

Numbers 17

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[0 : 00] If you will, it's in Numbers chapter 17. Numbers 17. When we started the book of Numbers, I was asked to do something in a minister's conference next year and it's a book full of wonderful stories and yet there are parts of Numbers where it's not easy, isn't it?

All Scripture is infallible. All Scripture is the Word of God. I think what I've grown to see is that not all Scripture is equally important.

I think that's quite important. I don't understand. So it's more important for you to understand Romans 1-5 than it is for you to understand the opening verses of Chronicles.

And all Scripture is infallible. All Scripture is inspired by God and yet not all is equally important.

And I think sometimes we can get a little bit worried about that. There are parts of the Bible where we think, I'm not really sure what that means.

And I think we need to relax a little bit and say, well, we know that this is an infallible, inspired, inerrant Word of God and yet there are parts of Scripture which are more important for us to know.

So that's how I frame Numbers chapter 17.

[1 : 26] Now, Numbers chapter 17. A nation has got to have confidence in the authority of their leaders. So in a democracy in the UK, it's very important, isn't it, that we know who received the most votes.

It can be very difficult to count it politically when people start disputing elections or referendums. In the Old Testament, elders, they were chosen by the election of the people.

There's a vote. And people got a sufficient number of votes. They were elected as elders in the people of Israel. However, there were three offices. The anointed offices, if we can call that a prophet, priest and king, who were chosen by God.

And they were chosen by God and not by men. But human beings moved to skepticism or jealousy or rebellion. They even struggled with that election, too.

They wanted to resist God's election as well. And this section of Numbers that we're back in tonight provides the symbol of God's choice for the nation's priesthood.

[2 : 37] And God chooses his priests and there are no recounts, there are no campaigns for another vote. Instead, we have two symbols placed in the tabernacle. Now, I'm sure you can all remember chapter 16. You've got the bronze covering that was prepared for the altar out of the senses of Korah's rebellion.

It was for the ordinary members of the congregation that when they went into the courts of the tabernacle, they saw the bronze covering of the altar in the outer courts. And it would be a constant reminder, that bronze covering, that God had given the house of Aaron to be their priest.

And secondly, now this evening, we have the staff of Aaron's house. That's placed inside the tabernacle, where only the house of Aaron may enter. So when you think about that, in ancient times, there were tangible, real objects that were filled with meaning about oral stories and their origins.

What does that mean? It means that when you go into your parents' home, there are certain objects out there that have got a story behind them. That's what it was like to the Old Testament Israel.

They provided a kind of visual Bible.

It told the story of their history. They didn't have a Bible like you've got on your laps. And so tangible, real objects with meaning were a visual kind of Bible.

[3 : 59] So that's why there's such detail about the physical structure of the temple and its symbols. And although those things are no more, although we don't have those tangible, physical objects now, these texts continue to provide us with lessons.

And so tonight's passage assures us of God's grace to choose for us, by his own election, a priest. That God has chosen a priest for us.

A priest who is able to bring you and I into God's presence. Aaron was the inaugural high priest.

And Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of this passage.

He is the fulfilment of that office. And so tonight's passage has four speeches. I'm going to try and be brief tonight. So if you see the four sections, there are four speeches. Number one, verses one to five.

And that is where the Lord speaks to Moses about the preparation of the staffs. Verse six to nine.

Moses speaks to the people of Israel and the staffs are put down and they're deposited.

[5 : 07] Verses 10 and 11. The Lord speaks to Moses again about the sign of Aaron's staff. And then in verse 12 to 13. The people speak to Moses about the fearful significance of Aaron's staff.

I just want to walk you right through it. Tonight reminds you and I that the gospel brings comfort and joy. Which it does, doesn't it, wonderfully?

That's why we meet together. To rehearse the gospel. The gospel brings comfort and joy. But it is also a word of terror to those who will not follow the priest. The priest appointed by God.

As I hope tonight we'll be encouraged and stirred to reverence. Verses one to five is a speech from God to Moses. And so here the Lord calls the people tribe by tribe to prepare for his election.

It's election day where God will choose his priest. They are to prepare for the election where God will make known who will be his chosen priesthood for the nation. Each tribe is to bring the head of the tribe and they're to bring their chief staff and they're to carve the name of the chief on the staff.

[6 : 14] Why do they do that? Well I think they do that because nobody can argue who the staff belongs to. No one can argue that the staff that blossoms is the one that they brought. No, that's mine.

Well if your name is on it you know it's either yours or it's not. Pete's staff is to be brought with the name carved on it. And what we have here is one of the oldest descriptions of scepters.

So you know a king will have a scepter but that's a symbol of authority isn't it? It's a symbol of monarchy. And this is one of the earliest descriptions of a scepter as a sign of rule. So Psalm 110 the rod of power.

It's a term Psalm 110 uses. And the Hebrew concept is that of the scepter or the rod of power. And it probably comes from Moses. In the story of Moses Moses began do you remember what was he? He was a shepherd in the wilderness. And then he encounters God on the slopes of Mount Sinai and there God takes Moses' shepherding staff and he turns it into a tool for divine shepherding.

[7 : 18] And so it's renamed in the book of Exodus as the rod of God. Moses' shepherding staff has become a supernatural tool for nurturing.

And Moses no longer shepherds sheep but people. And his rod brings water from the rock and so forth. It was transformed from a weapon warding off and it no longer wards off wolves but Pharaoh doesn't it?

His rod touches the sea the red sea what happens the sea parts. It is a staff that is endowed with divine power for shepherding.

And so in our chapter the staff a symbol of authority was to be brought to the Lord for his election.

And he says one of them will sprout. Sounds so odd doesn't it? One of them will sprout and blossom.

After all they are essentially tree branches aren't they? Each staff is a cut branch of a tree but one of them when it's brought into the presence of the Lord will bloom with new life again. And that will be the sign of God's election to be the people's priest.

[8 : 27] And the Lord here states his reason for this sign in the final verses of the opening address of Moses. Look at verse 5. And the staff of the man whom I shall choose will sprout.

Thus I will make to cease from me the grumblings of the people of Israel which they grumble against you. God is here expressing his weariness with his church that moans and grumbles that keeps finding reasons to borge at his choice.

So he determines to add this one further it's a truly remarkable seal of life to put a stop to it. To stop the grumbling against God's choice. And the wording of the verse makes it really clear that God takes grumbling against his choice very very seriously.

Note against again the pronouns instead of verse 5. Thus I will make to cease from me the grumblings of the people against you.

When the Lord makes his choice of his priest clear it is a slight against himself to resist the one whom he has chosen. The sign of the staff has to put an end to his grumbling.

[9 : 45] The second part of the passage begins with Moses talking to the people from verse 6 on. And so here Moses passes on God's instructions to the people of Israel and the staffs of the tribal chiefs are brought and placed in the tabernacle.

Perhaps they're placed in the Ark of the Covenant itself we don't know. But more likely they're placed in the outer room in a row facing towards the Ark of the Testimony and there they lie. But that's not the count. Maybe one of the attending priests who kept overnight prayer vigil and the one who tended the lamps at night maybe he would be able to testify what took place.

The text describes it in a most remarkable sequence of events through the night. It doesn't describe to you what they found the next morning but it gives you actually a sequence of events that took place all through the night.

That the rod of Abraham which was cut from an almond tree grew through the night. Verse 8 describes it. It doesn't come across as clearly in English but it's like a motion picture.

[10 : 52] You know as you get those little books where you get a photo or you draw something and you draw a little line and then it becomes like a cartoon as you flick through the books. You know what I'm talking about? That's verse 8.

It's a motion picture. In the early hours of the night the rod of Aaron began to sprout. And then as the night progressed these sprouts each put forth buds.

And in the deepening hours of the night those buds opened up into a pink or white blossom of an almond tree. And then by morning as the sun was rising the blossom gave way to fully formed mature almonds.

And in the morning each tribal chief went into the tent retrieved his staff and his own name on it and each staff remained as dead as it was the night before. But one staff, the one with Aaron's limb carved on the side, had blossomed with new life in God's presence.

We don't know if all the rods were made with almond wood or not, but it is significant that the rod which bore fruit with the stages described was indeed an almond branch.

[11 : 59] commentators tell us, the almond tree is the first fruit to blossom each spring in Palestine. It's among the first trees to bear fruit in early summer.

And so the name almond in Hebrew is a word which means watching or awake. What does that mean? It means the almond was what the farmer looked for.

It was the tree that the farmer kept an eye on. because the blooming of the almonds told the farmer that the spring had come. And when the almond tree woke up or awoke, the season of new life had begun.

It's a bit like daffodils in our country. You see the daffs and you know the winter's over. Some of you may recall that in Exodus 25 we learned that the golden lampstand in the tabernacle was designed as what?

It was designed, the golden lampstand. Do you know that lampstand that we see the Jews use, the Jewish menorah? What is it? It is a stylized almond tree. It's a lampstand with seven branches.

[13 : 08] For lamps. That is the lampstand. It was made of gold and it was to be kept burning all through the night in the tabernacle. And Exodus 25 tells us that the menorah, that lampstand which you see, is a stylized almond tree.

And it had the same stages of growth carved in gold along its branches. So you look at it, you can Google it when you go home, you'll see buds, blossoms, almonds on it. Which represented an almond tree blooming.

That's what the menorah was. In a static, frozen image in the tabernacle. And so the rod of Aaron, which lay there during the night under the glow of the menorah lamps, became in reality the promise of eternal life.

In God's presence. spring. What was symbolized in the menorah, was realized in staff. That is in the tribe of Aaron.

And the simple fact that this bizarre miracle took place, identified Aaron as the house of God. The house that God had chosen for the priesthood.

[14 : 16] But the kind of miracle that God used to identify who his priests would be, the specific sign that he used to mark out Aaron, is the symbol of new life in God's presence.

It's only Aaron's rod that received the blessing of life forevermore. The other rods, with all the names of the other chiefs, remained dead. And this is the result of the sign that is life for the house of Aaron.

Over against death for the other tribes. Well, this is what brought to application in the final two speeches. So, let's look at the first speech from the mouth of God in verses 10 and 11, and then the second in verses 12 and 13, from the cries of the people.

In verses 10 and 11, God speaks to Moses, instructing him to store the rod of Aaron, possibly inside the outer room of the tabernacle, the place where the menorah stands, or possibly inside the ark as a perpetual sign of life.

We know, don't we, by the time of the New Testament, it comes to Hebrews, we learn that it's being kept inside the ark, placed before the testimony, that is the tablets of the Ten Commandments, which were also kept in the ark.

[15:35] The priesthood is appointed by God to minister the very promise of life, testified in that testimony. Notice there's further statement of God's reason.

Look at verse 10. He says, 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 grumblings against me lest they die.

Do you see why we as God's people need such stern warnings for our God, for our good? God is a merciful God. God is a God of life.

and he warns us tonight so that we might be spared from leading to death. There are sometimes other rulers put down a rebellion because of self-preservation.

They're worried. And when a king is fearful of losing support, maybe a king gives a show of power to stop the rebellion. Often rulers show their power to stop rebellion because they're concerned to preserve themselves.

[16:43] But here we find the opposite. In number 17, God is not threatened by man or women, nor has the house of Aaron sought the priesthood so that they can assert themselves.

No, rebellion here is put on notice. It's not on account of self-preservation by God or by his priests, but it is for the people's preservation. That's the reason.

It's for your life. God is wanting your rebellion that it would be exposed and that it would be brought under control before God's judgment falls. He says, for you are the one who will die if you continue to rebel.

If you come before the throne of God without my elected intercessor of life, you will die. the bronze cover on the altar outside, it kind of bore public testimony to God's election.

It showed the people, this is whom I have elected to be my priest. And the almond covered rod inside the very footstool of God's throne, further declares it, and all of this was done, he says, so that your life might be spared.

[17:59] Your salvation, he says, to the people of Israel, depends on you laying hold of the true priest, whom God has anointed with the display of, can I call it, resurrection life in his name.

You see, what we find in Numbers chapter 17 is this, we find an artist's sketch. You know, you go to an art gallery, and sometimes they'll show you what it takes from the initial drawings and the artist's sketch, and it goes all the way through to the masterpiece.

And when you look at the masterpiece, you can still see the tracing of the artist's sketch, but it is now in glorious technicolor, isn't it? And Aaron's staff, it is like the artist's sketch of what Christ's priesthood will look like.

And Christ's priesthood is the colourful, completed masterpiece. For an Aaron's rod with his name upon it, we see, don't we, a seal of resurrection life, that which was dead, now sprouts forth life.

But more wonderfully, in the very person and body of Jesus, we see the reality, don't we, of human resurrection, and glorious entrance into the presence of the Father, a glorious seal of God's choice of Jesus as our eternal high priest, to silence every mouth, to stop every grumbler, and the blossoming of new life, which bursts forth from the tomb of Jesus in the middle of the night, is the glorious display of God's grace and kindness, for you who trust in his intercessions.

[19:47] death and judgment. Because remember what I said, to anyone who dares rebel against God's elected priest, and presumes to approach the throne of God in your own name, well, it's certain death.

And it's that fearful significance of the staff that closes the passage in verses 12 to 13. 13, because do you know what it is in verses 12 to 13, when the people understand, they suddenly feel terror of the sight.

For if only Aaron and his house received the eternal life promised in the light of the menorah, and all the other sticks remain dead and lifeless, then all the rest of us are lost, without hope in our own names.

Here again, the despair of these words. And as you come to verses 12 and 13, this is what it is like to be without Jesus Christ. People of Israel said to Moses, behold, we perish.

We are undone. We are all undone. Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord shall die, are we all to perish?

[21 : 16] Just hear the repetition in their cries. Look at verse 12 again. We perish. We are undone. We are all undone.

And the author of Numbers has written that in that way in order that you will pay attention to it. He wants you to feel the emotion of the cries of these people.

And he wants you to understand the significance of the sign of the staff that comes to life that they witness to. And the book of Numbers wants you and I to realise, and to be sure that we realise, the joy of what was dead that is now alive and the fearful significance of this sign.

that you and I, we are like the dead sticks with names on them. Because only the house of the chosen priest anointed by God to enter his presence is welcome to enter into his throne room and to receive that blessing of life forever more.

But the cry ends rightly, doesn't it? It ends rightly with the question, look at the end of verse 13. Are we all to perish? It's a desperate question, but it's a question that demands an answer.

[22 : 37] For if there is one house which God has been pleased to grant the blessing of life forevermore, we might ask, mightn't we, is there some way that we too might share in the blessing of that house?

The question at the end of chapter 17 is what introduces chapters 18 and 19. Because in chapters 18 and 19 there, God speaks to Aaron and Moses and he appoints rituals which teach you and I there is a way.

There is a way for our sin and our rebellion to be borne by the appointed priest. There is a way for him to carry our sins in our place.

that our entrance into life might be sealed by his priesthood. And so tonight as we round up, let's take heart, take to heart the fearful condition it is if we are left to stand in our own name.

And let us rejoice in the true priest of resurrection life, whom God has chosen for us, Lord Jesus Christ. For salvation is found in his name.

[23 : 55] For there is no other name given to men and women by which we must be saved. Psalm 110 which we began the service with, the final mediator appointed by God is one who combines all the blessings of anointed kings and those of the anointed priest into one man.

He is the prophet, the priest, the king, par excellence. He is the Messiah. And it is in the name of Jesus that we receive the promise of life at his right hand forevermore.

And so, therefore, with reverence, let us serve Christ. With fear and with trembling tonight, let us repent at every rebellious thought and sin in our hearts against his rule.

And with confidence and joy, let us rest in the life that is secured for us in his name. Let's pray. Amen.