

Numbers 17:1-13

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Date: 25 June 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, the text before us this morning is a passage that operates within a context, and there's a couple principal themes in that context, and I want you to have these in your mind throughout the rest of the sermon.

The first theme that's important is just the rebellion of mankind. Man, in his sin nature, has a native aptitude, a native desire to rebel against God and against his truth.

And the second theme that is in this text is the mercy of God in providing a remedy for the rebellion of mankind. I personally have been helped in how I think about human rebellion through the writing of the late Cornelius Van Til.

Some of you will know that name. A famous Dutch theologian labored at Princeton Seminary in the United States and then later at Westminster Seminary alongside men like Gresham Machen.

And Van Til was known for a number of things, but one of the things that he was known for was his assertion that there is no such thing as neutral ground between the believer and the unbeliever.

[1 : 18] Van Til said, and I agree with him, that all of humanity without exception falls into one of two camps. Either, on the one hand, by the grace of God, you love God's truth and you endeavor to submit to it or in the absence of God's grace, you hate God and you hate his truth and you actively rebel against us.

There's, Van Til said, there's no middle ground. You can't straddle those two positions. You're either in one or you're in the other. Van Til uses a wonderful illustration to present before our minds this idea of the rebellion of mankind against our God.

And it's something that he witnessed with his own eyes. He was riding on a train one day and in the cab right across from him where he was seated, he saw a father with a little girl in his lap.

The girl was his daughter. And for a reason unknown to Van Til, he watched this little girl sitting in her daddy's lap, reach up and vigorously slap her daddy right in the face.

And the daddy dealt with it graciously, but directly. And Van Til thought to himself, what a perfect image of mankind's rebellion.

[2 : 45] We reach up every day. We slap our heavenly father in the face, not realizing or at a minimum forgetting that we owe our very existence to God.

And it's only because we're supported by his lap that we can reach up and even be in a position to slap him in the face. This passage is about the rebellion of mankind.

Now, the rebellion is spelled out in Numbers chapter 12 and 14 and 16. If time would have permitted, I would have liked to have read all of that, but we don't have time for that today.

But it's about the rebellion of mankind and God's merciful remedy for our rebellion. So two thoughts to frame the sermon. The first is this.

Human rebellion is a sin that is death deserving. When we rebel against God and his truth, it's a sin that deserves death and judgment.

[3 : 51] Number 17, of course, comes right on the heels of Numbers 16. If you're familiar with the book of Numbers, you'll know that in Numbers 16, we have an account of the rebellion of the sons of Korah.

Now, the sons of Korah were not the only ones who rebelled. Back in Numbers 12, it was Miriam and Aaron who rebelled against Moses. In chapter 14, it was the Israelites as a whole who rebelled. But in chapter 16, the spotlight is placed on Korah and his sons, Dathan and Abiram and their households. Despite the fact that God had placed his stamp of approval on Moses and Aaron, despite the fact that they were God's appointed emissaries, God's mouthpiece to the people, the people consistently rebelled against Moses and Aaron.

And they did a number of things stretching across those chapters that I mentioned previously. Number one, they had accused Moses and Aaron of exalting themselves above the congregation. They said, you've made yourself a prince over us. In other words, Moses and Aaron, you're putting on heirs. We're all deserving of being priests. What gives you the right to be the leaders, the sole leaders of God's people? [5 : 13] They had accused them also of negligent homicide. They said to Moses and Aaron, you brought us out here in the wilderness to kill us.

Now, that was patently false. But they accused Moses and Aaron of doing that. Third, they accused them of lying. They reminded them often, you said you were going to bring us to the promised land where there was milk and honey.

Instead, you've brought us in the wilderness to die. And all of those, I would say, are subtle and timeless reminders that it is our native instinct to rebel against God and against his truth and against the authorities that he has put in place.

Do we not see that? I'm sure you see that in your culture here in Scotland. We certainly see it in America that man, society has a natural desire to rebel against the authority of the state which God in his sovereign power has put into place.

We see it in children who resist and rebel against the God-given authority of their parents. It's just part of who we are in our sin nature.

[6 : 20] Now, in response to the rebellious attitudes of the people, you remember what happened. God told Moses and Aaron on a multitude of occasions to separate themselves from the people so that God could destroy the entire nation.

When that happened, Moses and Aaron, the scripture says, they fell upon their faces and they interceded. They pleaded with God not to destroy the nation.

And God listened. And he gave the people an opportunity to separate themselves. If you're with Moses and Aaron, then go inside with them. If you're with Korah and his sons, then go inside with them.

And the people divided themselves in a sense. And then, in a series of devastating blows, God meted out judgment upon the rebels. We're told in chapter 16, verse 33, speaking of the sons of Korah and the household of Abiram and Dathan, they went down alive into Sheol.

And the earth closed over them. And they perished from the midst of the assembly. God opened up the earth and he buried those families alive.

[7 : 41] Now, I know that in our postmodern world, it can be hard for people to believe that there's a God in the universe that could cause the ground to open up at his own decree and swallow people alive.

But we're talking here about the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, who created everything, this world and all the worlds, out of nothing by the word of his power in the space of six days.

He can open the earth and swallow people if he wills to do so. After that, God sent down fire from heaven. And he incinerated 250 men, leaders, elders, who had united themselves with the rebels. And he burned them alive. On the next day, after the households were buried in the earth, after the 250 elders were consumed with fire, the remaining people had the audacity to claim that all of that was Moses and Aaron's fault, as if they had the ability to do any of those things.

And that response seemed to stretch the patience of God. And it was at that moment that he unleashed a plague upon the people that consumed almost 15,000 Israelites.

[9 : 04] Now, here's what I want you to see. The instructions here in Numbers chapter 17 were a direct result of the people's rebellious sin, most notable of which was the sin of grumbling.

That word is mentioned repeatedly in chapter 12 and 14 and 16. It's translated a number of different ways. It can be translated as complaining or murmuring, but it refers to an internal discontentment, an agitation, a frustration with circumstances.

And because God is sovereign, it's ultimately a frustration with God himself that typically manifests itself verbally by complaining and murmuring against God and his leaders.

I had a friend when I was in flight school in the United States who was rendered not physically qualified to fly aircraft. And the culprit in his case was a heart murmur.

Maybe some of you know people who have had heart murmurs. He lived with it his whole life. But a heart murmur is turbulent blood flow in the heart.

[10:20] He had no idea that was even a thing with him. But the diagnostic machines in the Navy detected it, and he was unable to fly aircraft. Unfortunately, in Israel's case, you didn't need any diagnostic machines to detect their murmuring.

It was just shamefully obvious. And I think the reality is that with most of us, especially me, I'm quite adept at times at disguising a grumbling spirit.

I can stifle it and suffocate it. But, you know, as the Bible tells us frequently, God doesn't look upon our outward behavior. He looks upon the heart. And so when we are agitated in our spirits, grumbling and complaining against the goodness of God, God sees it.

He knows it. The text is very clear that the chief reason behind God's frustration with Israel was, in fact, their grumbling.

If you look at the text with me, you'll see that the ultimate purpose behind the miracle of this sprouting staff is given in verse 5. God performed a miracle. He took a stick that was dead, and he made it alive.

[11:38] It put forth buds and blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds. And God is clear through Moses as to why he did that. What was the purpose of it? Verse 5.

Thus I will make to cease from me the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against you. The miracle had a purpose. To stop the grumbling.

And by the way, can I make a point of application here? And I do this very carefully, and I realize that it's rather easy for me to do this because I'm not your pastor. I can admonish you and exhort you, and then I can walk away without any fear of recrimination.

But I want you to notice that when the people grumbled against the leaders that God had appointed, God took that as grumbling against him.

because Moses and Aaron were appointed by him. And so may I encourage you to be sober-minded and careful as you're tempted to grumble against the leaders that God has given to you.

[12:44] That does not mean that the leaders of the church are above justified criticism. God forbid. But be sober-minded and be mindful that, as James says, they will incur a stricter judgment as leaders.

And it's also incumbent upon elders like myself and Joe to take stock of the awesome privilege that we have of speaking for God and to not abuse that privilege.

Of all the sins that Israel committed, and there were many, why was God so determined to stop the grumbling of his people?

In verse 10, we're told that their grumbling needed to cease lest they die. Now, would you agree with me that on the surface, having a grumbling, complanatory spirit doesn't seem all that bad.

It doesn't cause physical harm to people. It doesn't result in material loss. And yet, according to our text, God sees it as a capital offense.

[14:01] So why is it that grumbling was taken so seriously by God? I want to suggest three reasons. Number one, grumbling is a grave sin because it spurns the authority of God.

Every time we grumble about the circumstances of our life, essentially what we're saying to God is that I would be a better God than you are.

If I were in control of things, then I wouldn't have reason to grumble because I would have ordained things differently. As one theologian said, every time we grumble, we're essentially saying, I don't want God's truth.

I want what I want. And according to Jesus, sins of speech are sins of the heart.

Jesus says in Luke 6, 45, it is out of the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks. If you're like me, you want to think that it's your spouse that makes you grumble.

[15:10] Or it's your children that cause you to grumble and complain. Or it's your job that causes you to grumble and complain. According to Jesus, no, it's your heart that causes you to grumble and complain.

It spurns God's authority. The second thing is it spurns God's goodness. The goodness of God is one of the most constant refrains in all of the Bible.

Listen, Psalm 31, verse 19, the psalmist declares, how abundant is your goodness which you store up for those who fear you. Psalm 136, verse 1, give thanks to the Lord, that is to Yahweh, for He is good and His steadfast love endures forever.

Psalm 119, verse 68, the psalmist says, you are good and you do good. every time we grumble at the circumstances that God has placed in our life, there is a sense in which we are vandalizing the goodness of our God.

It spurns His authority. It spurns His goodness. It spurns His providence. Now, if you know the book of Exodus, you know that when God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt and He was going to take them to the promised land, He didn't take them via a route that was the shortest distance between point A and point B.

[16:42] He took them on a circuitous route. At one point, they were headed to the promised land. He rerouted them. He brought them back and He pinned them in a place of no escape where they had the Red Sea at their back, mountains on both sides, and Pharaoh's army bearing down on them.

He trapped them intentionally. And He did that to manifest His glory and His power in their midst. It wasn't by accident that circumstantially the Israelites were without bread and water in the wilderness.

God did that on purpose. So that He might reveal His faithfulness to Israel. You see, every time we grumble, we're losing sight of the fact that God uses suffering sovereignly as an instrument to build faith and to reveal His glory.

One of my favorite lines of poetry comes from a poet named Francis Willett who said, Lord, I thank You for the bitter things. They've been a friend to grace.

They have driven me from the paths of ease to storm the secret place. The poet understood that the bitter things that God providentially brought into the poet's life was there to draw the believer closer to God.

[18:10] But grumbling denies that. Now, I think it would be helpful at this point to make a distinction between sinful grumbling and what I might call Christian groaning.

Some of you, God has you walking through providentially very deep waters right now. And there are things in your life with your family, perhaps with your kids or with your loved ones, with your job, with your body, that produce within you genuine and sincere expressions of agony and hurt and sorrow.

And that is, the way that you respond to that in agony is not to be confused with sinful grumbling.

We read earlier from 1 Corinthians 10, and there Paul is speaking about the disobedience of the Israelites in the wilderness, and he says, we must not put Christ to the test as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer.

When Paul commands the church not to grumble, he's not forbidding us from groaning in the midst of suffering. To do that would make us less than human. When Jesus agonized in Gethsemane, Gethsemane, when he groaned in Gethsemane, he did so truly as a man.

He also did so sinlessly. Groaning is an expression of hurt and sorrow and pain that maintains faith in God and contentedness in his promises, whereas grumbling is always a faithless act and it's characterized by rebellion against God and discontentment with his purposes and his promises.

[20:12] Despite the immense gravity of their sin of grumbling and rebelling, do you see the merciful nature of God here in the book of Numbers?

He did chase them severely. He put some to death. But God would have been perfectly justified if he had wiped the floor with all of Israel and started over again and yet he didn't do that.

What did he do? There's a sense in which he took a knee, he condescended and he instructs the people of Israel. He shows them their desperate need for someone who will stand between a holy God and a sinful people.

In short, he teaches them, he shows them that they need a mediator and that's our second point. If grumbling is a death deserving sin, then our death deserving rebellion, it demands a mediator.

That was Aaron's God-appointed duty. To stand between a sinful, rebellious people and a God who is so pure that he cannot even look upon sin.

[21:31] In number 16, shortly after the Lord threatened to consume the entire congregation for their rebellion, this is what we read in number 16, verse 46, and listen carefully.

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 and the plague has begun.

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

God was teaching his people is that without a mediator there's no chance of survival no chance of atonement or reconciliation between a holy God and a sinful people and that beloved is precisely why God went through such great lengths to publicly and visibly vindicate the priesthood of Aaron he did that by performing this miracle verse 8 Aaron's rod sprouted and it put forth buds and it produced blossoms and it bore ripe almonds you see the people had been saying Moses is not the man Aaron is not the man and God spoke definitively and showed them in a way that was undeniable no Aaron is my chosen man and it silenced the people there was no argument that they could make and so we read in verse 17 the people of Israel said to Moses behold we perish we are undone we are all undone everyone who comes near who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord shall die there's a sense in which they came to grips with the fact that they were in the wrong they had nothing to claim I love I've always loved the definition that Martin Lloyd-Jones gave for a Christian he said very simply a Christian is one whose mouth has been shut the Christian knows that when he stands before the tribunal of God there's no defense that can be made there's nothing that I can say I have no claim Aaron was vindicated but Aaron was tragically inadequate as a great high priest for one Aaron was a grumbling sinner himself in numbers 12 he and Miriam rebelled against Moses and you remember that Miriam was stricken with leprosy because of that not to mention the fact that

[24 : 26] Aaron was a representative of God and his word he spoke the law of God to the people which was holy and righteous and good but the law of God despite being holy and righteous and good and profitable for our sanctification the law of God is incapable of doing away with sin I don't know precisely why she did this but my wife years ago started inscribing words from the Bible on the walls in our house so we have scripture on the walls in our dining room and in our kitchen and we're constantly reminded of the law of God and yet despite the fact that we have the law of God all around us the spirit of the south side rebellion here in Numbers 16 is very much alive in our household I would imagine that many of you struggle immensely with a grumbling spirit that spurns the authority of God and the goodness of God and the providence of God and the good news for you today the gospel good news is that forgiveness is available to you and me precisely because we have a great high priest who had a perfectly sinless heart and mouth in the gospel accounts there is a common denominator when Jesus stood before the earthly tribunals you remember he doesn't make any defense of himself he's silent and I would argue that that is for two reasons one he was standing as both our law keeper and also our sin bearer if anyone ever in their humanity had a justified reason to grumble and complain about their circumstances it was

Christ he was falsely accused he was publicly shamed and mocked and beaten by sinful men that he himself had created if anyone had a right to complain and to grumble at circumstances it was the Lord Christ and yet as Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 53 he was oppressed and he was afflicted and yet he opened not his mouth like a lamb that was led to the slaughter like a sheep that is silent before it shears he opened not his mouth you understand that if he had complained grumbled against the authority of his father and the goodness of his father and the providence of his father everything would have been lost you would die in your sin I would die in my sin he was obedient with his tongue to the very end he didn't just stand as our law keeper but also as our sin bearer I'm indebted to John Calvin for pointing out that perhaps the reason why Jesus was silent before the Sanhedrin and Pilate and made no defense of himself is that already there he's not to Calvary yet but already there he's already standing in our place when Adam sinned in the garden and God came to Adam and accused him what did Adam do Adam defended himself he shifted the blame to Eve Eve did the same she sought to shift the blame to the serpent Adam was justly accused and he defended himself Christ was unjustly accused and he did not defend himself why because he was standing already in our place if you're united to Christ today is it not good news to know that he bore in his body on the tree every syllable you've spoken as the outflow of a grumbling complaining heart that spurns the authority the goodness and the providence of God he bore it in your place bearing shame and scoffing rude in my place condemned he stood friends every day every day you and I are like that little girl sitting in our father's lap reaching up and slapping him in the face the secular world in which we live they can stomach

Jesus Christ as a moral teacher as a self help guru the one thing that they cannot stomach the thing that they hate is the idea that we as sinful people would need a mediator to stand between God and us but that's exactly what we need and it's precisely what God has provided may God be praised as we pray together our God and father we thank you for a great high priest holy innocent undefiled separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens father we pray for those who are outside of Christ today that coming to reckon with their sin the rebellion that resides in the human heart that by your mercy they may cast themselves upon the mercy of God in Jesus Christ and receive forgiveness for sin and be redeemed we pray for the work of the Holy Spirit to bring that about for those who are already in Christ today how we pray for a better ability to rest in Jesus Christ and in the fullness and sufficiency of his finished work to know that every sin including every sin of the tongue has been paid for in full it is finished we thank you for the gospel today for the joy of sins forgiven thank you for your character thank you for not counting our sins and trespasses against us thank you for healing our diseases and redeeming our lives from the pit thank you that in Jesus Christ you have crowned us with steadfast love and mercy we give you thanks we adore you father son and holy spirit and we offer it in Jesus name amen