

## **The Nature and Danger of Rebellion Numbers 16-17 (ESV)**

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Last week we witnessed one of the most tragic acts of collective rebellion in the entire Old Testament. God's people refused to follow Him into the Promised Land. They reject Moses as leader and instead, seek a return to Egypt. God's punishment is swift. They were sentenced to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until every rebel died. And it's into those wandering wilderness years we descend today to find Israel has not yet learned her lesson. This week and next we'll discover that while this unbelief-infected generation clings to life, the contagion of their insolent spirit will continue to spread. Today in Numbers 16 and 17, *The Nature and Danger of Rebellion*, we'll read most of the text in the message, but we'll start with verses 1-5.

*1 Now Korah the son of Izhar, 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. 2 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. 3 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?" 4 When Moses heard it, he fell on his face, 5 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.*

Cold, hungry, cold, hungry, cold! It was all anyone could think about, and they were sick of it. An entire bitter winter stranded in the frigid subzero wilderness had set the crew on edge. Rations were meager; supplies insufficient. Trust in leadership had plummeted. Tensions were on the rise. The Canadian spring came and it thawed the ice that set their ship free. And so the men were pleading with the captain to return home, but he was determined to go on. And something snapped! Now, he was known as one of the most successful navigators of the great age of exploration. He was one of the very few willing to brave voyages into the Arctic Circle in cramped, wooden vessels. His exploits live on with discoveries he made in Manhattan, Chesapeake, Delaware, New York, and maybe most prominently, in the Bay and river named after him, Henry Hudson. But in 1610, he gathered a crew of 22 and sailed the ship *Discovery*, looking for a safer trade route from England to India. Success would mean fortune, but the risk was great. His previous attempts had been blocked by ice, so he turned westward for a passage through Canada. But in November, ice forced them to set up camp in James Bay for a long, hard winter. It was cold and they were hungry.

When spring rolled around, the crew was desperate for the comforts of home, but Hudson was not one to give up easily, and he ordered them to resume the voyage. He failed to realize that adversity can sometimes breed mutiny. And as tremendous an explorer as he

was, all of his achievements were not enough to protect him from people who were just tired of following. On June 22, they rebelled. One of the journalists said that they had seized control and returned to England on their own. But they left Hudson and the loyalists behind, adrift in a small boat with supplies, to find a way to survive. But signs of struggle on the ship's deck suggest the actual mutiny was perhaps more violent. In the end, no search party was sent. And while legends exist, neither Hudson nor those crew members were ever heard from again.

Hot, hungry, hot, hungry, hot! It's all anyone can think about, and they're sick of it. Trust in leadership has plummeted. Tensions are on the rise. This is Israel, stuck in the wilderness. They have no hope of escape. It's just rocks and snakes and dirt. They thought, "Moses had shown up at the right time to help us get out of Egypt, but it's not like he wasn't the lucky one. He escaped slavery. He grew up in Pharaoh's house. And then when life got hard, he deserted and fled the country. And then he came back all spiritual. And of course, it's him and his brother that are leading the nation. And look where he has brought us? Nowhere! Sure, we've made some mistakes. Okay. But do you think God wants us to live here and be miserable? God wants good things for us! This isn't what God wants." In Numbers 16, it seems again that adversity is breeding a mutiny.

We don't like it when life gets uncomfortable. We don't like trials. We don't like pain or hardship, discipline. Suffering is not on our agenda. We like things safe, easy, enjoyable. So when times get hard, we react. "Who is messing this up? What's going wrong? We're not supposed to be here!" And who is the first to get blamed? Usually it's the people in charge. Few targets are easier to strike than those who are in authority. Children shout out at parents on how to lead the home. Players tell coaches the plays to call and who to sub. And fans go ballistic on the referees. Who is in charge here? Employees grumble about how executives should change the organization. Citizens inform politicians on problems with complex policies. When things get hard, these thoughts creep in. "Who put them in charge? What are they thinking? I can do better than that! I'd never do that. That's so unfair!"

Now, this is not to say that many followers don't have important insights, because they do. And leaders neglect listening, to their own hurt. Nor is it to say that leaders don't make big mistakes, because they do. Overlooking such abuses is at least equally as dangerous. But as important as those exceptions are, today's text is not addressing them. The passage today is speaking about when people grumble against authority because of an underlying rebellion against the God who is ultimately in charge. It's when they rebel against people, but really, it's against God. We're talking about how we like to be backseat drivers.

You know backseat drivers. They're sitting in the back and just telling the person up front, "That's not the way you want to go. Actually, that's the wrong direction." And when God gets control of our lives, sometimes we think, "Where are You taking me? This is not what I signed up for. This is not where I want to go." And in fact, we reach over and try to grab the wheel ourselves. "Let me help You out, God. This is not the way we should be going." We do that with God and with the people He puts in charge in our

lives. It's hard to trust. And we could say that we struggle to trust God because we've had some pain in our lives; because things have been difficult. And that wouldn't be untrue in a sense. Maybe we've had a broken heart, a betrayal, an abuse, an anxiety. These things really affect our ability to trust. But the reality that Scripture shows us is that we had trust issues before anything was ever wrong.

Back in the Garden, when life was perfect, we chose to rebel against God's authority. We took matters into our own hands, then. We didn't need a reason. And ever since, temptation has actually only grown stronger. And this is what's crazy! It's not like God has made it easy. I mean, He allowed Israel to suffer in slavery for 400 years. And at the initial deliverance, it got worse. And He has led them on purpose into the wilderness. He allowed the Canaanites to get entrenched into this Promised Land. Isn't there a better way? It's almost as if God is not a very good driver. What's He doing?

Have you ever felt like that in your life? "Is anybody in control of this thing, or is this really what God actually wants?" And the people that God puts in charge, we think, "There's gotta be a better way. God, anything but that, but them." Or "Dad, you don't understand." Or "I can't believe my boss." Or "The church is just so political." Or "Government is just worthless." Or "If I'm in charge, things would be better." We may not think those exact thoughts. But maybe we reach for the wheel through just persistent worry and anxiety. There's just sort of a constant grumbling and complaining. Or maybe we neglect prayer. We just try to control and manipulate through our own might and busyness. Eventually, we find ourselves tempted to reject the authority in our lives, even though they were given by God, because we think we've found a better way.

What does God think about all of this? What does He think about rebellion? And how does He want us to think about it when God's way doesn't seem to be our way? There's perhaps many things to do, but certainly we should not sinfully rebel. In fact, we'll say it like this: The most dangerous place to take a stand is in the soil of rebellion. The most dangerous place to take a stand is in the soil of rebellion! Authority may not be popular, but it exists for our protection and we rebel against it at our own risk. Before we start grumbling about who is in charge, we have to remember who is really in charge because chiseling away at authority erodes the very ground on which we stand.

How do we avoid this sort of rebellion? It's hard and leaders make mistakes and life gets tough and it gets hot and we get hungry. So we turn to this passage which is foundational. It kind of exposes us to the nature and danger of rebellion. We come as rebels. I come as a rebel being spoken to. And we want to come with ears to hear, especially when life gets hard, when the land is dry and the future seems bleak and it's just hard to trust when God and authorities don't seem to be driving well. How do we resist the temptation to take control? How do we avoid the spirit of rebellion? God gives us a story that maybe comes apart in three phrases that show us the danger of rebellion and maybe teaches a few lessons on leadership along the way. This is a story about God's authority; His authority confronted, His authority defended, and then His authority confirmed. First,

**Authority Confronted: Rebellion on the Rise (Num 16:1-15)**

It opens here with a hostile shakedown in a section we'll call "Swallow the Leader." A shakedown is a radical change or restructure in leadership where they just question who is in charge. It starts with a confrontation that is sort of like what is called a coup d'état. It's a sudden, illegal shift where there's a movement made where they try to take over. This isn't foreign to humanity. In fact, once source says that there have been over 60 coups attempted in the last 18 years alone. This is not surprising. So this is a shakedown, a confrontation against Moses and Aaron that starts with an aggressive uprising. Look at this confrontation, the spark that happens. Look at their assembly here; who it is that rises up.

*1 Now Korah the son of Izhar, 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. 2 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.*

There are three distinct parties. There is a Levite named Korah, and there are three Reubenites: Dathan, Abiram, and On. And then there are some chiefs. The instigator is Korah, this Levite. He tries to take control, getting everybody together, and he gets some guys who are well-known. This is not a rabble. This is organized. It took work. You didn't have texting. You didn't have email. You had to go and talk with these guys. It would take effort and risk to assemble this kind of liberation movement. And yet, he did. Their stance is clear. They are against Moses and against Aaron.

Now, why does it matter what tribe they are from? Well, it could be an insight of these guys' motives. Think about Korah. What tribe is he from? Levi. What tribe are Moses and Aaron from? Levi. Okay, now of the Levites, remember God had spoken and He had chosen Aaron and his line for a special role as priests. They were designated to get together the things of the tabernacle to move. And actually one other division of the Levites which is where Korah comes from, the Kohathites, they weren't the priests but they actually were the ones who would get to carry these things. It was a privileged position. But you can almost imagine Korah just being like, "What makes Aaron so special? He and his family are getting things together and all of a sudden they bring it to us and we load it like we're the mules. What's going on?"

And then he draws in these guys who were Reubenites. What's up with that? Well, with where the tabernacle was situated, south of the tabernacle you have where Korah would have been. And right next to them, what tribe do you think might have been there? The Reubenites. And what motive might they have had? Well, we can't know exactly, but it's interesting. Reuben was actually the firstborn of Jacob. Do you remember that? He should have had the birthright. He should have been in charge. But instead, he seemed like he maybe did a power grab through sleeping with his father's concubine and he fell out of favor. And so the leadership didn't go to him.

For whatever reason, these guys have a chip on their shoulder. They're tired of Moses and Aaron, so they have a shakedown. This is the uprising. They're aggressive in their

assembly and in the amount. There are 250 chiefs here. And why are they rising up?

*3 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.*

This is their assumption. "We're all holy! What makes you so special?" Now it seems like they're referencing what God said at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:6. God said, "Tell the people

**Exodus 19:6** and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

So they're saying, "God said we're all holy. We're all priests. What makes you so special? Let's go!" It makes partial sense, but not total sense. Because even though Exodus 19:6 is there, they are priests in one sense, but there's also clear commands from God about Aaron's family having the special role of the priesthood. So, both are true at the same time. In one sense, there's a passage that makes clear that everyone is a part of God's kingdom here, but it doesn't invalidate a clearly assigned role that God has given. Well, they don't like that. And they're emboldened about their own holiness. What makes them so confident? Well, maybe this is a hint. If you were reading through, in chapter 15 they're talking about holiness and God instructs Moses

**Numbers 15:38-40** "Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God.

So they have a sense of these tassels and holiness and it's like, "Yeah! Look at this. We have a uniform, here. We're holy." It's almost like the Awana Cubbie. They get their patch and they think, "Okay. I'm ready to teach the adult ABC. Here we go." No. It's a patch. It's a tassel. Or like a high school graduate gets a cap and gown. They show up the next fall and say, "I'm going to lecture today. I got this tassel." Well, here they are. They have an assumption. "We're holy just like you." It's aggressive and they make an accusation here in verse 3.

*"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?"*

"You guys are just trying to be in charge. You're trying to boss us around." The problem is that it's not Moses and Aaron seizing power, it's actually, ironically, them. But this is the shakedown that begins. There's an aggressive uprising here, and it initiates a decisive response by Moses and Aaron. They respond physically and verbally.

*4 When Moses heard it, he fell on his face,*

He is a true servant leader. And look at what he says. There are a few elements. First, he opens with a humble assertion.

*5 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.*

"God is going to be the one who decides this thing." Moses didn't take matters into his own hands on this occasion. He says, "God is going to do it. God is going to choose, and He's going to set this straight, and He'll do it tomorrow." And so he gives some logistical instruction. Here's how it can happen.

*6 Do this: take censers, Korah and all his company; 7 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.*

Now this is a dangerous proposal because if you remember back in Leviticus 10, there were two individuals who did this: Nadab and Abihu. They got fire, but unauthorized fire. They waved it before the Lord, and God struck them down dead. Except Nadab and Abihu were actually Aaron's sons. They were the right guys, but they just did it in the wrong way and they died. These aren't even the right guys and they're not going to do it the right way. This is dangerous! And Moses warns them. He ends with two spiritual accusations against them. First, he accuses them of shameful ingratitude.

*You have gone too far, sons of Levi!" 8 And Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi: 9 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, 10 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?*

It's shameful ingratitude. "That's what you've spurned. But it's not only what you've spurned. Let me tell you about who you've spurned. It's not just shameful ingratitude, but you have a supernatural ignorance."

*11 Therefore it is against the LORD that you and all your company have gathered together. What is Aaron that you grumble against him?"*

"You guys are upset at us. You're not arguing with us. You're arguing with God!" Moses gets it. And it's easy to take things personally as a leader, but he doesn't make it about him. He makes it about God. We see that this builds into a derisive revolt where Moses' authority is going to be rejected by the Reubenites. It's a derisive revolt.

*12 And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and they said, "We will*

*not come up.*

This is total defiance! It's brief and it's emphatic. "We won't come up." And it's repeated again in verse 14. "We're just not going to do what you say, Moses." It's defiance! And they express it through defamation of Moses' character. They use his words.

*13 Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also make yourself a prince over us?*

"You think it's not a big deal that you just take us away from the good land," which was Egypt, when they were in slavery, "so that you could just be in charge; so you could be the boss?" They are forgetting what God has done. And this accusation leads into a public denunciation of Moses as a failure.

*14 Moreover, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards.*

"You have failed! This isn't the Promised Land. Look at this place. This is terrible!" And it doesn't stop them from making a final stab of disrespect, and you see the extent of their revolt. They say

*Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up."*

"Are you going to try to blind us? Are you going to try to pull the wool over our eyes and try to trick us that this is the good place?" They're missing something here. They're missing that the reason why they are in this place is not because of Moses' ambition but because of their rebellion. But they don't want to hear that. So there is a revolt. And it incites a responsive prayer by Moses. Now this is too much! And you can see what is behind this prayer in verse 15 is anger. Moses was very angry! "These guys are twisting history and saying that we are the oppressors, that I am the oppressor who rescued them from slavery." It's almost like this is the last straw, but not quite. Moses prays to God instead of lashing out in anger at them. But we can see him being pushed to the edge. Remember that!

*15 And Moses was very angry and said to the LORD, "Do not respect their offering. I have not taken one donkey from them, and I have not harmed one of them."*

"I have not had any hypocrisy toward them. There has been no exploitation and no endangerment." So this is the first phase of the story: authority confronted through a hostile shakedown. Now, if you're in any household where there's lots of complaining and rebellion, kind of just give your ears a rest. That's hard to hear. I don't know if you've felt like that, but it's hard to hear. Unfortunately, we're not done. It's hard to hear people talk like that. And it just kind of shows us man's persistent resentment of authority. God allows people and directions that we don't like, and we lash out. We rebel.

And here are two truths that become clear. First, about rebellion: Rebellion generally is

senseless. It may feel right. It may sound justified from a limited perspective and it may be popular. But the problem is, when we start complaining about who is in charge, we're forgetting who is *really* in charge. Sinful rebellion is senseless because it's against God. And then from the other angle, we think about leadership, and we realize leadership can be hardship. Sure there's an honor, there's a blessing. But when you're leading sinful people, this can be the kind of thing you experience, whether it's leadership of being a parent in a home or in a work place. There's an honor, yes, but it can be a burden, a hardship. That's what it is to lead people.

But as we turn our focus off of ourselves and turn upward toward God, we think the ultimate authority and the most aggrieved victim of rebellion that ever lived was Jesus. The one through whom the entire world was created, the ruler and King of all the earth, He is Yahweh incarnate, and actually it is He who is being rejected by His people here in the wilderness. But it almost seems nothing compared to Him coming as a person and taking on flesh and coming as the God-man and offering His life and love and being rejected and then murdered upon the cross. It's the ultimate leader who endured the most painful hardship from the most senseless rebellion ever committed. Talk about God steering at crazy! And yet, it was through that very act that His authority would be defended and His people would be delivered. Maybe God is driving in a way that we should trust.

I was in a church that I loved dearly. The church was going through a lot. There was turmoil in leadership, rumors and growing distrust. Things were hard. I remember as I thought back and this pastor was convicting me about times when I was lured into grumbling. And there were times even where I think I encouraged others to grumble. And that was wrong. God was bringing those things to mind and the need to ask for forgiveness. And there are also other times in those seasons where I remember where we got together and prayed. And I don't regret one moment of prayer. We prayed for leaders. We prayed for each other. We prayed for what God was doing. Do you know who God changed probably the most through all those things? He changed us!

There are so many temptations to grumble against authorities because authorities *do* make so many mistakes. And God allows us to be in hard situations. And yet, He's using it to get us exactly where He wants us to be. So in the midst of that, how do we use our positions and influence to move others toward a heart of trust and respect for God and for the people that He puts in authority, rather than one of suspicion and disrespect. This is a great challenge because authority is going to be confronted. But not only that, we see

### **Authority Defended: Rebellion Under Fire (Num 16:16-50)**

Rebellion that was on the rise, for the rest of chapter 16, now is going to fall under fire in a section we'll call "Avoid It Like The Plague." Here, God responds and He's not going to take lightly His authority being challenged. He defends it decisively. And you see how this defense is accomplished. We'll watch it unfold first through a spiritual showdown that is initiated by Moses calling Korah and his crew to face off with Aaron. And he has a clear summons and instructions are given.

*16 And Moses said to Korah, “Be present, you and all your company, before the LORD, you and they, and Aaron, tomorrow. 17 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, 250 censers; you also, and Aaron, each his censer.”*

This is a clear summons, and the challenge is accepted by them with an irreverent confidence. You see their resolve.

*18 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.*

They didn't take the fire from the altar, so it's unauthorized fire. But they show up. "We're ready to go!" Not only did they have resolve of their confidence, look at who their confidence impacts and the reach.

*19 Then Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting.*

He stirs everyone up! It's an irreverent confidence. They're ready to go. But that brings a divine appearance. God appears!

*And the glory of the LORD appeared to all the congregation.*

Now the last time that happened was in Numbers 14:10. Do you remember that? When they were complaining and didn't enter the land? It's sort of like a hint. It's like, "Uh oh! Someone's getting busted!" It's almost like when the garage door opens when you're fighting and then dad shows up. "Uh oh! Someone's getting busted!" Well here, God arrives and you know that someone is going to get it. The focus of His appearance is not on these rebels. It's on Moses and Aaron. He speaks to them.

*20 And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 21 “Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.”*

Judgment! God has Israel in His sights. "Aaron, Moses, get out of the way!" And what did Aaron and Moses do? They say, "Let them have it!" No, they do like they've done in the past. They make a compassionate plea. Intercession is made. And they address God respectfully.

*22 And they fell on their faces and said, “O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh,*

This is sort of a title used to talk about God as the sustainer of even sinful humanity. And it's the same title that they'll use in Numbers 27:16 when Moses and Aaron are actually caught up in the rebellion and then they need to find a new leader and they pray to this God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, and God provides Joshua. This is a desperate plea, a humble position, a respectful address. And you look at the logic that their plea employs.

*shall one man sin, and will you be angry with all the congregation?"*

They're just talking with God and pleading with Him and sharing their heart with Him. What's interesting is that later on, it almost seems like there will be a priest named Caiaphas who uses this kind of logic, but in a twisted way when he says, "It's better for one man to die than the whole nation would perish. This guy, Jesus, He's bringing up a whole insurrection and we're going to get in trouble here. Let's just make sure He dies, and then this rebellion is snuffed out and we all will survive." Only his statement is ironic and it's a reversal. It seems like it began here. But here, Moses and Aaron are making a plea for the people. "Will you be angry?" It's a question for God, and so God responds with a clear warning.

*23 And the LORD spoke to Moses saying, 24 "Say to the congregation, Get away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram." 25 Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram,*

Remember, they didn't get out of their tents. So Moses marches over, the elders follow, and there is this huge following.

*and the elders of Israel followed him. 26 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." 27 So they got away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.*

We have two contrasting responses. There are people who get away. But also in verse 27, we see

*And Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, together with their wives, their sons, and their little ones.*

They're leaning on the door of their tents like, "This tent? What are you going to do about it?" Their families decide to stay with their rebellious fathers or husbands. They refuse to obey together. And so we see Moses declare a supernatural sign. It's how this showdown is going to be decided. He starts with a need for this sign.

*28 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. 29 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. 30 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."*

So that's the sign. The outcome is going to prove either direction. That's the showdown. And it's going to evoke a brutal takedown where God judges the rebels. They don't see it coming at all.

Have you ever been in an earthquake? My wife and I lived in California, so we've been in a few. She's been in more than me. It's a bizarre feeling because the thing that you've always trusted as stable begins to betray you. It's like someone put your house on a skateboard. It's just going back and forth and the pictures on the wall and the chandelier and the chairs are falling over. You don't know what way is up or down. Except it's not your house that is moving; it's the earth underneath. You think, "How could this happen? How could the earth betray me like this? I've always trusted it." Understand that God is the one who upholds the earth. He is the one who is holding the stability upon which we are rebelling and He can remove it at any moment, and we never see it coming. Here's the horrifying spectacle. The penalty drops. And look how fast it happens. Moses is just done talking.

*31 And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. 32 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. 33 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.*

Talk about a brutal takedown. It's over. But not yet, because it incites a hysterical panic. Can you imagine seeing your neighbors just swallowed alive like that?

*34 And all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up!"*

They had backed up, but now they're really backing up. "Whoa!" And that leads into a swift purge.

*35 And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men offering the incense.*

Before it's even over, fire consumed them just like Nadab and Abihu. Then God warns the survivors and He issues a very careful lockdown. This stuff is dangerous!

There was a professor of Chemistry at Dartmouth College who specialized in toxic metal exposure. She was successful and was studying one day, August 14, 1996. She was studying the toxic properties of this dangerous metal, and she accidentally spilled just one or two drops on her latex gloves. She cleaned up her area and then took the gloves off. No one actually knew how dangerous that chemical was. She had some symptoms over time and before the year was over, she had passed away. They later discovered that this chemical she was working with could permeate latex gloves and enter within seconds causing metal poisoning. Some substances are so dangerous that you have to take every precaution available. And that's what is going on here with not only the rebellion, but the reason why it's so dangerous is because of God's holiness. And here's the lockdown to protect these people from God's holiness. You see who God gives His command to. It's Eleazar. Specifically, this guy is the one God chose. He is contrasted with the men who sinned at the cost of their lives.

*36 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 37 “Tell Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest to take up the censers out of the blaze. Then scatter the fire far and wide, for they have become holy.*

And now it is dangerous to these rebels.

*38 As for the censers of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives, let them be made into hammered plates as a covering for the altar, for they offered them before the LORD, and they became holy. Thus they shall be a sign to the people of Israel.”*

So these things, you can't just touch them. They are holy. But here's the practical purpose. They will be sign so that anyone who looks and sees can tell “Wow! That's what happens when you rebel against God.”

*39 So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers, which those who were burned had offered, and they were hammered out as a covering for the altar, 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.*

This is a serious deal! The only way to God is the way He has chosen. There is no other way! Now, what is shocking is that it doesn't seem to help. The survivors who were there rebel again with an illogical double-down. They doubled down on a strategy that has continued to fail and they press forward.

*41 But on the next day*

This is shameful timing! And you see the shocking scope and the mistaken target of their grumbling.

*all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, “You have killed the people of the LORD.”*

This is a ridiculous accusation! They still cannot accept responsibility. Even after the take down and the lock down, they don't get it and they double down. So God moves on to the next phase. Here's the lethal crackdown where He judges fresh rebels. This is perhaps the most tragic.

*42 And when the congregation had assembled against Moses and against Aaron, they turned toward the tent of meeting. And behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD appeared. 43 And Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, 44 and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 45 “Get away from the midst of this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.”*

Now again, leadership is there.

*And they fell on their faces.*

This is a huge risk! When God says, “Get out of the way,” and you don’t necessarily get out of the way because you’re making an appeal, this is a risk on behalf of the people. And yet they appeal, but this time, the judgment has already begun. Their only hope is a swift atonement; someone who can make it right, who can intercede and who can make a payment that appeases God’s wrath. And it can’t just be anybody. It has to be the one God chose. Moses gets this!

*46 And Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer, and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone out from the LORD; the plague has begun.”*

You can almost see the slow-motion, zoom-in shot of Moses’ bearded face and his lips when he says, “The plague has begun.” Well Aaron is not a young guy, but he follows the instructions obediently and swiftly.

*47 So Aaron took it as Moses said and ran into the midst of the assembly. And behold, the plague had already begun among the people. And he put on the incense and made atonement for the people. 48 And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped.*

The plague was sweeping through the people and he stood there holding that censer and there’s the dead and the living. They saw the line and atonement was made. It left an unforgettable impression.

*49 Now those who died in the plague were 14,700, besides those who died in the affair of Korah.*

That is a lot of burials!

*50 And Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the tent of meeting, when the plague was stopped.*

The whole thing orbits around this need for atonement. Someone, the right one, has to get before the sinful people and before the holy God and make atonement, make things right so that the wrath doesn’t consume this unholy people. God’s authority is defended and He shows that Aaron is His choice. And we learn here another two lessons. First, on rebellion: Yes, it’s senseless and it’s also very serious. Our persistent resentment of God’s authority incites a passionate judgment on behalf of His authority. God will defend His holiness. Rebellion is serious!

But then we learn about leadership. It can be hardship, but we also see it’s a stewardship. Think about this. The very leaders that Israel was rebelling against were their only hope of survival. The very men they were insulting and rejecting were the ones who were

interceding on their behalf. It was the very priest that they scorned that made atonement for them and rescued them from wrath. Does that sound familiar? These lessons are clear in Scripture.

**1 Corinthians 10:6** Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.

We see both the severity of God and the kindness of God revealed here, but more perfectly revealed in Jesus. He is the granter and the defender of authority, but also the deliverer of repentant rebels. He is the great High Priest who was rejected and would sacrifice His own life in payment as atonement, a propitiation for the sin of anyone who would believe. For them, God's wrath is over. And He did so, Isaiah 53, while just like Aaron, He was despised and rejected by men.

I'm a rebel and we're reading this as rebels. I remember as a son, there were times when I was obedient, but there were times when I wasn't. I remember some bad times where I actually made my mom cry. Some decisions that I made disrespected her. And I didn't feel terrible about it. I was being selfish. I remember some times when that happened, she would go to her room and she would pray. And I remember, she would pray for me. There were some times where I realized she was praying that God would have mercy on me. The very woman I had wronged was interceding for me and I saw a bit of Jesus in her. I was reminded of both the kindness and the severity of God.

Where are we tempted to believe that rebellion isn't serious and to treat God's holiness with flippancy? Remember that rebellion is something to avoid like the plague. God will defend His honor! We need to remember that whatever authority we have as parents or as employers, it's not about us. It's about God. We can appeal for the people that are rejecting us, but ultimately, the one who is mediating and interceding is not us. There is one that God has chosen.

### **Authority Confirmed: Rebellion Put To Rest (Numbers 17:1-13)**

God's authority had been confronted, defended, now it's been confirmed. We'll call this section "Miracle Grow." God's authority is confirmed through three stages. It starts with a helpful breakdown. God establishes a way to validate the leader. I don't know if you've had a job interview where you go in and they sort of do a breakdown. Here are the requirements. Here are the qualifications. Well, here is God saying, "I'm going to choose My leader and here are the qualifications." And it's a pretty unique process. There is a supernatural test.

### **Numbers 17**

*1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 "Speak to the people of Israel, and get from them staffs, one for each father's house, from all their chiefs according to their fathers' houses, twelve staffs. Write each man's name on his staff, 3 and write Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. For there shall be one staff for the head of each father's house. 4 Then*

*you shall deposit them in the tent of meeting before the testimony, where I meet with you.  
5 And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout.*

“So these dead sticks that had been cut and walked with, one of them is going to grow some life, and it’s going to be proof that I’ve chosen that man as priest.” So the purpose of the test is pretty clear.

*Thus I will make to cease from me the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against you.”*

“I’m going to cut this complaining out by proving a very supernatural event.”

*6 Moses spoke to the people of Israel. And all their chiefs gave him staffs, one for each chief, according to their fathers’ houses, twelve staffs. 7 And Moses deposited the staffs before the LORD in the tent of the testimony.*

That’s the careful breakdown they follow. And we see that this is going to result in God’s desire for a supernatural clampdown on all of this complaining. It’s a clampdown where God validates His leadership. So this is supposed to be a deterrent. It starts with a decisive miracle.

*8 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.*

With all the miracles of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I can’t even get the right plants to grow in my yard. And this thing, in 12 hours in the dark, in the night, in the desert, it goes through the whole production cycle!

*9 Then Moses brought out all the staffs from before the LORD to all the people of Israel. And they looked, and each man took his staff. 10 And the LORD said to Moses, “Put back the staff of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their grumbings against me, lest they die.”*

Again, God is giving them blatant, blaring signs of warning. Do not rebel and grumble! And the whole point is so that they don’t die. “You’re going to die if you treat Me like this! I’m holy!” It’s supposed to be a deterrent. The warning is there. You can almost see Moses getting this. “Can you believe these guys rebelling again and again?”

*11 Thus did Moses; as the LORD commanded him, so he did.*

He’s holding that staff to say, “Don’t rebel! You’re going to die. It’s going to be terrible! Don’t rebel!” And yet, there’s a lesson there that maybe hasn’t quite been planted in him that we’re going to see next week. It’s easy to take that phrase for granted, but this is the last time we see Moses obey in this manner, perfectly. There’s going to be a darker moment next week when the rebellion affects him. The last vision is one of just a total

meltdown of dread and despair. You see the dread conveyed with emphatic repetition.

*12 And the people of Israel said to Moses, "Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone. 13 Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the LORD, shall die.*

"We're goners! How can we come near to God? We're all dead! We're not holy enough. How are we supposed to be a kingdom of priests with a God so righteous?" There's dread, but also despair. Look at this open question.

*Are we all to perish?"*

"Is God just driving us off of a cliff? What hope is there?" It's a question that is going to be answered more fully much, much later, isn't it? That simple verse that we all remember and that we were reminded of today:

**John 3:16** "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

We draw two more lessons here. Rebellion, yes, it's senseless, it's serious, but we also discover that it's truly helpless. Rebellion is helpless to make itself right or to accomplish its own goals. God is too holy to be approached in any other way than the way He chooses. Rebellion is helpless.

But here's the good news. God has provided the one man, hasn't He? Only it's not Aaron. He died and so did his sons. But God gave us a man who didn't merely watch a dead stick come to life, but a man who himself died on a tree and returns to life. The God with the power to give life, this is the God-man whose sacrifice paid for all who believe in Him. And His blood is a perfect atonement for sin, so that anyone who would believe can enter confidently into the Holy of Holies and receive the spirit of God, which is the Holy Spirit.

Rebellion is helpless, but leadership and Aaron's job here is about worship. Leadership is about worship! Aaron's job was to get the people and point them back to God, and point them to this God from whom they were at His mercy. He was the God whom they needed to deliver them and to rescue them and to sanctify them. He didn't fully know how it was going to work. He just had a shadow, just a whisper of the song that would be sung later by the ultimate High Priest who would make a way for all. There's one way!

**John 14:6** Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

His authority was confronted by rebels at his betrayal. It was defended by God as God poured out the wrath that we deserved for our rebellion, upon Him at the cross. And finally, at the resurrection it was confirmed and it will be one day, perfectly. Are we all to perish?

Now here's the secret, just a little nugget at the end. Think back to that fateful moment when the ground opened. Everybody who stood by their wicked tents on this side of that line and they rejected God, they perished. That's a hard truth! But here's a secret. Not all of the children stood with their family. Did you know that? Some chose to side with God.

**Numbers 26:11** But the sons of Korah did not die.

Even though Korah had rejected God's authority, he had some children who didn't, and these children decided to worship God. They not only worshiped God, but they actually served as worship leaders. They would one day write a Psalm. Did you know that? They wrote Psalm 84, the descendants of Korah. It starts out

**Psalm 84:1** How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!

Do you remember that psalm? In particular, listen to what these men say, whose ambitious forefather and their families died stubbornly at the tents. What do they say in Psalm 84?

**Psalm 84:10** For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

"I'll do anything. I'll be whatever it takes to be close to God, rather than anywhere else." These guys were willing to let God take the wheel. Do you hear how that psalm ends? In contrast to their forefathers, they were content and they said

**Psalm 84:11-12** ...the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!

You can trust Him! He didn't keep anything back. How do you move from angst to trust? You have to see who God is, revealed most perfectly in the one He has chosen, the man Christ Jesus.

Now this was a hard passage. You hear a lot of complaining. You try to convey that through the tone, but it's almost hard on our ears. We think, "I'm glad that this message is over." Except we go to next week, and it's not going to get any easier. We think this feels heavy-handed. What about leaders who are heavy-handed? What about leaders who make mistakes? What about leaders who sin against followers? Next week, we're going to see that and we're going to learn about the fact that no one is above God's holiness. No one! It's the frailty of God's people in the fall of Moses.