

# THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

## NUMBERS 15-18

Once a painter was pushed and hassled by his boss to hurry the job. But when too much pressure is applied accidents happen... The brush slipped from the painter's hand, dropping forty feet, smacking his boss right on his noggin. And as that brush fatefully *fell*, the painter let out a yell, "quack, quack, gobble, gobble."

Afterwards, the boss scolded him, "*why didn't you warn me when you dropped the brush?*" He said, "I did! I shouted, "**duck turkey!**" Get it, "*quack... gobble...*"

*And that, my friends, was a lame - duck joke!*

But have you heard the expression, "**lame duck?**" It's a bird that's injured, yet still manages to fly... It's a politician who loses reelection, btt serves out his term... *Or it's a generation of Hebrews who forfeit God's blessing to wander in the wilderness forty years!*

**The lame duck generation** were the Hebrews who took off from Egypt, but never landed in the Promised Land. *Like a turkey* they were ruled by fear not faith.

After God's miraculous efforts to win their freedom, He brought the Hebrews to Mt. Sinai. There a band of slaves were turned into an army. God gave Israel His law, taught them to worship Him, and organized their tribes. After thirteen months they were ready to enter the land of promise. *But in Chapters 13-14 they balk...*

They cave-in to fear and unbelief. God had proven Himself in unmistakable ways. But rather than trust the Lord, Israel acted like *a turkey!* They lacked the faith to possess their possessions. As a result God told Moses the adults who exited Egypt would wander in the wilderness until they were dead and gone. It'll be their kids who'll enter the land flowing with milk and honey.

**Chapter 15** begins the final term of **the lame duck generation**. Still *flying*, but one by one now *dying!*

Verse 1, "**And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When you have come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving to you..."**" Note the hopeful wording... It's not "*If you come into the land,*" but "**when you have come into the land.**" God didn't give up on Israel. The people failed, not God. As a whole, Israel suffers a *setback*, but God didn't *take back* His promise.

And life is full of setbacks - *some are caused by circumstances beyond our control, others by our own willfulness and unbelief.* But God is faithful. He never throws in the towel on His plan. He disciplines us, like He did the first generation, but His grace

assures His people of a new day and another chance. **A setback is just a set up for a new wrinkle in God's plan.**

In the next 19 verses of Numbers 15 God lays out the rules for the **grain offering** and **drink offering**. These were what I call "**AFLAC sacrifices**," they were **supplemental insurance**. An animal was sacrificed to God; then on top of the cooking meat *bread and wine* were added. This was like a garnish and steak sauce.

And the bigger the animal, or more meat - the more bread and wine! The supplements permeated the meat and added to its aroma and taste... *And there's a picture here...* The NT, Romans 12:1 tells us "**present your bodies a living sacrifice.**" We're to give our whole self to Jesus, yet the Christian life is not just about *dying* and *sacrifice*. No, the bread and wine is added to what's on the altar which gives the meat a sweet taste and pleasant aroma. When you give yourself to God He meets you on the altar and His presence makes your life sweeter - you stop stinking, and smell better.

Verses 14-16 tell us the law of the **grain offering** and **drink offering** applied to the stranger as well as the Hebrew. It's interesting, room is being made here for pagans to convert and join God's covenant people.

*And notice*, we're less than four books into the Bible and we've already seen our communion elements - the **bread and wine** - coupled together over and over.

In Genesis 14 the High Priest, Melchizedek, met Abraham with bread and wine... Joseph encountered a baker (*the bread*) and a butler (*or wine taster*)... The Hebrews celebrated Passover with bread and wine...

And here again we see the bread and wine in the *grain offering* and *drink offering*. Throughout the Bible bread and wine always speak to us of our Lord Jesus.

Verse 17, "**Again the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When you come into the land to which I bring you, then it will be, when you eat of the bread of the land, that you shall offer up a heave offering to the LORD.'**" Again, God says "**when you come into the land...**" God is always focusing on what *will be*, instead of *what is*.

Years ago, Mike Westhoff was special teams coach for the Miami Dolphins. When he was in the hospital dying of cancer Westhoff was visited by Dolphins' head coach, Don Shula. Everyone was saying good-bye to Westhoff. But Coach leaned over his bed to whisper, "**Mike, I need you in training camp in July, on the field, ready to go. We're going all the way next year.**" Mike recovered from cancer and was back to work in July.

Later he recalled his conversation with Don Shula, “I thought Coach Shula would tuck me in, but he didn’t. He treated me the way I could be, not the way I was.”

*And someone needs to hear me today!* Yes, you’re reeling from a huge failure, but God has no intentions to tuck you in. He still has plans for you, as with Israel!

This is why God keeps saying, “When you come into the land... And when you do, verse 21, “the first of your ground meal you shall give to the LORD a heave offering throughout your generations.” When you enter the land and harvest your crops for the first time; then honor God with a token of what He’s given you. We call it a “tithe.” The Hebrews called it “a heave offering.”

And let’s admit, when you first start to tithe it feels like **a heave offering**. A check weighs just 4/100s of an ounce, but try to drop it in the offering box and it gets so heavy you have to heave it in. It’s obviously not because of the weight of the paper, or even the weakness of your arm. *The problem is our puny faith.*

But faith is like a muscle! The more you work it the stronger it gets. Trust God with your money - even if your check feels heavy *heave it in* - and you’ll see God prove His faithfulness to you. Jesus’ “burden is light.”

Now verses 22-29 differentiate between *deliberate* and *unintentional* sins. If the nation or if an individual sins accidentally, an offering still needs to be made.

Whether the perpetrator at the time knows it was a sin or not, it’s still a sin in God’s eyes and requires the blood of a sacrifice to be forgiven. Recall what Jesus said from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” I think oftentimes we sin, but don’t really understand the ramifications of what we’re doing... *if we did we’d never do it.* In that sense, a lot of sins are unintentional. *And what’s amazing is that Jesus has become the sacrifice for unintentional sins!*

*But what about intentional, defiant sins - acts of overt rebellion?* Verse 30 addresses them, “But the person who does anything presumptuously...” The word means “highhanded.” The idea is *a deliberate betrayal*.

Verse 31, “Because he has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be upon him.”

The cure for *unintentional sin* is forgiveness, but for *acts of defiance* punishment needs to be administered.

And every parent understands this reasoning. When a kid slips up and makes an honest mistake quickly forgive. But when a kid is guilty of treason, and deliberate defies you, if you don’t discipline them, you won’t retain their respect. Here’s a good parenting strategy: **Forgive childish blunders, but discipline defiant attitudes.** This is

how God dealt with Israel.

And verse 32 provides an example, “Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him under guard, because it had not been explained what should be done to him.” And this was a clear violation of a command God had emphasized. You could collect firewood six days **and do work**, but not the seventh.

Up until this point, nobody had been brazen enough to defy a command that was obviously so important to God. This fellow knew better, and Moses placed him in solitary confinement until they could discern God’s will.

“Then the LORD said to Moses, “The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.” So, as the LORD commanded Moses, all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him with stones, and he died.” Giving new meaning to an old saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones...” *Here, they did!*

Granted, the OT penalties for defiant behavior seem harsh to us, *but how else was God to prove He was serious?* And unlike the New Covenant we have in Christ, the Old Covenant had no power to transform the sinful nature of a man. The Law was an external standard that exposed sin, but couldn’t change a sinful heart. A habitually rebellious person only grew worse and more defiant, and thus to protect society against the spread of evil God’s penalties were swift and stiff.

Thankfully, under the New Covenant the blood of Jesus covers all sins - *unintentional and intentional, subtle and high-handed*. The blood of Jesus is far more potent than the blood of bulls and goats. Jesus forgives us of sin; then transforms our inner nature. He turns *callous hearts* into *compliant hearts*. He offers hope to the addict... to the hardcore... to the defiant rebel...

Chapter 15 closes in the weirdest way. The LORD tells Israel to sew blue-threaded tassels on the corner of their garments. *What a minute, a guy gets stoned for violating the Sabbath, so why jump to blue tassels?*

But blue was the color of heaven!... The Ark was transported under a blue cloth... The High Priest wore a blue robe... Tabernacle curtains were blue... **Blue stood for heaven.** This is why God says in verse 39, “And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and that you may not follow the harlotry to which your own heart and your own eyes are inclined, and that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy for

**your God."** The tassel reminded Israel of God's commands. They come from **heaven**. Obey God, remember the *tassel*, and life will be less of a *hassle*. Even today Jewish men wear tassels as reminders of their obligation to the Law.

The Hebrew word for **"tassel"** is **"tzitzit"** (zeet-zeet), which means **"to twinkle or glance."** This is why Jews are forbidden to tuck the tassel into their pants. The tassel is to be seen. It's a reminder to the Hebrews that God's commands are not man's invention, or another opinion, or subject to man's wisdom. *They're heavenly!*

Chapter 16, **"Now Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth"** (The boy was probably a hyperactive child. He was always **On**), **sons of Reuben...** Reuben was the oldest son. What's about to erupt is a squabble over authority and family position - not just with Levi, but probably all the tribes.

These leaders **"took men; and they rose up before Moses with some of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, representatives of the congregation, men of renown. They gathered together against Moses and Aaron..."** On the heels of their failure to enter Canaan the Hebrews look for a scapegoat. They hurl the blame on Moses and Aaron.

I'm always amazed at the turnover among Major League baseball managers. At the end of the season half the teams fire their managers, and the other half rehire the very same guys. The teams just swap managers. *And why? The manager never swings a bat, fields a ball, or makes a throw...* But it's easier to fire a manager than it is to fire 25 players, or all the fans. It's just simpler to blame a team's troubles on its skipper. This is what happened in the camp of Israel...

And this happens in churches... People fall short of their calling, or stop growing in their faith - and rather than take responsibility for their unbelief they blame it on the leaders... *If my pastor had been this... or done that... if the church were different...* It's a tragedy.

The leaders of this uprising say to Moses and Aaron, **"You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?"** And the answer is, **because God said so.** God called Moses to lead.

Originally, Moses didn't want the job. God had to overcome Moses' excuses. There was no doubt, Moses and Aaron had been commissioned by God, and since God called them, God would have to remove them - *not Korah and not his cronies*. So here's how Moses resolves the dispute, **"let's see what God says!"**



Over the years, I've discovered if God calls a leader, and he remains faithful; then he doesn't have to defend Himself... Once, a group of ladies left Calvary Chapel on a Sunday night, and went to the Burger King for milkshakes. One lady confessed to me later they were letting me have it, criticizing all I was up to... when the man at the booth next to them gets up, walks over, and says, *"Hey, I know Sandy Adams, and what you're saying about him isn't true. You're spreading lies and gossip... Someone might hear you and believe you. You'd better knock it off."* Then the man sat back down.

To this day I have no idea who the fellow was. But those ladies got the point - and so did I... If God calls you, He is faithful to defend and validate your position.

So Moses throws down the gauntlet, *"Tomorrow morning the LORD will show who is His and who is holy, and will cause him to come near to Him. That one whom He chooses He will cause to come near to Him."*

Do this: Take censers, Korah and all your company; put fire in them and put incense in them before the LORD tomorrow, and it shall be that the man whom the LORD chooses is the holy one." Then Moses adds sarcastically... he echoes Korah's own words - *"You take too much upon yourselves, you sons of Levi!"*

Korah overstepped his boundaries. God allowed the Levites to help the priests in the Tabernacle worship, but now they're no longer content to help, they want to run things. And what happened to Korah and the Levites occurs in church. You start out helping, just thankful to serve - but over time you forget your place, and assume more authority than you're given. Korah had *taken on* a few duties, now he wants to *take over*.

Verse 8, *"Then Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi: Is it a small thing to you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the work of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to serve them; and that He has brought you near to Himself, you and all your brethren, the sons of Levi, with you? And are you seeking the priesthood also?"* God gave to the Levites an important role. They carried the Ark and the holy furniture. *But now they want more...* *"Therefore you and all your company are gathered together against the LORD. And what is Aaron that you murmur against him?"*

And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, but they said, *"We will not come up! 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 should keep acting like a prince over us?"* They blamed Moses rather than their own unbelief.

*"Moreover you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor*

given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up!" This was a defiant bunch. *Where were they back in Chapter 12 when God struck Miriam with leprosy for questioning Moses' authority?*

"Then Moses was very angry, and said to the LORD, "Do not respect their offering. I have not taken one donkey from them, nor have I hurt one of them." And Moses said to Korah, "Tomorrow, you and all your company be present before the LORD - you and they, as well as Aaron." He sets the day - *tomorrow*. And I'm sure of the time - *high noon*. A showdown is coming...

"Each of you take his censer and put incense in it, (these were the tools of a priest) and each of you bring his censer before the LORD, two hundred and fifty censers; both you and Aaron, each with his censer." Remember, this was formidable opposition, 250 "*men of renown,*" *they were called...* Men of some stature.

Verse 18, "So every man took his censer, put fire in it, laid incense on it, and stood at the door of the tabernacle of meeting with Moses and Aaron. And Korah gathered all the congregation against them at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to all the congregation." The Lord comes to separate the *pretenders* from the *contenders*.

"And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment." God is also upset. "Then they fell on their faces, and said, "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and You be angry with all the congregation?" Moses knows what's coming and he asks God to have mercy on the Hebrews who'd not participated in the rebellion.

"So the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the congregation... 'Get away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.' Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. And he spoke to the congregation, saying, "Depart now from the tents of these wicked men! Touch nothing of theirs, lest you be consumed in all their sins."

Realize the most dangerous place on earth is to be in close proximity to people God is about to judge.

This is why Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 6:14, "*Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers.*" Get involved legally, or socially, or financially with an unbeliever who's deserving of God's wrath, and don't be surprised if you become collateral damage. *Hang with friends who are breaking the law and when they get busted you'll probably spend a night in the slammer with them.* Moses' words to the Hebrews, "*Depart now from the tents of these wicked men!*" is advice to us all.

So Moses proposes a test. If the families of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram die of old age; then Moses was not called by God. But, verse 30, "If the LORD creates a new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the pit, then you will understand that these men have rejected the LORD."

"Now it came to pass, as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground split apart under them, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods. So they and all those with them went down alive into the pit; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the congregation." The crowd critical of Moses, who'd been slinging mud, now gets shut-up by a major mud-slide.

"Then all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up also! And a fire came out from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense."

It's interesting, in verse 33 the word translated "pit" is "Sheol" which was the OT home of the dead. Between His crucifixion and resurrection Jesus went to *Sheol* or *Hades*. Evidently, Korah and the rebels slid down a hole into a space warp that took them straight to Hell.

The vital lesson learned from Korah's rebellion is the attitude that works so often in business has no place in God's kingdom. *Ministry is not a ladder you climb!*

Position and authority aren't gained by power-plays and takeovers, but by God's appointments. Success in ministry is being content with wherever God puts you.

Verse 36, "The LORD spoke to Moses, "Tell Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, to pick up the censers out of the blaze, for they are holy, and scatter the fire some distance away. The censers of these men who sinned against their own souls..." Notice, when you sin it's against God, against others, *but also against yourself*. Sin is self-destructive. The one you hurt most is you!

Eleazar is to gather the censers and turn them into a covering for the altar - a memorial to this event. So that no one, ever again, will take too much upon themselves and assume authority God hasn't given.

And you'd think Moses and Aaron's authority would never be questioned again! But not so, "On the next day (the very next day) all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, saying, "You have killed the people of the LORD." God opened a chasm in the earth and swallowed the rebels, but the people



blame Moses! *Moses was too harsh.*

“Now it happened, when the congregation had gathered against Moses and Aaron, that they turned toward the tabernacle of meeting; and suddenly the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD appeared.” This time God isn’t going to drag it out. He’s going to cut to the chase and finally silence their grumbling...

“Then Moses and Aaron came before the tabernacle of meeting. And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.” And they fell on their faces. So Moses said to Aaron, “Take a censer and put fire in it from the altar, put incense on it, and take it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them; for wrath has gone out from the LORD. The plague has begun.” Aaron is now racing to the brazen altar as the grumblers and complainers are dying!

Verse 47, “So he put in the incense and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living; so the plague was stopped.” We don’t think of it this way, but we’re in the same situation as Aaron. We’ve been commissioned by Jesus to go into all the world and share the Gospel - but while we’re strolling along, dragging our feet - people are dying. We need to sprint to the altar, fall on our knees in prayer, and intercede for people who haven’t heard.

Verse 49 tallies up the death toll, “Now those who died in the plague were fourteen thousand seven hundred, besides those who died in the Korah incident. So Aaron returned to Moses at the door of the tabernacle of meeting, for the plague had stopped.” It’s difficult to fathom... that after the incident with Miriam, and then Korah, and now with the victims of this plague... *that there would still be the need to confirm Moses’ authority...* But **Chapter 17** tells us...

“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to the children of Israel, and get from them a rod from each father's house, all their leaders according to their fathers' houses - twelve rods.” Leaders of the twelve tribes each brought a shepherd’s staff to Moses. A staff was a stick of wood - or limb cut from a former tree. *God is going to confirm his priesthood once and for all!*

“Write each man's name on his rod. And you shall write Aaron's name on the rod of Levi. For there shall be one rod for the head of each father's house.” They identified each rod with one of Israel’s twelve tribes. “Then you shall place them in the tabernacle of meeting before the Testimony, where I meet with you. And it shall be that the rod of the man whom I choose will blossom; thus I will rid Myself of the complaints of the children of Israel, which they make against you.”

You might say God is *going out on a limb* to settle this question of which family will have priestly authority. In verse 6 Moses follows through on God's orders. *And I'm sure everyone went home to a restless night...*

Verse 8, "Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds." Hey, Moses handed Aaron's rod back to him, and said, "*Brother, this bud's for you.*"

**And it was!** Not only did his rod bud, but overnight it blossomed, even produced almonds. It was undeniable confirmation that God had appointed Aaron as priest.

"Then Moses brought out all the rods from before the LORD to all the children of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod. And the LORD said to Moses, "Bring Aaron's rod back before the Testimony, to be kept as a sign against the rebels, that you may put their complaints away from Me, lest they die." Thus did Moses; just as the LORD had commanded him, so he did." According to Hebrews 9:4, along with this rod, the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, and a jar of manna were kept inside the Ark of the Covenant. It was all a perpetual reminder of God's Law, His provision, and the priestly authority given to Aaron's family.

There's another point about Aaron's rod. A rod or staff was a former branch or tree limb. Once alive, it's now dead. What God did to Aaron's rod was to bring it back to life - *God resurrected his staff to prove that Aaron was His chosen intercessor*. This was also true of Jesus! Our High Priest died, but He was resurrected to prove that He is now the intercessor of all mankind.

Today, the graveyard is full of dead rods: Buddha, Mohammed, every other false Messiah lies there dead with no buds. But Jesus is alive - His work blossoms all over the world. Jesus is the only Man God has authorized to intercede for us. He is the only means by which a person can be saved. *And **this** bud is for you!*

Verse 12, "So the children of Israel spoke to Moses, saying, "Surely we die, we perish, we all perish! Whoever even comes near the tabernacle of the LORD must die. Shall we all utterly die?" Notice how they go to extremes... Folks died not because they came to the Tabernacle, but they overstepped their boundaries.

And now new boundaries need to be established between the priesthood and the Levites, **Chapter 18...**

“Then the LORD said to Aaron: “You and your sons and your father's house with you shall bear the iniquity related to the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity associated with your priesthood.” God has confirmed Aaron’s authority. But as all Spiderman fans know, *the Peter Parker Principle*, “**with great power comes great responsibility.**”

“Also bring with you your brethren of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you while you and your sons are with you before the tabernacle of witness. They shall attend to your needs and all the needs of the tabernacle; but they shall not come near the articles of the sanctuary and the altar, lest they die - they and you also.” The Levites should *step up and help out*, but *not overstep*. It’s vital we all know our place in the body of Christ.

The Levites were to assist the priests, but in verse 7 the Lord tells the priests, “Therefore you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything at the altar and behind the veil; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood to you as a gift for service...” And notice, how priests should view their ministry “**as a gift.**”

And all ministry is a gift! Whenever your service to God becomes a duty, or a right, or a job you’re spiraling downward. Ministry is a **privilege**. Always, the opportunity to *serve the Lord is a gift from the Lord*.

Notice verse 20, “Then the LORD said to Aaron: “You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel.” The tribe of Levi was the only tribe not to receive a tract of land in Canaan. **The Lord not the land was their inheritance.** *But if they had no land and grew no crops how would they eat and provide for their families?*

Well, we’re told in verse 21, “Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting.” The Levites were compensated for their service from the offerings and sacrifices given by God’s people. And this becomes the NT principle for paying the pastor. Church staff gets paid from the offerings you drop in the box.

But here’s an important principle, verse 25, “Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak thus to the Levites, and say to them: ‘When you take from the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them as your inheritance, then you shall offer up a heave offering of it to the LORD, a tenth of the tithe.

And your heave offering shall be reckoned to you as though it were the grain of the threshing floor and as the fullness of the winepress. Thus you shall also offer a heave offering to the LORD from all your tithes which you receive from the children of Israel,

and you shall give the LORD's heave offering from it to Aaron the priest." The Levites were paid from the people's tithes, but then they were expected to tithe from the tithes they received. *The same should be true of a pastor...*

*A portion of your offering becomes my salary:* then I get the pleasure of tithing to God again from what you've already tithed. No one should be deprived of the opportunity to give to God, for as Jesus said in Acts 20:35, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

*Do you really believe it's more blessed to give than it is to receive?... If you're not sure why not give it a try!*