**Falling Facedown: Why Forgiveness Requires Sacrifice**

**Numbers 16-17**

**Wilderness Series Slide**

In 1976, Steve Jobs a couple of other men founded Apple Computer in hopes, they said, of changing the world. From 1976 to 1983, they did just that. They revolutionized the computer industry and, as a result, Jobs becomes a billionaire. In 1983, in an attempt to continue growing the company, Jobs sought to hire Pepsi’s President, John Sculley, and used perhaps one of the best recruiting lines in the history of business:

"Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life, or do you want to come with me and change the world?" – Steve Jobs to John Sculley, President of Pepsi

Apparently, Sculley was impressed by this challenge, and took the job as Apple’s CEO. Even though Jobs was initially resistant to sharing power with someone else, the partnership was great. Jobs was the brains behind developing Mac computers, and Sculley was a marketing genius who kept Apple relevant and flush with cash.

However, it didn't take long for their partnership to go south. Jobs became increasingly hard to deal with and insubordinate—at least according to Sculley and Apple’s board—which led to Sculley attempting to take away some of Jobs’s authority within the company. When Jobs heard about this, as you might expect, he was furious. So, he hatched a scheme to get Sculley ousted from Apple. All of a sudden, a profitable and blossoming company was in the middle of a power struggle between the man who founded it and the man who the founder hired to run it.

In 1985, Steve Jobs resigned from Apple and started another company. As the story goes, Jobs was hired back by Apple in 1997 when they were on the verge of bankruptcy, and he is largely credited with the company’s meteoric re-rise to prominence through products like iTunes, the iPod, and the iPhone.

Now, we can all relate to Steve Jobs, can’t we? We have a friend, a family member, a spouse, a co-worker who we love, trust, and depend on. And one day, that person lets us down. They say something hurtful to us; they lie to us; they betray us. And we are so hurt by their actions that we put our relationship with them to the side, and we immediately fight back. We become vengeful, vindictive, outraged. In an instant, it’s as though the relationship never existed and we only see that person as an enemy. If even for a moment, every one of us has felt this way.

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We’re going to read a similar story this morning in Numbers 16-17, if you want to swipe, flip, or tap your way over there. If you don’t have a Bible, we have some in the back of the room. You can take one on your way out as our gift to you. In the meantime, you can follow along on the screen.

As we’ve worked our way through the Book of Numbers, we’ve seen the Israelites rebel against Moses’s leadership and ultimately against God’s plan for them. They complain about not having enough food to eat, about being tired of wandering in the wilderness, and about the enemies they run across along the way.

And every time, even at his worst, Moses ultimately reminds them of God’s faithfulness and at times even begs God to forgive them.

Some scholars have estimated that there were anywhere from a few hundred thousand to as many as 2 million Israelites in the wilderness with Moses. Can you imagine a population the size of the Greater Nashville area looking at you, grumbling and complaining and whining about their circumstances? I have two small children, and when they both get to complaining at the same time, it can drive me nuts!

This really puts Moses’s situation into perspective. He is trying to follow God’s call to lead this massive group of people and the only thanks he gets is more complaining. And then we come to Numbers 16-17, where the community’s rebellion against Moses turns up a notch.

I’m not going to read the entirety of both chapters—just the main plot points so that we can get an idea of what’s going on.

So, let’s first look at Numbers 16:1-13:

Now Korah son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took **2**two hundred and fifty prominent Israelite men who were leaders of the community and representatives in the assembly, and they rebelled against Moses. **3**They came together against Moses and Aaron and told them, “You have gone too far! Everyone in the entire community is holy, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the Lord’s assembly?”

**4**When Moses heard this, he fell facedown. **5**Then he said to Korah and all his followers, “Tomorrow morning the Lord will reveal who belongs to him, who is set apart, and the one he will let come near him. He will let the one he chooses come near him. **6**Korah, you and all your followers are to do this: take firepans, and tomorrow **7**place fire in them and put incense on them before the Lord. Then the man the Lord chooses will be the one who is set apart. It is you Levites who have gone too far!”

**8**Moses also told Korah, “Now listen, Levites! **9**Isn’t it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the Israelite community to bring you near to himself, to perform the work at the Lord’s tabernacle, and to stand before the community to minister to them? **10**He has brought you near, and all your fellow Levites who are with you, but you are pursuing the priesthood as well. **11**Therefore, it is you and all your followers who have conspired against the Lord! As for Aaron, who is he that you should complain about him?”

**12**Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, but they said, “We will not come! **13**Is it not enough that you brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness? Do you also have to appoint yourself as ruler over us? – Numbers 16:1-13 (CSB)

So, there’s a couple of things to notice here.

Now Korah son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took **2**two hundred and fifty prominent Israelite men who were leaders of the community and representatives in the assembly, and they rebelled against Moses.

First, in verses 1-2, we see four men leading this rebellion of 250 Israelite leaders.

First, there’s Korah. Korah is Moses and Aaron’s cousin, and he’s Kohath’s son, which means his family lineage was appointed by God to help transport the furnishings of the tabernacle back in Numbers 4. This was one of the highest callings in the land. Korah, as the leader of this clan, is in one of the most prominent positions in the community.

Then, there’s Dathan, Abiram, and On. The text says that they’re “sons of Reuben.” The last time we see Reuben, back in Genesis 49, he had forfeited his birthright to leadership in the community because he slept with his father’s girlfriend.

So, you have a lot of jealousy going on here. On the one hand, you have Korah who has one of the highest positions in the community wanting even more power. You have the three Reubenites who want power because their ancestors forfeited the power they think they should have.

**3**They came together against Moses and Aaron and told them, “You have gone too far! Everyone in the entire community is holy, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the Lord’s assembly?”

Then, in verse 3, they falsely accuse Moses and Aaron of exalting themselves above them. Of course, as we’ve seen, Moses continually serves and sacrifices for these people. But let’s look at the moment Moses was commissioned by God to lead the Israelites.

Exodus 3:

**9**So because the Israelites’ cry for help has come to me, and I have also seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them, **10**therefore, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh so that you may lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

**11**But Moses asked God, “**Who am I**that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” – Exodus 3:9-11 (CSB)

And then in Exodus 4:

**10**But Moses replied to the Lord, “Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent—either in the past or recently or since you have been speaking to your servant—because **my mouth and my tongue are sluggish.**”

**11**The Lord said to him, “Who placed a mouth on humans? Who makes a person mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? **12**Now go! I will help you speak and I will teach you what to say.”

**13**Moses said, “Please, Lord, **send someone else**.” – Exodus 4:10-13 (CSB)

If anything, Moses has been extremely passive and uncomfortable with leading Israel. And yet these men, one of whom is his own cousin, are accusing him of exalting himself. Korah and the others say that “the entire community is holy” as a reason for why Moses shouldn’t be in charge. But God put Moses in the position of leadership. So they’re bitter against both Moses and God.

Now, in this moment, Moses has two options. Two ways he can respond to these accusations:

1. He can respond like Steve Jobs and John Sculley and start a war.
2. He can immediately turn to the Lord and not retaliate.

Let’s see which one he does in verse 4.

**4**When Moses heard this, he fell facedown.  (“When Moses heard this, he punched Korah in the face.”)

He chooses option 2. He immediately humbles himself, falls facedown, and gives it to the Lord. Moses knows that he’s done nothing wrong. He knows he doesn't deserve this kind of treatment. But instead of sticking out his chest, he puts his face on the ground.

Then, he tries to reason with them:

**10**He has brought you near, and all your fellow Levites who are with you, but you are pursuing the priesthood as well. **11**Therefore, it is you and all your followers who have conspired against the Lord! As for Aaron, who is he that you should complain about him?”

Moses basically says, “You guys have been raised up and appointed by God to do great things, but now you want more. It’s not me you have a problem with, but God. He’s the one who has placed us in our roles in the community.”

Dathan and Abiram’s response would be funny if it weren’t so sad:

**12**Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, but they said, “We will not come! **13**Is it not enough that you brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness? Do you also have to appoint yourself as ruler over us?

“You brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey.” What land are they talking about here? … EGYPT! Again, they idolize their slavery in Egypt as being better than being free and in the wilderness with God. God promised to give them the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, but they’re so twisted at this point that they’re calling Egypt the Promised Land.

So, as the story goes, Moses suggests that they all present an incense before the Lord. This was a priestly action of burning up an incense, and the idea is that the smell of the burning incense would rise up to the Lord, and he would accept or reject it based on the aroma.

God’s answer to whose offering he accepted is pretty clear in verse 20:

**20**The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, **21**“Separate yourselves from this community so I may consume them instantly.”

We’ve already seen at this point that these guys are trying to overthrow God’s plan and doubting his goodness in placing Moses and Aaron in leadership, and in bringing them into the wilderness. So, it’s no surprise that God rejects their offering—and then says he’s going to destroy *everyone*, not just the ones who rebelled this time.

But here’s Moses again, being humble and patient and sacrificial toward the people:

**22**But Moses and Aaron **fell facedown** and said, “God, God who gives breath to all, when one man sins, will you vent your wrath on the whole community?” **23**The Lord replied to Moses, **24**“Tell the community: Get away from the dwellings of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.” **25**Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. **26**He warned the community, “Get away now from the tents of these wicked men. Don’t touch anything that belongs to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins.”

So, Moses accepts God’s judgment on Korah and the other men for leading a rebellion against Moses. But God threatens to destroy everyone, the entire community.

As Trevor talked about a few weeks ago, we again see Moses appeal to God’s character. He says to God, “You are the God of life! Surely you won’t destroy everyone just because of this smaller group’s rebellion.”

Now, on the one hand, God could destroy everyone and be totally justified. We’ve read enough of Numbers already to know that at various times the entire community has turned their back on God, grumbled against him, and rebelled against Moses. In fact, Moses could have easily said, “That’s a good idea, God. I’m about sick of all these complainers!”

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But even though they might have deserved punishment, Moses again falls facedown before God and begs him to spare them. Moses’s radical forgiveness of these people who have sinned against him is pretty extraordinary and required sacrifice.

In a sense, he is disobeying God by begging him not to punish the whole community. God told him to step aside and let him destroy everyone, but he stood in front of God and shielded them, asking God to spare them. He is also sacrificing his own comfort, because Lord knows these people are going to grumble again and make his life miserable again.

Some people see a passage like this and ask why God would listen to Moses. He is sovereign and all-knowing and perfect. He could destroy everyone and be totally justified in doing so, because he is the perfect judge who knows right from wrong better than we do. Did God change his mind? Was God confused?

But that’s the wrong thing to focus on here. What we should notice is that God heard Moses’s prayer and honored his request. God answers prayer! Moses’s radical, humble, loving, sacrificial prayer had an actual impact on the world. God is sovereign and perfect and totally beyond us, and yet at the same time he is extremely near to us, ready to listen to our prayers and even grant our requests.

So, remember how I said that Moses’s forgiveness was a sacrifice of his own comfort, considering how awful these people have been to him? Let’s go down to verse 41:

**41**The next day the entire Israelite community complained about Moses and Aaron, saying, “You have killed the Lord’s people!” **42**When the community assembled against them, Moses and Aaron turned toward the tent of meeting, and suddenly the cloud covered it, and the Lord’s glory appeared.

**43**Moses and Aaron went to the front of the tent of meeting, **44**and the Lord said to Moses, **45**“Get away from this community so that I may consume them instantly.” **But they fell facedown.**

**46**Then Moses told Aaron, “Take your firepan, place fire from the altar in it, and add incense. Go quickly to the community and **make atonement for them**, because wrath has come from the Lord; the plague has begun.” **48He stood between** the dead and the living, and the plague was halted.

After Moses just begged God to spare them from judgment, they completely overlook his forgiveness and sacrifice for them and immediately start complaining about him. They’ve seen God destroy Korah and those who rebelled with him, and yet it hasn’t clicked that Moses is the best thing they’ve got going for them.

Now, if I were Moses, I would’ve lit the place on fire by now. God, don’t worry about destroying them, I GOT THIS. But Moses, again, falls facedown before the Lord and begs him to spare them. More than that, he tells Aaron to go offer a sacrifice to God so that they won’t all be destroyed.

Again, Moses shields his people from God’s right and good judgment, and takes a chance on angering God and sacrificing his own comfort, because, again, *you know* these people are going to complain again, regardless of how much Moses does for them.

But God does stamp out one complaint for good in Numbers 17. Let’s take a look there, and then we’ll talk for a few minutes about what we should do with this story. Numbers 17:

The Lord instructed Moses: **2**“Speak to the Israelites and take one staff from them for each ancestral tribe, twelve staffs from all the leaders of their tribes. Write each man’s name on his staff. **3**Write Aaron’s name on Levi’s staff, because there is to be one staff for the head of each tribe. **4**Then place them in the tent of meeting in front of the testimony where I meet with you. **5**The staff of the man I choose will sprout, and I will rid myself of the Israelites’ complaints that they have been making about you.”

**6**So Moses spoke to the Israelites, and each of their leaders gave him a staff, one for each of the leaders of their tribes, twelve staffs in all. Aaron’s staff was among them. **7**Moses placed the staffs before the Lord in the tent of the testimony. **8**The next day Moses entered the tent of the testimony and saw that Aaron’s staff, representing the house of Levi, had sprouted, formed buds, blossomed, and produced almonds!

So, if you remember, Korah and the others tried to take Moses and Aaron’s place as leaders of the community. Aaron in particular was the highest-ranking priest in the community. He was the one charged with offering sacrifices for the people’s sins.

God had appointed Aaron to this role, but reiterates it here for everyone to see. Aaron’s staff looks like an ordinary staff laying there next to everyone else’s, but his is the only one that sprouts almonds. Almond trees were one of the earliest to sprout in the spring, so in the Israelite community almonds were a sign of life.

So, when Aaron’s staff sprouts almonds, it means that God ordained Aaron to be the chief priest who made atonement for the people, covering their sins and giving them life. God reiterates here what he had already put into place—that one man would be responsible for atoning for the sins of the people. (If you aren’t picking up on the Jesus stuff yet, it’s coming.)

Ok, so that’s about as quickly and succinctly I can lay out the story, so what does it mean for us? Any time we read Scripture, we aren’t just looking for information, we’re asking how it challenges us and how it comforts us.

So let’s look at how this story challenges us and how it comforts us.

**1. We are challenged to see ourselves as rebels.**

If we compare ourselves to Moses, we might all give up pretty quickly. We all will be tempted to think that if *that’s* what forgiveness looks like, we can’t live up. Like I said earlier, I would’ve been tempted to take them all out myself. I wouldn’t have been so kind.

But the truth is, we’re all a lot more like Korah, aren’t we? We’re vindictive, vengeful, short-tempered, selfish, and unforgiving. We like to think we’re Moses. We tend to think we’re mostly in the right and those who have hurt or offended us are in the wrong. We like to think we can be Moses, but that’s not the point of the story.

Now, Moses was not perfect by any stretch. He was a godly man, no doubt, but he had his flaws. But when we read this story with ourselves in the place of Korah and the other rebels, we see a fuller picture of ourselves. If they had been sacrificially forgiving, they would’ve trusted in God’s sovereignty even in their anger frustration about their circumstances. Their greatest sin was being bitter—unforgiving—toward God and Moses. They were bitter about their situation and about the wrong they felt had been done to them. They didn’t trust God, and so they didn’t obey God.

So there’s our challenge—to realize that we’re much more like Korah than Moses. We are often unwilling to forgive God and others for our situation. But understanding this gives us a good picture of the state of our hearts and our need for God’s mercy.

**2. We are comforted by God’s forgiveness through Christ.**

So if we’re Korah in this story, then who is Moses? He’s a picture of Christ.

Christ is the one who continually forgives those who rebel against him. Christ is the one who did nothing wrong, and yet was still mocked and ridiculed and accused by his people. Christ is the one who stood in our place, between death and life, taking on God’s wrath toward sin in our place. When God said, “I should punish them for their rebellion,” Christ fell facedown on the cross, making atonement for our sins. Sacrificial forgiveness.

And this time it wasn’t Aaron’s ordinary staff that sprang up with life so that people’s sins could be atoned for. No, it was Christ’s own bloodied, broken body. What looked like an ordinary man lying dead in any ordinary tomb turned out to be the sacrificial forgiveness needed to forgive all of us rebels. His resurrection means that once and for all, death is dead and sin is wiped clean. Forgiveness in its highest form.

Now, this doesn’t excuse us from being sacrificially forgiving. God doesn’t say, “Well, thanks to Jesus you’re all forgiven and free to continue to be little unforgiving Korahs.” In fact, Jesus has strong words for us. Look at Matthew 6:

**14**“For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. **15**But if you don’t forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses. – Matthew 6:14-15 (CSB)

We may be temped to think, “Hey hey hey… Jesus, come on, now—you know I’m not able to do that! I’m the rebel, you’re the Savior, remember? I get the forgiveness and you get the sacrifice and we work well together!”

When we believe in Christ, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. We have God living inside of us, empowering us to live new lives shaped not by our rebellion but by Christ’s righteousness. Look at Ephesians 4:

**30**And don’t grieve God’s Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption. **31**Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. **32**And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ. – Ephesians 4:30-32 (CSB)

In other words, Christians don’t get to say, “I *can’t* forgive.” We can *choose* not to forgive, but it’s no longer impossible. We are called to forgive others like the Father forgave us through Christ, and we’re given the Holy Spirit in order to live it out that forgiveness.

In fact, it grieves the Holy Spirit—it grieves *God*—when we say that we can’t forgive. Not only is it not true, but it shows a lack of trust in God’s goodness and power both to forgive you and help you forgive others.

Paul says it this way in Colossians 3:

**12**Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, **13**bearing with one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a grievance against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive. **14**Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Colossians 3:12-14 (CSB)

God’s love for you is not only a good example of love to look up to—it’s able to literally change who you are and how you approach loving others.

If you want to know what sacrificial, forgiving love looks like, just look at the cross. On the cross is both the forgiveness you yourself need and the power you need to forgive others in the same way.

"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you." – C. S. Lewis

Again, it will be your temptation to brush this aside. “If you only knew what that person did to me, you would understand why I can’t forgive!” Listen, I get it.

I was emotionally abandoned by my mom, abused by my stepdad, and had the woman I thought I was going to marry dump me for another person a few weeks before I planned to propose. I’ve been blackmailed by a co-worker and pushed to the side by countless people who I’ve sacrificed time and energy trying to pastor through their own brokenness and sin. I get it. Forgiveness is *hard*.

But more importantly, we have a Savior who gets it. He was abused and rejected and abandoned by the very people he came to save. In fact, we all still do that to him every day in our own pride and selfishness and grumbling. Praise God that he continues to forgive us, that he continues to stand between us and death.

We don’t look to Moses and Aaron to save us. They served their purpose for a time, but they died and others took their place. Instead, they point us to Christ. Hebrews 7 says it this way:

**26**For this is the kind of high priest we need: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. **27**He doesn’t need to offer sacrifices every day, as high priests do—first for their own sins, then for those of the people. He did this once for all time when he offered himself. **28**For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak, but the promise of the oath, which came after the law, appoints a Son, who has been perfected forever. – Hebrews 7:26-28 (CSB)

Moses and Aaron were appointed by God to make sacrifices for the people, but they were still sinners themselves. But Christ never sinned. This is the promise we rest on. A perfect priest. A perfect sacrifice. The work is done.

So the good news is that we don’t have to forgive others in our own strength. All of us would admit that we need to be forgiving but don’t think we can, or we don’t want to forgive but know that it’s actually the right thing to do. In both instances, we have the Holy Spirit to empower us to take steps toward reconciliation.

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Forgiveness requires sacrifice. We cannot forgive others without first sacrificing our own pride to submit our lives to Christ, and we cannot forgive others without submitting to the Holy Spirit’s power to help us. We have to fall facedown before God.

This doesn’t mean we forget about past sins. It doesn’t mean we pretend like we haven't been hurt. It means that *in* our hurt and *in* our anger and *in* our frustration, we can acknowledge sin while at the same time forgiving others the way we’ve been forgiven.

We can be like John Sculley, Steve Jobs, Korah, and millions of others who choose to wage war instead of strive for peace. Or we can look to Christ, whose sacrificial love brought us the forgiveness we didn’t deserve, so that we can offer forgiveness to those who don’t deserve it.

Christ, the true and better Moses, gives us the ability to be like Moses in our story today, but only if his forgiveness changes us first.

Let’s close this morning with a big ol’ chunk of encouragement from John:

**7**Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. **8**The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love. **9**God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might livethrough him. **10**Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved usand sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. **11**Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another. **12**No one has ever seen God.If we love one another, God remains in us and his love is made complete in us.

**13**This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. **14**And we have seen and we testify that the Father has sent his Son as the world’s Savior. **15**Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God—God remains in him and he in God. **16**And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him. **17**In this, love is made complete with us so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment, because as he is, so also are we in this world. **18**There is no fear in love; instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment. So the one who fears is not complete in love. **19**We love because he first loved us. **20**If anyone says, “I love God,” and yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not see. **21**And we have this command from him: The one who loves God must also love his brother and sister. – 1 John 4:7-21 (CSB)

Let’s pray.