

Aaron's Staff Blossoms

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn together to that chapter we read, Numbers chapter 17. And we'll take up the reading again at verse 8, although I want to consider the whole of the chapter with you.

Chapter 17 of Numbers, page 150. 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. Today is something of a linked theme, if you like, with last week.

Last week we considered Moses' sister Miriam, and how she rose against Moses. Today we're going to consider something related to Moses' brother Aaron.

There are many things, there are many chapters we could choose, but this one is the one that I want to choose this morning. It is quite wrong of us to read a chapter like this and say, oh, it's too complicated.

[1 : 17] It is unusual. It's perhaps not the easiest chapter to understand or to try and understand, but nevertheless, the challenge of the Bible is always to read it and read it again, and ask the Lord to reveal to us what the message of that chapter is, what is God saying to us, not just what was God saying to the children of Israel, there is no question, but that the initial purpose of this event was for God to communicate his message and his word to the people of Israel.

But this is God's word to every generation, and to us as well. There is something in this chapter in which God is telling us something, and that's what we are asking this morning.

What is it that God is telling ourselves? There are three words that come to my mind in terms of the message of this chapter, and I'm just going to keep it as simple as that.

The first word is proof. The second word is priesthood. And this third word is promise. Now, these are all words that we readily understand, and words that we can take away with us, and by which I hope we'll be able to have a deeper and a closer understanding with God's word in this chapter.

Proof, priesthood, and promise. This chapter is all about how God proved beyond any doubt whatsoever. They shouldn't have needed, the people of Israel should not have needed that proof.

[2 : 46] Enough proof had already been given, and yet, in God's mercy, God comes to them in an unmistakable way, and by this unmistakable action on his part, he proves to them in no doubt whatsoever that Aaron is his appointed and chosen high priest for the people.

Let me just go over what happens that God challenges the leader of each tribe through Moses to take their staff. And their staff represented the authority of each of the tribal leaders, one for every tribe of Moses.

They had a chief, each one had a chief, and each chief had a staff, a kind of, I suppose, like a walking stick. We would not regard a walking stick as having any sign of authority whatsoever.

Yet, in those days, their staff, their stick, or their rod, was a sign of authority, or their authority over each tribe. And each tribal leader was to write his name on the staff.

Now, just like any shepherd's crook, or walking stick, or stick of this kind, the staff was dead and completely incapable of producing any kind of fruit, or branches, or leaves, or buds, or any...

[4 : 16] It was an absolute impossibility. And yet, when each person put their staff into the tabernacle, and the next day, within a few hours, when Moses took each one of them out, and laid them, I guess, on the ground in front of all the people, or as many people as could see, every single one of them was as dead as it had been those few hours before.

It looked exactly the same, as you would expect. The last thing you would expect from any staff was for it to show any sign of life whatsoever.

Except for the staff of Aaron. That staff had been as dead as any of the other staffs that had been put in. And yet, when the people looked, they saw that...

And by the way, we're... It's a kind of mistaken notion to talk about Aaron's rod that budded. It didn't just bud.

We think of buds as little, just little tiny buds. This rod had produced not only buds, but the chapter tells us blossoms and fruit at the same time.

[5 : 35] It was an almond rod, an almond staff, incapable, completely, in its present form, of bringing forth any kind of fruit whatsoever. And it had just burst into life.

It wasn't just tiny little signs of buds. It had burst into life. There were blossoms and almonds and buds at the same time.

Even that itself in a living tree was utterly impossible. You don't get almonds, buds, and blossoms at the same time. All of these represent different parts of the year. So you have a lengthy time process condensed into a few hours.

So there could be absolutely no doubt whatsoever that a divine miracle had taken place in which God had stepped in to his house and he had produced what only he could produce, which is life from the dead.

It's a divine prerogative. You can't argue it in any other way. And the people who saw it were put to silence, many of them, once and for all we hope and we trust.

[6 : 42] Although in the chapters that lie ahead there is more rebellion and more grumbling, but we hope that many of them saw sense at last and saw that in this final act of God, that God was showing them once and for all that he had chosen Aaron to be his priest.

And that brings me on to the second word, which is priesthood. You see, the whole argument which had produced the crisis of the previous chapter was about priesthood.

And it's important for us, not only useful, but important for us to go back and to trace through what the argument and the crisis was. Three men, Korah, Dathan and Abiram had risen up against Moses and Aaron and their argument was this.

Typically the argument of the Israelites was, why have you not given us water? Why have you not given us food? Why are we living such miserable lives? They seem to forget all along the utter misery that they had suffered in Egypt before Moses, the Lord had led them out of Egypt.

They've lost sight of God's salvation altogether and all they could think. But this was a different argument altogether. This was not about food or water or provision. This was about sheer jealousy on their part.

[7 : 58] And this was about them striving after something that did not rightfully belong to them. And this is what they said at the beginning of chapter three. They assembled against Moses and Aaron and said, you have gone too far.

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?

That was their point. That was their argument. Why do you exalt yourself? They had completely lost sight of the fact that it wasn't Moses and Aaron who had brought this position on themselves, but that God had given them a position of leadership and priesthood.

What was priesthood and why was it so crucially important to God, to Israel, and to us today?

Priesthood is God's way of our reconciliation to him. Let me put it another way. Priesthood is God's only way in which we can be right with God.

[9 : 11] Let me put it another way. Priesthood is God's only way in which our sin can be taken away. Priesthood is God's only way in which we can know him and meet with him and fellowship with him and receive all the blessings that God has offered us in the gospel.

Don't ever think that priesthood has been done away with. We'll see in a few moments time of how priesthood in the Old Testament extended into our one great high priest who is Jesus Christ, who is still our high priest.

And the Bible tells us that he is the only way in which we, as our high priest, the only way in which we can be right with God and which we can be reconciled and which our sins can be forgiven.

You see a terrific example of this in the last chapter, chapter 16. An important chapter to read where God, when these people in Korah, Dathan, and Abiram had risen up against the upshot, the whole thing was that the ground opened up, literally, underneath Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and swallowed them and all those who were associated with them.

Another divine act, but not good enough to convince the rest of the people of Israel. The day afterwards, the day after this awful thing had happened, they rose up against Moser and Aaron once again and they said, you have killed God's people.

[10 : 46] It wasn't Moser and Aaron at all. It was God. But then God's anger burned against them again because of their continued rebellion and he sent a plague.

And the plague was, the plague was rife among the people, raging among the people. You could almost look over the people and see them all dropping as the plague spread amongst the people of Israel.

Moses, of course, in concern and love for the Lord's people, he said to Aaron, go and take your censer and stand between the living and the dead.

And when Aaron did that, he stood between the living and the dead. That's the moment that the plague stopped. That's what a priest was.

Someone who stood between Israel and God. And someone who represented the people of Israel and the holiness of God as he stood before the holy.

[11 : 46] See, there's God on the one hand who was utterly and perfectly and completely and eternally holy and unapproachable. And there was Israel on the one hand who were sinful.

How were Israel going to be reconciled to God and who was going to bring them together? The answer, God's answer, was a priest. It didn't, the idea of the priest did not come from Israel.

It wasn't Moses' invention. It wasn't Aaron's invention. It wasn't the invention of any one single person of Israel. It was God's way in which he said, he said, through this priest, you will be able to be reconciled to me and we will be able to meet with each other and your sins will be forgiven.

Now, of course, it was through what the priest did. The sacrifice that the priest made in which the blood of an animal was presented to God and through the blood that their sins were forgiven and the people were reconciled.

But only the priest was able to make that sacrifice. And instead of accepting God, instead of rejoicing that there was actually a way in which God had created in which they could know him and love him and worship him and in which they would know that he was on their side, they rebelled against him and they said literally this, why should only one person be a priest?

[13 : 16] We all want to be priests. Why not? We're all the same as Aaron. We all are the same flesh and blood. We're even related to him. What makes him so different from everyone else? On one level, nothing.

He was a sinful man, same as everybody else was. No more deserving to come close to God than anyone else. But on the other hand, God had chosen Aaron to be the representative of his people.

This was God's choice. And as soon as God made his choice, the people were faced with a challenge. Do we accept that or do we not? It's a bit like today's world, isn't it?

The real challenge, not believing that there is a God, but believing and accepting what he has told us in the Bible. And the biggest challenge of all is this, in today's world, that God has said there's only one way in which you can be reconciled to me and in which you can come to know me and in which your sins will be forgiven.

What does the world say? We don't want to know. We don't want that way. We don't think that it's, we don't think it's very acceptable because we feel that, well, why can't we just come to God?

[14 : 26] Why can't we all just climb the mountain where God is at the top, each with his own religion, each with his own way? Everyone has their own opinion. Surely, at the end of the day, God's going to accept us all for what we are.

He's not. That's the message of the Bible. The Bible, the message of the Bible starts by saying, the soul that sins, it shall die. And our world has completely forgotten that.

We are in no position to start negotiating with God. That's the mistake these people made. Rising up against Moses and saying, well, what makes him so special? special. God had made him special.

God had set Aaron apart to be the mediator or the man who stood between Israel and God. You know, they should have rejoiced.

They should have leapt up and down and praised God for the rest of their lives that there was a way in which they would know that their sins were forgiven and that God loved them and God wanted to be reconciled and one with them and he was to be their God and they were to be his people and yet instead of that they rose up against him because they demanded their own rights or what they believed was their own rights.

[15 : 37] That's the way the sinful human heart works. And it's the way in which our sinful human heart works as well when we're confronted with the gospel and with the same message which God brings to us today which is if you want to know me you have to be it has to be through the priest.

The only priest. Jesus Christ who became our great high priest and our mediator and the one who stands between us.

God says you need a mediator. You cannot come to me on your own by your own strength in your own deeds with your own goodness or your respectability or what you think is good about your life.

You can't do it. You need to be forgiven and it's only through the work of the priest and the sacrifice of the priest that that can take place.

So I hope this message is relevant for each one of us. It was proof that Aaron was absolutely God's chosen vessel and instrument by which Israel could be reconciled and brought near to God and it was priesthood in which God is saying there is only one way in which you can know me through the priesthood and through particularly the man that I choose and he says exactly the same thing to us today that salvation is found in no other for there is only one name given under heaven amongst men whereby we must be saved.

[17:17] Only one name. Don't you rejoice in that? Don't you rejoice that salvation is not a complicated process? Don't you rejoice that you can that you can go to your bed tonight in Christ knowing that if you were to die tonight that you would be saved through Jesus not through your own works.

If you if you thought for one moment that salvation was found through my efforts and through my coming to God and through my attempts I could never sleep at night because I would always think well I wonder if I did enough today I wonder if I did the right things today I wonder if I've pleased God or if I've left one thing out because if I've left one thing out that's it I'm lost but through Jesus we have someone who left nothing out who is perfect in every possible way and who is our mediator between God and man and through whom God says that if any man be in Jesus he is a new creation and that our sins and our iniquities I will remember no more that's what I want to hear I want to hear God saying to me your sins are forgiven there's only one way in which that can happen through Jesus Christ my Lord so that's how important the priesthood was the last word was the word promise and I can't help but noticing here something that that clearly announces to me what was going to happen in future you see God at the same time as warning his people and instructing his people and giving them every detail as to how they should live through the law and the sacrifices he's also pointing forward he's pointing forward to the blessing that he had already

God had a purpose for the centuries to come starting off in Abraham and the promise that he gave to Abraham that one day they would have the land of Canaan to be the promised land that in his seed all nations would be blessed that his seed would be would outnumber the stars would be like the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore and that through him all nations would be blessed and God is working to fulfill that promise and that's why as we've said often before we can come to the Old Testament with a greater and a fuller and a clearer appreciation and knowledge of what God was doing at that particular time now what how does and what what I'm saying is this how does Aaron's rod point us to Jesus Christ well I hope we've explained that partly in what we've said about the priesthood Aaron's priesthood extended through the the and although the New Testament tells us that it was defective in that the high priest died year after year that Jesus is a great high priest and that then that he ever lives having made that sacrifice of himself and having risen again and having ascended to the Father's hand he ever lives to make intercession for us we have the Bible says a great high priest but

I believe the sign itself is a tremendous indication of what God would do one day in Jesus Christ look at what happens look at how God is in the detail of what's taking place here here is a rod a staff and it's dead it's lifeless and it's laid before the Lord it's presented before the Lord as a lifeless rod and that lifeless rod represents as we've seen before the priesthood of Aaron represents the man who who stands between Israel and God it's a rod and that rod is presented before God and what God does with that lifeless dead staff is to bring it to life so that in the morning it had sprung to fruitfulness and to blessing and to promise and to life does that not clearly announce to you what Jesus would do in his resurrection after he laid down his life on the cross his body was laid as a dead body in the tomb and laid before God his life his death was an offering before God as our priest and what did

God do as a as the final mark the ultimate mark of how how Jesus life and death was accepted to God he brought him to life again he raised him on the third day to life again and if ever you're looking for proof that Jesus is the way to God and the only way to God you simply ask one single question which is who has the key to life and death that's the question I would ask I've said this often before if I was today not a Christian if I was looking at all the systems and beliefs and faith systems and all the different opinions I would only have one I would only have one question who can show me the key and who can give me the key to life and death it doesn't matter how it doesn't matter how respectable or ornate your buildings are or your procedures are or your books or your history and all of these things religion to me is completely useless if it has nothing to say to me about life and death and here is this extraordinary figure

[23 : 19] Jesus of Nazareth who came into our world and who lived the perfect life and who laid down his life as the sacrifice for my sin at Calvin and who rose again triumphant from the grave he's the only one who did that means for me there is no question just like the people of God here just like the people of Israel there this was the final proof that Aaron had been chosen by God to represent the people of God so for me and I'm sure for you as well the resurrection of Jesus Christ and all that that resurrection has brought about is the final proof the decisive proof he is declared Paul says to be the son of God by the resurrection from the dead and so what we have here is a link a precious link between the priesthood of Aaron being the way to God and the resurrection of Jesus

Christ many people can't help noticing also that in this rod there are the three elements there are the buds there are the blossoms and there are the almonds these three elements don't occur on any branch normally at the same time they take place over a different there first the first the blossom then the buds and then the almonds over a number of months but they're all brought together and God is showing that he has a future and a promise for his people he is showing that right now he is not going to leave them he's not going to forsake them he still is carrying out his purposes in them and we see always the same thing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ not only the way in which we can be saved from sin through the Lord Jesus Christ but that God has a future for this world that what we have today other people will have and there are people today who are like the buds who are perhaps only just coming to know the facts of the gospel for the very first time hearing the gospel for the very first time and as they're listening to the gospel they're taking it in and absorbing it we have to believe that

Jesus promised I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against that and that promise has been fulfilled over the centuries how has it been fulfilled certainly not through any impressiveness that the church brings it's the gospel itself the message of Jesus Christ that has changed people's hearts and there might be somebody here today and you're a bud you're only beginning to just appreciate the greatness of Jesus Christ you probably never you may not even have heard much about Jesus before and you're only beginning now to absorb there's something about it that just gets to you isn't there there's something about the gospel that you fight against it you wrestle with it you struggle with it you try and put it out of your mind and you can't because there's something about this that just grabs hold of your heart and your soul well that's God speaking to you why don't you listen to him instead of running from him why don't you stop and listen to him and discover the greatness of God and the greatness of what he's done in the Bible

I know in many ways there's nothing more complicated than trying to wrestle with this whole idea of priesthood but I hope that we've seen this morning that it's actually a simple idea someone who stands between us as guilty sinners and God who is ultimately holy by nature that's an impossibility we can't come to God the psalm says who can ascend the holy hill of God who can ascend the hill of God the answer is he whose hands are clean and whose heart is pure that means none of us so what's the answer then the answer is in the way that God has given to us in the priest stands between us and God and represents us to make sacrifice for our sin and the great priest is Jesus Christ the son of God himself who became one of us taken from among men he became one of us to represent us before God and to make the sacrifice but it wasn't another sacrifice it was himself that he sacrificed on the cross so the priest and the sacrifice at Calvary became one so that by that perfect act of atonement that we can know today for sure that our sins and all our guilt and all our shame and all our darkness and dirt can be cleansed through him and in him there's the proof there's the priesthood and there's the promise all of them in Jesus

Christ and him alone let's pray your father in heaven we ask that you will impress your truth upon our hearts we ask oh lord that you will make us to see our own lostness like the people of Israel were made to see that day how utterly broken and guilty they were we ask oh lord that having seen the truth of the gospel in none other than Jesus Christ that we might be able to see how much we need him in our lives for we ask in his name amen to