

Rejecting God's Priest

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- [0:00] And please turn your Bibles to Numbers chapter 16 on page 150.! Our passage today is very long, but I do want us to understand the entire story, so a few people are going to help me read it, as Andrew said.
- But before we get into the story, I think we need to understand the core assumption of the passage, and that is the holiness of God.
- And why it's so dangerous to approach the holiness of God without reverence or fear. In our minds, especially when we read the Old Testament, we might ask, why is God so unapproachable?
- And in a society like Australia that doesn't like hierarchy, being unapproachable is offensive. Why is God being exclusive?
- Why is He so separate from His people? And so we need to understand this, God's holiness. So what is God's holiness?
- [1:13] Well, we know the definition. It's different. He is different and good. But what is that like? Well, we can think of God's holiness like the sun.
- It's beautiful. It gives us warmth, life, light. But if we get too close to it, we die.
- The sun is not being exclusive, but it is powerful. And therefore, there must be a distance between us and the sun. Or we can think of God's holiness in terms of morality.
- This is what we usually do when we say someone is holy. That means morally good or morally perfect. Police officers are good if they are moral.
- They provide justice and order. But that means a criminal keeps their distance from a police officer. And a police officer who harbors a murderer because he is loving is not actually a good police officer.
- [2:28] There must be a distance between morality and immorality. Or lastly, we can think of God's holiness in terms of purity.
- Clean water gives us life because it's pure. But there must be a distance between clean water and dirty sewage water for it to keep giving life.
- So these different illustrations hopefully enable us to see the different sides of the diamond that is God's holiness.
- That's why approaching God's holiness is dangerous to us. Dirty water can't mix with clean water. An immoral murderer can't approach a moral police officer.
- Humans can't approach the sun without being burned. And with that in mind, we'll read the first scene.
- [3:27] Thanks, Andrew. So if you've got your Bibles there, it's page 150, as Ricky said. And we're going to read chapter 16, 1 to 40, which will be the longest section.
- So verse 1.
- When Moses heard this, he fell face down.

Then he said to Korah and all his followers, In the morning, the Lord will show who belongs to him and who is holy. And he will have that person come near him.

The man he chooses, he will cause to come near him. You, Korah, and all your followers are to do this. Take censers and tomorrow put burning coals and incense in them before the Lord.

[4:53] The man the Lord chooses will be the one who is holy. You Levites have gone too far. Moses also said to Korah, Now listen, you Levites, isn't it enough for you that God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community, the other tribes, and brought you near himself to do the work at the Lord's tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them?

He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself. But now you are trying to get the priesthood too. It is against the Lord that you and all your followers have banded together.

Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him? Then Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram and the sons of Eliab. But they said, We will not come. Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of the land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness?

And now you also want to lord it over us? Moreover, you haven't brought us into land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Do you want to treat these men like slaves?

No, we will not come. Then Moses became very angry and said to the Lord, Do not accept their offering. I have not taken so much as a donkey from them, nor have I wronged any of them.

[6:11] Moses said to Korah, You and all your followers are to appear before the Lord tomorrow, you and they and Aaron. Each man is to take his censer and put incense in it, 250 censers in all, and present it before the Lord.

You and Aaron are to present your censers also. So each of them took his censer, put burning coals and incense in it, and stood with Moses and Aaron at the entrance to the tent of meeting.

When Korah had gathered all his followers in opposition to them at the entrance to the tent of meeting, the glory of the Lord appeared to the entire Israelite assembly.

The nation, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once. But Moses and Aaron fell face down and cried out, O God, the God who gives breath to all living things, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?

Then the Lord said to Moses, Say to the assembly, Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him.

[7:18] He warned the assembly, Move back from the tents of these wicked men. Do not touch anything belonging to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins. So they moved away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.

Dathan and Abiram had come out and were standing with their wives, children, and little ones at the entrances to their tents. Then Moses said, This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things, and that it was not my idea.

If these men die a natural death and suffer the fate of all mankind, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the realm of the dead, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt.

As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households and all those associated with Korah together with their possessions.

They went down alive into the realm of the dead with everything they owned. The earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community. At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, The earth is going to swallow us too.

[8:38] And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 who were offering incense. The Lord said to Moses, Tell Eliezer, son of Aaron, the priest, to remove the censers from the charred remains and scatter the coal some distance away, for the censers are holy.

The censers are the men who sinned at the cost of their lives. Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar, for they were presented before the Lord and have become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites.

So Eliezer, the priest collected the bronze censers brought by those who had been burned to death, and he had them hammered out to overlay the altar, as the Lord directed him through Moses.

This was to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the Lord, or he will become like Korah and his followers.

Okay, so what's the problem in this first scene?

[9:42] Well, I think there are two symptoms of the same problem. The first symptom is Korah and his 250 followers thought that everyone in Israel was holy and therefore could just approach God like a priest, every last one of them.

But that's only half true. Israel as a nation was chosen to be a holy nation, and the Levites were chosen, had been chosen to work around the tabernacle, close to God.

But the Levites were not the priests. The priesthood was given to Aaron's family, which was a family within the tribe of Levites.

And therefore, the Levites were not chosen, were not declared to be holy ceremonially, like the priests. Remember in Exodus, the priests had gone through a purification ceremony.

Their sins were atoned for when they offered the sacrifices. They were bathed, and they were clothed in white to symbolize holiness.

[10:59] In other words, the priests had been declared holy by God. In God's eyes, they were clean water, so they could approach clean water.

But Korah and his 250 followers rebelled against the priesthood. And so, they were given the chance to prove that they could approach God.

They were each given a censer to bring to God, bring an offering to God. And as they did that, they died.

They got burnt, because they got too close to the Son. The second symptom came from some Reubenites.

These Reubenites did not rebel against the priesthood. They rebelled against Moses' prophetic leadership. They said that Moses had taken them out of Egypt, which was a land of milk and honey, to lord it over them and to enslave them.

[12:06] Excuse me. This is preposterous. They forgot that Egypt was a land of slavery. They were crying out to God for help. And Pharaoh had been the one who was lording over them.

Moses was sent by God to liberate them. And along the way, Moses was the one who kept interceding for them when they sinned, which is what he did here as well.

And so, God judged them. The earth swallowed them alive. And just before it happened, Moses had predicted the exact way that they would die, proving his prophetic leadership against them.

Two symptoms, but actually just one problem. Whether against Aaron or against Moses, the problem was the same. They rejected God's appointed way of drawing near.

They did not revere God's holiness. So, some of them got consumed by fire and some others got swallowed by the earth. Now, after these two horrible judgments, will the Israelites repent and respect God's holiness?

[13:28] Unfortunately, no. Let's read the second scene. Thanks, Helen. So, from 16, verse 41.

The next day, the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. You have killed the Lord's people, they said. But when the assembly gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron and turned toward the tent of meeting, suddenly the cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord appeared.

Then Moses and Aaron went to the front of the tent of meeting and the Lord said to Moses, get away from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once. And they fell face down.

Then Moses said to Aaron, take your censer and put incense in it along with burning coals from the altar and hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them. Wrath has come out from the Lord.

The plague has started. So Aaron did as Moses said and ran into the midst of the assembly. The plague had already started among the people but Aaron offered the incense and made atonement for them.

[14:42] He stood between the living and the dead and the plague stopped. But 14,700 people died from the plague in addition to those who had died because of Korah.

Then Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance to the tent of meeting for the plague had stopped. The Lord said to Moses, speak to the Israelites and get twelve staffs from them, one from the leader of each of their ancestral tribes.

Write the name of each man on his staff. On the staff of Levi, write Aaron's name for there must be one staff for the head of each ancestral tribe.

Place them in the tent of meeting in front of the ark of the covenant law where I meet with you. The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout and I will rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites.

So Moses spoke to the Israelites and their leaders gave him twelve staffs, one for the leader of each of their ancestral tribes. And Aaron's staff was among them.

[15:48] Moses placed the staffs before the Lord in the tent of the covenant law. The next day, Moses entered the tent and saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the tribe of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds.

Then Moses brought out all the staffs from the Lord's presence to all the Israelites. They looked at them and each of the leaders took his own staff. The Lord said to Moses, put back Aaron's staff in front of the ark of the covenant law to be kept as a sign to the rebellious.

This will put an end to their grumbling against me so that they will not die. Moses did just as the Lord commanded him. The Israelites said to Moses, we will die.

We are lost. We are all lost. Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die. Are we all going to die? Now, what's the problem?

I think I lost my... Well, actually, the problem is the same as previously.

[17:07] The people were rejecting Moses and Aaron as God's appointed means for them to draw near to him. They were saying, you have killed the Lord's people.

Moses and Aaron, you have killed the Lord's people. Meaning, those people who died in the previous day were the ones who belonged to God. They were the Lord's people. You're not because you killed them.

In other words, we stand with them. And so, God sends a plague. Rejecting God's mediator means rejecting him.

But here is the beautiful part. Just the very next verse, Aaron, the rejected mediator, ran into the middle of the plague, stood between the living and the dead, and interceded for the very people who had rejected him.

That should remind us of someone in the New Testament. And the plague stopped. And then straight after, God vindicated Aaron.

[18:24] He told all 12 tribal leaders to place their staffs in the tents of meeting. And the very next day, only Aaron's staff had sprouted, budded, and produced almonds.

These were dead branches used as staffs. A dead branch doesn't produce almonds overnight. This was a miracle. God showed them through this miracle that Aaron was his appointed means for the people to draw near.

Yeah. And having seen this, the people finally realized in fear, we will die. Anyone who comes near the Lord will die.

My goodness, after all this time, after all these plagues and deaths, it had not clicked in their minds until now that drawing near to God without the proper means means death.

death. And that is often our problem too, isn't it? We get the logic. Dirty water can't mix with clean water.

[19:35] We can't stand near the sun. Criminals stay away from justice. But what we struggle to accept is this. We are the dirty water. We are the criminals.

We are the weak humans who can't stand near the sun. And so we find God's holiness offensive when we read stories like this.

Until God helps us realize that we are the offensive ones. That's what Jesus did when he taught that sin is not just in what we do, but it's in our hearts, in every heart in this room and in the world.

That hatred in the heart is murder in seed form. That lust in the heart is adultery in seed form. There is evil inside the heart of every person.

I've used this quotation before, but atheist Hannah Arendt called this the banality of evil. There is evil inside the heart of every ordinary person like you and me.

[20:50] And if you have dealt with another human being, you know this to be true. And that's why approaching God's holiness, perfect holiness, is dangerous because our evil offends him.

We will die. Anyone who comes near the Lord will die. That's the cry of the Israelites. That should be our cry too. we will die. If we come near the Lord, we will die.

Is there a solution to this? Yes, there is. Because God is gracious and he still wants fellowship with his unholy, rebellious people.

And we see that in his response in the last scene. thanks, Mavis. Thanks, Mavis. So, chapter 18, verses 1 to 7.

The Lord said to Aaron, you, your sons, and your family are to bear the responsibility for offenses connected with the sanctuary.

[22:08] And you and your sons alone are to bear the responsibility for offenses connected with the priesthood. Bring your fellow Levites from your ancestral tribe to join you and assist you when you and your sons minister before the tent of the covenant of law.

They are to be responsible to you and are to perform all the duties of the tent, but they must not go near the furnishings of the sanctuary or the altar.

Otherwise, both they and you will die. They are to join you and be responsible for the care of the tent of meeting, all the work at the tent and no one else may come near where you are.

You are to be responsible for the care of the sanctuary and the altar so that my wrath will not fall on the Israelites again.

I myself have selected your fellow Levites from among the Israelites as a gift to you, dedicated to the Lord to do the work at the tent of meeting.

[23:21] but only you and your sons may serve as priests in connection with everything at the altar and inside the curtain.

I am giving you the service of the priesthood as a gift. Anyone else who comes near the sanctuary is to be put to death.

well, right when Israel panicked that they could never survive God's holiness, God reassured them he did not want anyone to perish.

Next slide. he had provided the Levites and the priests to stand between him and the people. The priests were the ones who would draw near on behalf of the people.

The priesthood was God's gift so that the people wouldn't die. in my family when someone wrongs another person they have to apologize.

[24:39] I'm pretty sure that's also true in many families. It's the means for a relationship to be repaired saying sorry. One day Esa, my 18 month old baby threw a toy at my face.

He didn't know what he was doing of course that's just what babies do. But I said, Ow, Esa, are you going to say sorry? Well, he didn't because he can't even talk, right?

Kai, my four-year-old son, was watching the whole time and then he said, he can't say sorry daddy, he's just a baby. I'll say sorry for him.

And then he came to me and then he said, sorry daddy. That's what the priesthood is like. Interceding for the sake of the people who could not come near to do it themselves.

But unlike Esa, the Old Testament people and we as well have the capacity to repent and say sorry to God. God. But in ourselves, we can't draw near to the Son to actually say it.

[26:01] We are not worthy to intercede for ourselves. We are unclean water. We are humans in front of the Son. And so in the Old Testament, God gave them the priests to do that on behalf of the people through the sacrifices.

And that's why it says that the priesthood is a gift. And now in the New Testament, we still have a priest, don't we? And his name is Jesus.

Next slide. As Hebrews 7 says, because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, not through ourselves, but through him.

because he always lives to intercede for them. Like Aaron, saving the people through intercession, standing between the living and the dead, except that it's not just once, it's forever, because he lives forever.

Only Jesus can do this role. Why? Because Jesus is not only our high priest, he is the Son of God. Who else can stand closest to God's holiness?

[27:26] His one and only Son. Who else is heard 100% by God when he prays for us? His one and only Son.

Who else is sinless, needs no atonement for himself, and leaves forever to intercede for us? His one and only Son, Jesus.

So when Christians say that Jesus is the only way to salvation, we are not trying to be exclusive. In fact, we want to include as many people as possible to draw near to God through Jesus.

The claim is not about exclusivity, but about holiness. to approach God without the proper way is death.

And God loves us so much that he has given us the means, the only way, is one and only Son, Jesus.

[28:35] So our application from this passage today is simple. First, revere God's holiness. If we want to draw near to him, as God also wants to fellowship with us, we need to do it out of reverence and with an acknowledgement of our own unworthiness and sin, lest we die.

But God has given us a way through his high priest, his only Son, Jesus. And so the second point of application is accept Jesus as God's only way of going to him.

Don't reject him. So if you haven't done so, and if you long to enjoy a fellowship with God, accept Jesus. You already have Jesus.

Keep drawing near to God through him. Through church, through prayers, in the person of Jesus, who always intercedes for us.

We have something, a privilege, that the Old Testament people did not have, a direct access through his one and only Son. Let's use that privilege.

[29:57] privilege now. Play.