

# Rejection

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[ 0 : 00 ] Numbers chapter 16, reading verses 1 to 11. Now Korah the son of Izar, 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.

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? 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. 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.

[ 1 : 28 ] You have gone too far, sons of Levi. And Moses said to Korah, Hear now, you sons of Levi, is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel to bring you near to himself, to do service in the tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to minister to them, and that he has brought you near him, and all your brothers, the sons of Levi, with you?

And would you seek the priesthood also? Therefore, it is against the Lord that you and all your company have gathered together. What is Aaron that you grumble against him?

Second reading is from Numbers chapter 16, starting at verse 16. And Moses said to Korah, Be present, you and all your company, before the Lord, you and they and Aaron tomorrow.

And let every one of you take his censer and put incense on it, and every one of you bring before the Lord his censer. Two hundred and fifty censers.

You also, and Aaron, each his censer. 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.

[ 2 : 54 ] Then Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation.

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

And they fell on their faces and said, O God, the God of our spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin and you will be angry with all the congregation. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Say to the congregation, Get away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.

Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. And he spoke to the congregation, saying, Depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins.

So they got away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. And Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, together with their wives, their sons and their little ones.

[ 4 : 11 ] And Moses said, Hereby you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, and that it has not been of my own accord. If these men die as all men die, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then the Lord has not sent me.

But if the Lord creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord.

And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. 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 all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, Lest the earth swallow us up.

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

[ 5 : 31 ] Morning, everyone. Thanks so much, Catherine, for reading. Lovely to have you all with us as we continue our series in the book of Numbers.

So please do keep Numbers chapter 16 open, and let me pray for us. I'm going to pray the same prayer that I've prayed the last few Sundays as we've been looking at Numbers from Hebrews chapter 3, because the big lesson the New Testament tells us of the book of Numbers is that we mustn't harden our hearts to God, but have soft hearts.

I'm going to pray the same prayer again. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the wonderful privilege we have of hearing your voice today as we hear your words read and then preached.

And we pray again, please would you help us not to harden our hearts, help us to be soft-hearted. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, imagine you're going on a long journey, perhaps a holiday or a business trip. What is the one thing you tell yourself you must take?

[ 6 : 53 ] That kind of essential item, you know, without which you simply cannot travel. I guess for many of us, it might be our phone, or your passport, or sun cream, depending on where you're going, or golf clubs, again, depending on where you're going, or perhaps for the youngest member of the family, it's that teddy, without which they won't even be able to sleep, and your holiday will be ruined.

What about another journey? The journey to heaven? It's the journey, of course, that's prefigured in the book of Numbers.

God has rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. They're journeying through the desert. They're journeying to the promised land. It's the journey we are on if we belong to Jesus as we journey through the wilderness of this life on our way to our destination, the new creation.

Or perhaps you're here this morning and you're someone who hasn't yet really started that journey or just looking into the Christian faith. You're considering the claims of Jesus. But for all of us, what is the one essential that you think to yourself you really need on that journey?

Well, the answer from Numbers 16 and 18 may be rather surprising. It's that we need a mediator. A mediator.

[ 8 : 21 ] And not just any old mediator, but a mediator appointed by God. Because if we've been following this series in the book of Numbers, then that reading we had from Numbers 16 may have felt all too familiar.

It's yet another rebellion to add to the people complaining about their food in chapter 11, complaining about their leader, Moses, in chapter 12, and then refusing in chapter 13 to enter the promised land.

But this time it's more serious. Because it's about the rejection of God's appointed mediator. In fact, the importance of this incident, I think, is underlined by the fact that it actually is the only significant event that's recorded during the wilderness wanderings, the 40 years of wilderness wanderings, in the book of Numbers.

So you'll remember how in chapter 14, when the Israelites refused to enter the land, God's judgment on them was that they would wander in the desert for 40 years. Now, by chapter 20, which is not that far on, we've only got three or four chapters until we get there, by chapter 20, that 40-year period is almost over.

And the only significant event that the writer of Numbers, Moses, actually records during that 40-year period is what we're looking at today, chapters 16 and 17, is if to underline the fact that as we go on this journey, more than anything else, what we need is a mediator.

[ 9 : 54 ] And the only God's appointed mediator will do. Now, you'll see on the outline, we've got two headings this morning, God's mediator rejected and God's mediator vindicated.

So firstly, God's mediator rejected. Now, I wonder if you remember this slide that's come up on the screen, we looked at it a few weeks ago, the way in which God's people camped. The Lord God dwelling in the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, in the midst of his people, and then around the tabernacle, you had the Levites on God's duty.

Not if you remember to protect God from the people, but to protect the people from a holy God. And then around them, you have arranged three, three, three, three, 12 in total, the 12 tribes around them.

But it was only Moses and Aaron who were allowed inside the tabernacle. Moses as the prophet through whom God spoke to the people, there's already been opposition to him back in chapter 12, and Aaron, the priest.

And it's him who is now the focus of the attack here. The main leader of the rebellion is Korah. He's one of the Levites who together with his henchmen rise up against Moses with 250 chiefs of the congregation.

[11:21] Let's look at their complaints in verses one to three. Now Korah, the son of Izar, 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 people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, you have gone too far.

For all 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?

Now this is the equivalent in kind of political parliamentary terms, not of some tiny backbench rebellion, but the equivalent of many senior MPs and many members of the cabinet rebelling against the prime minister.

What are they saying? Why is Aaron the only priest? Why is Aaron the only mediator, the only one who can make sacrifices for sin?

[12:37] Aren't we all holy? Isn't the Lord among all of us? Now there's a sense in which they were right.

Back in Exodus chapter 19, after the Lord God had rescued his people from Egypt, after he had brought them to himself, he declared them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

And yet God had set apart Aaron and appointed him to act as a mediator, a priest, so that sinful people could live in the presence of a holy God.

We can see more of what's going on in verses 8 to 10. Here is Moses' assessment of what they're saying. Verse 8. Here now, you sons of Levi, is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel to bring you near to himself to do service in the tabernacle of the Lord and to stand before the congregation to minister to them, and that he has brought you near to him and all your brothers, the sons of Levi, with you?

And would you seek the priesthood also? Therefore, it's against the Lord that you and all your company have gathered together. I watched a programme last week about the Duchy of Cornwall, which is the estate owned by the Prince of Wales to fund his activities, a total of 53,000 hectares stretching across 23 counties.

[14:14] And there was a wonderful moment when a group of Cornish farmers and their wives were invited to Buckingham Palace. But, of course, they couldn't simply kind of walk in on their own terms, just as you and I simply can't walk in to Buckingham Palace on our own terms.

They needed a mediator to bring them in. And so we saw the secretary and keeper of the records, who is in charge of the day-to-day management of the Duchy of Cornwall Estates, he kind of took them with him.

He showed the police and security people his ID card, and he was able to take them into Buckingham Palace. There was a kind of garden party going on, but not simply to join everyone else in the garden party, but then he introduced them to the prince, taking them into the very presence, so to speak, of the Prince of Wales himself.

And you could see the sheer delight on the faces of these Cornish farmers and their wives. But of course, without a mediator, they couldn't have done it.

And it's just the same with God. That is the issue here in Numbers chapter 16. Can you approach God on your own terms? Can you know God on your own terms?

[15:37] We live in a culture where the assumption is very much yes. Yes, you can. There are loads of different religions, many different spiritual parts.

We're all on a journey. It's the air we breathe, isn't it? All parts are equally valid. I guess many of us have heard the contemporary echo of Numbers chapter 16, verse 3.

Why do you exalt yourselves, you arrogant Christians, by saying that Jesus is the only way to God? Indeed, you may well be here this morning, and actually that's your very objection to Christianity, the arrogance of it as you see it.

Well, the answer to that objection in Numbers is that Aaron was appointed by God himself.

And when we come to the New Testament, we see that Aaron was simply a template pointing us forward to Jesus Christ, who is God's appointed mediator priest for all time.

[16:56] The writer to the Hebrews in Hebrews chapter 5 puts it like this. For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

No one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, and this is God speaking, you are my son.

Today, I have forgotten you. What does that mean practically? What it means is that you cannot know God without Jesus.

You cannot have access to God without Jesus. You cannot have God without Jesus.

It means that to reject Jesus, to reject God's mediator, is the biggest mistake of your life that you could ever make.

[18:10] I don't know what you imagine the kind of biggest mistakes one could ever make in life might be, but the biggest mistake anyone can ever make is to reject God's mediator.

God's rejected mediator. Secondly, God's vindicated mediator. God's mediator vindicated. Because that's what the rest of both chapter 16, but also chapter 17, are about.

Making the point in three different ways that we cannot approach God on our own terms, but only through God's appointed mediator and making the point that this really is a matter of life and death. Let's look at each section in turn. Firstly, death, verses 4 to 40, and that's the section which we've had read already. So in response to the rebellion, Moses falls down on his face and he sets up this test for Korah and the 250 rebels.

Verse 5. 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.

[19:32] Do this. Take censers, Korah and all his company, put fire in them and put incense on them before the Lord and the man whom the Lord chooses shall be the holy one.

You have gone too far, sons of Levi. Now, a censer is what they use to bring incense before the Lord in order to make an offering to him.

And the point is that only the priests were allowed to do this. So only Aaron and his children in due time. So Moses is saying, look, you bring these censers, you bring this offering and we'll see if you can be priests, Korah and the whole 250, if you can be priests as well as Aaron.

Well, in verses 18 and 19, they do the test. So, verse 18, 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 him at the entrance of the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation. And then the moment of truth.

[20:49] And I guess we might be thinking to ourselves, what's going to happen? Well, far from accepting their censers, the Lord's righteous anger breaks out.

Verse 20, and the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron saying, separate yourselves from among this congregation that I may consume them in a moment. While Moses and Aaron then intercede for the people, verse 22, they fell on their faces and said, O God, the God of spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin and will he be angry with all the congregation?

And so, verse 24, the rest of the congregation are then told to separate themselves from Korah, Dathan, and Abiram as Moses then addresses the people in verse 26.

And he says to them, depart please from the tents of these wicked men and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins.

Moses then addresses the rebels in verse 29. If these men die as all men die, in other words, by natural causes, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then the Lord has not sent me. [ 22 : 03 ] But if the Lord creates something new and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into shale, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord.

And as we read, that is just what happens. It is horrific. It is shocking. In verse 34, the people are terrified. In verse 35, the other 250 are then consumed by fire.

Now, at which point, I guess we may well be thinking to ourselves that if sensitivity readers are needed to rewrite some of Roald Dahl's books, then perhaps what we really need is some sensitivity readers to rewrite parts of the book of Numbers as well.

But we shouldn't read this and imagine that God is rather like one of the giants in the BFG, not the big friendly giant, but the other giants who are simply vindictive and who are all too quick to zap people.

Because what we see throughout Numbers and throughout the Bible stories so far is the extraordinary way in which God's heart tends towards mercy.

[ 23 : 28 ] These people here, they are the very people he has rescued from slavery. They're the very people he has then brought to himself. He's appointed a priest for them to offer sacrifices on their behalf so they can be in relationship with him.

God is gracious. He's kind, as we were singing earlier. He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. And yet, if we reject his mediator, we face his righteous anger.

And that is why in verses 36 to 40, the child remains of the censors of the 250 are then hammered onto the altar as a sign.

Verse 40, to be a reminder to the people of Israel so that no outsider who is not of the descendants of Aaron should draw near to burn incense before the Lord, lest he become like Korah and his company as the Lord said to him through Moses.

the point being that Aaron and his sons alone can serve as priests and offer sacrifices as mediators between God and the people.

[ 24 : 50 ] It couldn't be clearer, really, could it? It couldn't be clearer. God is a holy God. We cannot approach him on our own terms. It's simply not true to say that all roads lead to God.

They don't. So that's death. Let's think secondly about life. Verses 41 to 50. Have a look at verse 41.

But on the next day, all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron saying, you have killed the people of the Lord.

At which point, I guess we may think to ourselves, hang on a minute, this is only the next day and yet they are grumbling again. In verse 42, the congregation assemble against Moses and Aaron.

They move towards the tent of meeting. The cloud signifying God's presence covers it and the glory of the Lord, the presence of the Lord appears. In verse 43, Moses and Aaron come out of the tent.

[ 26 : 00 ] In verse 45, the Lord commands them to get away because he's going to come in judgment as his righteous anger breaks out. It is a moment full of urgency as the plague of God's wrath breaks out and begins to kill people.

So Moses instructs Aaron to take a censer to put fire in it from the altar where the animal sacrifices have been made, to put incense on it, applying the benefits of the sacrifice and to make atonement for the people.

It's a dramatic picture. I wonder if you can imagine perhaps how a film crew might put this whole scene together. The Lord's wrath going out, people running in panic, terror as they face God's wrath.

And then verse 47, have a look at it, Aaron in great earnestness runs to the people because there's no time to lose. He makes atonement for the people and the plague stops.

Although too late, verse 49, for the 14,700 who have died. The point being that this is what a priest does.

[ 27 : 10 ] They can turn away God's righteous anger at sin. In the Old Testament, offering animal sacrifices for sin and then applying those sacrifices, the benefits of those sacrifices to the people.

A priest therefore brings life. Life with God. The blessing of forgiveness. The blessing of relationship with God.

That is why a mediator priest is needed. And that is underlined in chapter 17, which again is about life.

Because in chapter 17, the Lord tells Moses to gather 12 staffs or sticks, one to represent each of the 12 tribes of Israel.

And the instructions are there in verses 4 and 5. Then you shall deposit them in the tent of meeting before the testimony where I meet with you, and the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout.

[ 28 : 13 ] Thus I'll make to cease from me the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against you. And so, verse 7, the sticks are placed before the Lord in the tent, and they wait until the next morning.

Now, what do you think is going to happen? Just to help, here's my visual aid for this morning. This is my stick. Now, I think if I leave this here overnight, I think if I come back tomorrow morning, I think it's going to look exactly the same.

as it looks now. I mean, if you want to beg to differ, you can beg to differ. But the whole point about a stick is that it's dead, and I think it's still going to be dead in the morning.

So, have a look at verse 8 to see what happens here. 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 staff has sprouted, it's budded, and not just the tiny buds that you may see on a rosebush in your garden at this time of year as it struggles to do something in cold weather, rather it's produced beautiful blossom and ripe almonds.

[ 29 : 42 ] abundance. It is, we might say, full of life. Aaron, in other words, has been vindicated. He alone is God's chosen priest and mediator.

Well, finally, the people seem to get it, verses 12 and 13. 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? this is really the highlight of chapters 16 and 17. And it's a wonderful moment where they realize that their biggest problem as they journey to the promised land over these next 40 years, as they realize actually their biggest problem is not with the food, it's not with their leaders, it's not with the terrain that they're going to be walking through, it's not with the powerful enemies they face or the scale of the task ahead.

Their biggest problem is their sin. Can you see the two alternatives? Death or life?

[ 31 : 06 ] Well, you say that was then. And yet when we come to the teaching of Jesus Christ, it is no different. On the judgment day when we meet with God, we will either face death or life.

Either the judgment or be welcomed into the new creation. And Numbers 16 and 17 are teaching us that if we're to stand before God on that day and live, we need a mediator priest.

Now, of course, in that sense, the Roman Catholic Church is right. We need a priest. But it's wrong in that no church leader today, or since Jesus came, since his death and resurrection, no church leader has been a priest.

It's why the New Testament doesn't call them priests, because Jesus is the one true mediator that Aaron foreshadows. It's why I've put 1 Timothy chapter 2, verse 5, on the outline.

for there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. Just like Aaron, Jesus was appointed by God.

[ 32 : 27 ] Just like Aaron, Jesus was rejected by those he came to serve. Jesus crucified, and yet, just like Aaron, vindicated by God, who raised him from the dead, never to die again.

And that, of course, means that he saves completely those who turn to him. He died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins, the once for all time, perfect sacrifice for sin.

It's what we'll be celebrating at the Lord's Supper in just a few minutes time. It's what the book of Hebrews calls us to rejoice in and have confidence in.

Hebrews 7, verse 25, consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Aaron was appointed priest for a time, but died. Jesus is God's priest who lives forever. forever.

[ 33 : 37 ] So let me finish this morning by asking two questions. First, have you got to the point of verse 12? Just have a look at chapter 17, verse 12 again.

Have you got to this point where you can say, behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone?

There was a wonderful moment on the news just this last week when we had one news item on the shortage of tomatoes and cucumbers, followed by the next news item on the one-year anniversary of the war in the Ukraine.

And as the news reader said, it puts tomatoes and cucumbers in their perspective. Well, in this room, many of us, I guess, face significant difficulties and challenges.

And if we don't at the moment, then we will do at some stage. difficulties perhaps at work or with elderly parents or ongoing health diagnoses or financial pressures or stresses in marriages, unhappiness in families.

[ 34 : 48 ] And yet, actually, none of those things, however significant they may feel, however much headspace they take up, actually, none of those things are the biggest problem that we face in our lives.

Because tearing above them all is our sin, the problem of the human heart, turned as it is, away from God.

Which means there's actually only one essential item we need as we journey through this life to the next life, and that is a mediator.

many of us look, of course, respectable on the outside, but let's not deceive ourselves. Far more important than having a healthy body, or a satisfying, well-paid job, or a beautiful home, or successful children, we can do without all of those things.

But actually, the one thing we can't do without is a mediator. And then the second question, have we appreciated how wonderful it is that in the Lord Jesus Christ, God has provided precisely the mediator that we need?

[ 36 : 13 ] It's so easy, isn't it, to take him for granted. If you've never personally put your trust in him, will you do so? Because life and death really are the only two options.

And for those of us who have put our trust in him, let's continue to trust in him, and to do so deeply, to be firm in the conviction that what we need above all else in this life is Jesus.

As the writer of the Hebrews says, therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we've heard, lest we drift away from it. how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?

Let me lead us in prayer. Let's pray together. How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?

Heavenly Father, we praise you for the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you that he is the one perfect mediator we need, your appointed mediator, the one rejected by man, the one vindicated in his resurrection from the dead, the one who lives forever.

[ 37 : 33 ] And we pray, Heavenly Father, for your mercy on us, that we would pay close attention to him, lest we drift away. And we ask it in his name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.