what happened to the Reubenites. But what are the clan elders, the men of the assembly?

They had claimed the spiritual authority of the assembly and they had claimed that gave them the right to come and sacrifice or burn incense to the Lord.

And what happens? Well, the spirit of the Lord does indeed come to them and they are indeed made holy but not quite in the way they wanted because the spirit comes and burns up the people, the clan leaders.

[24:51] Again, we don't know exactly how it happened but perhaps a gust of wind or something spread the fire from the censors, we don't know but there was a fire and the people by the spirit of the Lord were destroyed and yet, there's this little note that says, but these incense was offered to the Lord so these censors become holy and they were used as a covering for the temple.

So that's the event on this day when the rebels are destroyed and one might have thought that was the end of it. One might have thought the people finally had learned but sadly that's not the case. People can die but an idea is a much harder thing to kill and this idea that Moses was a usurper was not going to go away so easily.

And so, what happened the next day? it looks like it's about to come a reprise of what had gone the day before.

Now you notice the charge is upgraded they don't just say that Moses had led them out in the wilderness and was lording it over them now they actually accuse him of killing the people of the Lord.

[26:12] They've not just exalted themselves above the assembly but they've killed the people of the Lord and of course that's the complete fabrication isn't it?

They've not done anything of the sort. Moses and Aaron had killed nobody on that previous day and in fact they'd done exactly the opposite. They'd repeatedly interceded for the people and then they had warned the people to move away from the tents of Dathan and Abiram where the wrath of the Lord was about to descend.

Far from killing the people of the Lord they'd actually warned them of the wrath that was to come. And yet this is often what happens isn't it?

Somebody has to be blamed and the easiest people to blame here were Moses and Aaron even though in fact it's the people's own folly that had led to their deaths but they won't admit that.

People will never admit will they that it's their own fault. You always have to blame somebody else. We all do that don't we? So Moses and Aaron becomes the target and it looks like it's going to be a repeat of the day before because the Lord once again tells Moses and Aaron to stand aside while he destroys the people in verse 45.

[27:43] But it doesn't work out quite the same way this time. And notice the dramatic irony here the narrator the writer of Numbers is a good storyteller.

There's all sorts of parallels you'll probably notice them as we read through. But here on the day before Moses had warned the people to get away from what one might have called the epicenter of wrath the place where God's wrath was to God's judgment was to happen and those who had done so had survived.

And here again Moses and Aaron are actually given the same advice by the Lord. Move away from the middle of the assembly. But actually they don't do that.

In fact they do the exact opposite. As many times before they intercede in prayer. But this time it turns out there's a difference. This time there's no standing around discussing it.

There's no warning to the people. Why is that? Well because Moses says it's too late for that. The plague has already begun. And so he tells Aaron to hurry.

[29:06] Aaron's must be well over 80 by this time. And in that culture old people just didn't run. And yet that's what Aaron told that's what Moses tells Aaron to do.

And that's what Aaron actually does. It says he runs. Where does he run to? Well not away from the middle of the assembly. But exactly to the middle of the assembly.

It's the same word used in the Hebrew. The Hebrew word is apparently Tavek. And it's the midst, the middle, the center of the assembly. Exactly where he knew that the Lord's wrath was about to descend.

In fact where it had already started. he hastens to make the necessary atonement. But I think it's not going too far to say that at this time Aaron achieves the high point of his high priestly ministry. He was high priest in name, he was high priest in ritual, he carried out the high priestly rituals. But here perhaps he really becomes the high priest indeed.

[30:25] When he takes his stand alone between the dead and the living, we're told in verse 48. For the dead it's too late, nothing can be done.

But for those who are alive there's still hope. He could have just stood on the sidelines and said well I've done the sacrifice stuff, let's just see what happens. But instead effectively he puts his own life on the line doesn't he?

He offers his own life for the people. He says as it were to the plague, well if you're going to take these people you're going to have to take me first.

And the Lord chooses not to take Aaron's life and so the plague is foiled. Aaron here becomes perhaps the hero of the day where he really stands between the dead and the living which was his job to protect the people as it were from the wrath of God.

But there is another way we could look at this. The Lord chooses not to take Aaron's life just as when we look to the book of Esther we saw that Esther put her life on the line for the people.

[31:47] but the Lord chose not to take her life. Aaron is not the spotless lamb. He's a fallible human like the rest of us.

Only a few short time earlier you'll remember he'd been actually griping at Moses himself. He certainly didn't do everything right by any means. so the Lord instead accepts Aaron's incense as a token of the true sacrifice that's to come.

And that's the sacrifice of Jesus Christ who did give up his life so that God's wrath can be turned aside. It is really of course Jesus who stood in front of the living and said to the wrath of God stop. take me instead. But then rose from the dead so that death itself could be annulled. So how am I going to finish this sermon?

Tempting as an evangelical to have a sort of conventional appeal to repent and believe. the only thing is actually there is no such appeal in the text at this point.

[33:13] There had been on the day before in a sense when Moses had told the people to separate themselves from the tents of Korah and Abiram. But here there's actually no suggestion that the dead were any more or any less deserving of wrath than the living.

Any more we would claim that those people who survived the fire in the tower were any more or any less deserving of death than those who died in the fire.

It seems here only the sovereign choice of God is what separated the victims from the survivors. As Paul says in Romans 5 God demonstrates his own love for us in this that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

The people were still rebellious in their hearts when Aaron stood between the dead and the living. By doing that in a sense he changed their minds and their hearts.

God provides a sacrifice of atonement for those who are undeserving. And yet this isn't fatalism either. It's not to say that human action has no meaning.

[34:33] Quite the contrary. It's Aaron's prompt action which saved many lives didn't it? By running by getting to the critical point as quickly as he could Aaron saved those who would have been the next victims of the plague.

Like Aaron we cannot be the perfect sacrifice but we don't need to be that because if Jesus removes as he says the plank from our own eyes we can see clearly to help others.

And of course we're very likely to be blamed by the very people we're trying to help. That's certainly what happened to Moses and Aaron wasn't it? In fact that was just a normal occupational hazard of a prophet or a priest.

Perhaps I didn't choose that hymn that says something like that about agents of God's righteousness. They blame for everything they're poor and yet they make people rich. It was very much what Moses and Aaron did wouldn't it?

They made themselves poor to make other people rich. Well Aaron was the high priest but in the new covenant the scripture tells us that we're all prophets and priests.

[35:55] We won't say to one another know the Lord because we all know the Lord in that sense. We're all priests of the most high God servants of the high priest Jesus.

And so I think it's not unreasonable to say that we're all actually called to be Aaron's in this sense. We're all actually called to stand between the living and the dead and to say that through the death of Jesus Christ the curse can be turned aside.

But there is an urgency to it. Lives are being lost and death won't give up easily. It comes in many forms and the battles fought on many levels.

Of course for some of those people it was only a temporary stay of execution and we know that all of those over the age of 20 were going to die in the desert apart from Joshua and Caleb and

presumably their wives and families as well.

So we may have to fight death on many levels. Some may work to relieve starvation so that people may live to serve the living God.

[37:16] There is no hope for people who are already dead physically and some might fight plague literally. I don't think that would be wrong to say that is standing between the living and dead.

Those who work in medicine and public health and medical science, I don't think it would be wrong to say that in doing that they are standing between the dead and the living. Some might fight in the political or the social arena opposing the slow strangulation of the spirit through greed and materialism and selfishness.

But surely the most important way to stand between the living and the dead is to proclaim repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

because for the spiritually dead perhaps there is still hope, there is still the possibility of resurrection.

But Jesus Christ is in the business of calling the spiritually dead to life. So, will we be Aaron's, will we be those who are prepared to stand between the dead and the living and say that through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ the wrath of God is turned aside even though we're likely to get blamed for it.

[38:43] But there are other things from this passage we can learn as well. If the assembly of the Lord is holy then it has to demonstrate that, doesn't it?

First of it will be by the way it thinks and the way it acts. We can't afford to offer strange fire, fire that the Lord did not command, sacrifices that the Lord has not commanded.

But what sacrifice has the Lord commanded? Well, Paul tells us that as well, doesn't he, in that well-known verse, Romans 12, verse 1. I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your spiritual act of worship. Paul turns it the other way around, doesn't he, in one sense. He says, yes, make yourselves holy, make yourselves holy by offering your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to the Lord, to do the will of what the Lord is, to do what the Lord wants us to do. So that's our message this evening. If the people are holy, then they must follow the example of the Lord Jesus. They must follow the example of Aaron, to stand between the living and the dead, and to proclaim that there is salvation.

[40:15] But, as I say, some of those people, it was only a temporary stay of execution. There is a day of grace. There was a day of grace.

But for some, their hearts were truly turned to the Lord, and this was the turning point, the point at which things began to get a bit better, but the things began to get moving again.

Of course, Aaron stood there between the living and the dead, and turned the wrath of God back.

So let's sing, as we, and then we're going to turn, of course, to our communion.

But let's sing, uh,