

Korah's Rebellion (Numbers 16-17)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Numbers

I. Introduction and Recap from Prior Lesson

- a. This lesson is closely related in theme to the immediate prior lesson in this series.
- b. The entire exodus journey from bondage in Egypt (through the Red Sea, crossing and wandering for 40 years in the Wilderness, all the way to the Promised Land) is a map of the Christian spiritual journey, as Paul explained in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**.
- c. The assembly of Israelites in the Wilderness foreshadows the church. With this in mind (and confirmed by what we see in the New Testament), there will be problems with sin in the church.
 - i. In addition to 'regular' or 'marginal' members of the church falling into sin, we should not be surprised to see even top leaders involved in sin.
- d. When we encounter sin in the church, we need to keep the following in mind:
 - i. Don't be shocked if (or when) you see this happening. We have been warned about this.
 - ii. Don't be enablers, making excuses for the sins in others.
 - iii. Like those who saw the man gathering firewood on the Sabbath, those who see sin need to confront it and bring it to the attention of those best equipped to deal with it.
 - iv. Those with leadership responsibility need to address sin in the church exactly as the Lord prescribes.
 - 1. Don't try to be "more gracious/patient" than God Himself is!
 - 2. Sin needs to be addressed and exposed.
 - 3. The church needs to follow what it says in **Matthew 5, Matthew 18, 1 Timothy 5, 1 Corinthians**, etc.
 - 4. For God's sake (and the church's sake), let's NOT be like most churches (of all types), who typically 'cover up' sin, especially sin in the lives of leaders!

- a. There are plenty of excuses people use for not following this, but all are bad.

II. Why the Story of Korah's Rebellion Matters to Us Today

- a. Read **Jude v. 3-13**.

- i. Points made by Jude, the brother of James, include:

- 1. Bad people have crept into the church.
 - 2. This follows a longstanding pattern found throughout spiritual history (those saved initially end up turning away from God and being destroyed). That pattern includes:
 - a. The Israelites who were "saved" but later destroyed because of unbelief;
 - b. The angels who fell into sin, who are set apart for destruction; and
 - c. Sodom and Gomorrah.
 - 3. The bad people coming into the church also follow the pattern of three classic wayward examples from the past.
 - a. Note that two of the three are from the book of **Numbers**. The three are:
 - i. Cain (**Genesis 4**)
 - ii. Balaam (**Numbers 22-24** and **31**)
 - 1. He was in it for the money.
 - iii. Korah's rebellion (**Numbers 16-17**)
 - 1. That is the subject of the current lesson.
 - b. **Question:** There are many examples of evildoers in the Scriptures. What is it that *these three* have in common?
 - c. **Answer:**
 - i. All three were prominent religious people who worshiped God.
 - ii. All three offered sacrifices to the Lord.

- iii. However, despite being religious and worshipping the one true God, all three were unrighteous and ended up getting severely punished.
 - d. Some might object: "Balaam was not a Jew; he was a pagan". However, he was *a prophet of God!*
 - i. Balaam even gave a famous prophecy about the resurrection of Jesus in one of his oracles.
- 4. Jude goes on to describe how people like these three examples have crept into the church.
 - a. He then describes these corrupt people in the most graphic terms. (**Jude v. 12-13**)
 - i. These people look like Christians on the outside, but have no fruit.
 - ii. Like trees in autumn with no fruit or clouds containing no water, they are useless.
 - b. The Lord will judge and severely punish such people.
- b. Read **Jude v. 14-22**.
 - i. Consider: this is the only letter we have from Jude. Of all the things he could talk about (how much God loves us, etc.), he devotes the entire letter to *warning about bad people who will come into the church!*
 - ii. These people are sensual, living to gratify their flesh, but impressing others by the way they speak.
 - iii. Jude reminds those reading his letter that the apostles of Jesus had warned them about the fact that bad people would creep into the church.
 - iv. This passage in **Jude** reminds me of what Peter wrote in **2 Peter 2**, using similar language.
- c. When scandals break out in Christian church circles (including a recent example I discussed in the prior message), many Christians struggle. I notice that this is especially the case with the younger generation of Christians, who have not lived through examples of this before.
 - i. However, these things are rather common and seem to have plagued the church from the beginning. They can hit the church in waves.

1. The first such wave someone encounters may be something they knock them over, especially if the person is unprepared for it!
 2. I will discuss a couple of examples of such scandals that I have seen over the past 20 years.
- d. Famous Boston-based sex scandal in the Catholic Church
- i. About 20 years ago (2002), the Boston Globe did a Pulitzer Prize-winning series (running under the title '*Spotlight*') on sexual abuse of minors and coverups by the religious hierarchy in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston.
 - ii. One priest had molested boys over a period of 23 years; another was charged with molesting 130 children.
 - iii. Church leaders who became aware of these problems covered them up and simply moved the offending priests from parish to parish when these problems surfaced.
 - iv. This scandal resulted in:
 1. About \$100 million in settlements.
 2. Resignation of Cardinal Law.
 3. Discovery of similar problems in other dioceses throughout the U.S. and internationally, involving thousands of victims.
- e. Ravi Zacharias was a very popular and engaging Christian apologist who died in 2020.
- i. At his funeral, Vice President Mike Pence called him the greatest Christian apologist of the century. He was considered to be 'another C.S. Lewis'.
 - ii. During his life, Zacharias was a popular speaker at live events (40,000+ attending) and on a popular radio show. He founded RZIM ministries, which funded apologetics-related training.
 - iii. After he died, it surfaced that he was leading a double life, engaged in sexual misconduct all over the world.
- f. Recently, court cases were filed against ICC / ICOC / Kip McKean and other related parties. Many in this fellowship are quite familiar with those churches.

- i. Again, the charges go back many years and involve sexual depravity and leaders covering up the crimes.
- ii. News of these charges has rocked especially the younger generation of those who came out of this church background lately, some of whom are listening to this message.
 - 1. Church members want to know who knew what and when; and what leaders did (or failed to do).
 - 2. They wonder: "How could this happen in a group we trusted, with leaders we trusted?"
- g. If we preached the same message that Jude and the apostles of Jesus preached, Christians would not be so surprised when revelations such as these surface.
 - i. Rather, the church would be vigilant to watch for predators in the church; for people who are living for the money, recognition, fame, or covered-up fleshly depravity.
 - ii. There will be bad people among the flock, even as we strive to address sin we find and exert appropriate church discipline.
 - 1. If the apostles could not keep every single wicked person out of their churches, despite their best efforts, why should we expect we will be able to do so?
 - 2. However, if we address and expose sin in the church there will be less of it, and its spread will be significantly curtailed.
 - iii. We have the three classic examples Jude points to, the third of which is Korah's rebellion.

III. Korah's Rebellion

- a. Read **Numbers 16:1-3**.
 - i. **Question:** Who was Korah?
 - 1. **Answer:** He was a Levite, more specifically, a Kohathite. (**Numbers 16:1**)
 - 2. There were three divisions of the Levites (based on the sons of Levi: Gerson, Kohath and Merari). Korah was a Kohathite.
 - a. The Kohathites had the most honored role of all the Levites.
 - b. Aaron and Moses were Kohathites.

- c. The Kohathites were the division responsible for setting up and taking down the tabernacle itself, including the ark of the covenant, the altar of incense, the table of showbread and the lampstand. (**Numbers 4:1-20**)
 - ii. Rebels include:
 - 1. Korah, a Kohathite;
 - 2. Dathan and Abiram;
 - 3. Sons of Reuben; and
 - 4. 250 prominent men from different tribes.
 - iii. The group of rebels was comprised of *leaders within the community*.
 - iv. Their complaint against Moses and Aaron: "The entire congregation is holy; why do you exalt yourselves above the rest of the assembly?"
 - 1. They are not content with their position.
 - 2. They resent that Aaron's descendants (only) have the priesthood.
- b. Read **Numbers 16:4-19**.
- i. Moses does not claim that he is better than the others.
 - ii. He points to God as the one who ordered things.
 - 1. Read **Exodus 28:1**.
 - a. The Lord had told Moses that Aaron and his sons would have the priesthood. Moses was simply doing what God said.
 - 2. This was unpopular with many of the leaders and provoked an envy-fueled rebellion.
 - a. The story of this rebellion is mentioned other places in the Old Testament, including **Deuteronomy 11** and **Psalms 106**.
- b. Read **Wisdom of Sirach 45:18-20**.
- i. "Outsiders conspired against him [Aaron] and were *jealous* of him in the desert."

- iii. Moses proposes a test (each side to take censers and offer incense) and leaves the outcome in God's hands. Then he asks the Lord to disregard the sacrifice of the rebels.
 - iv. Dathan and Abiram are insolent and refuse to come down and appear before Moses.
 - 1. They complain that Moses brought them out of Egypt, which they fondly describe as "a land flowing with milk and honey".
 - 2. They complain that Moses is *trying to kill them* in the desert.
 - 3. They complain that Moses is *lording it over* the people.
 - 4. They absolutely refuse to obey Moses' request and *will not appear* before him.
 - v. The showdown takes place at the door of the tabernacle.
 - 1. 250 (with Korah) vs. 1 (Aaron) or possibly 2 (Aaron + Moses).
 - 2. Each man has a censer with burning incense.
- c. Read **Numbers 16:20-35**.
- i. The Lord once again threatens to destroy the entire congregation.
 - ii. Moses and Aaron fall down before the Lord and appeal to him to destroy only those who were involved in this sin. The Lord agrees with their request.
 - iii. They proceed to the place where the tents of Dathan and Abiram are. The Lord then has Moses call the people to separate themselves from Korah's rebellious group.
 - 1. He calls the people to make a decision, to choose sides. The people go with Moses' instructions.
 - iv. Moses says beforehand that if something unusual happens next, it will be the sign that the Lord is bringing judgment against the rebels.
 - v. The earth opens up and swallows the rebels with their families alive, then closes up afterward. It says these people were "taken down to *Hades*" in the LXX.
 - vi. Fire comes out from the Lord (I assume this would be coming out from the tabernacle) to incinerate the 250 rebellious men who were trying to usurp the priesthood, who were offering incense.
- d. Response of the people who see these events: fear of God.

- i. They do not want to fall to the same fate.
- ii. They do not want to be anywhere near the ones who sinned.
- e. A few thoughts on 'Hades'.
 - i. In the Scriptures, Hades is the place where the spirits of the dead go, awaiting final judgment. This is the place referred to in **Luke 16**, in the story Jesus told about the Rich Man and Lazarus.
 - ii. Reading this account in **Numbers 16**, one would get the impression that Hades (the place where souls of the dead go, awaiting final judgment) is somewhere *under (or inside) the earth*.
 - iii. **Question:** Is Hades actually a location somewhere *inside the earth*?
 - iv. Consider what Jesus said:
 - 1. "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights *in the heart of the earth*." (**Matthew 12:40**, NKJV)
 - 2. Of course, we know that Jesus descended to Hades before he was resurrected, as Peter explains in **Acts 2**.
 - a. Quoting from **Psalms 16**, Peter said in his speech to the crowd in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost:
 - i. "Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption." (**Acts 2:26-27**, NKJV)
 - b. Peter then concludes:
 - i. "Therefore, [*David*] being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses." (**Acts 2:30-32**, NKJV)
- v. From Tertullian, writing c. 210 AD:

1. "By ourselves the lower regions (of Hades) are not supposed to be a bare cavity, nor some subterranean sewer of the world, but a vast deep space in the interior of the earth, and a concealed recess in its very bowels; inasmuch as we read that Christ in His death spent three days in the heart of the earth, that is, in the secret inner recess which is hidden in the earth, and enclosed by the earth, and superimposed on the abysmal depths which lie still lower down.
2. "Now although Christ is God, yet, being also man, 'He died according to the Scriptures,' and 'according to the same Scriptures was buried.' (**1 Corinthians 15:3-4**) With the same law of His being He fully complied, by remaining in Hades in the form and condition of a dead man; nor did He ascend into the heights of heaven before descending into the lower parts of the earth, that He might there make the patriarchs and prophets partakers of Himself.
3. "(This being the case), you must suppose Hades to be a subterranean region, and keep at arm's length those who are too proud to believe that the souls of the faithful deserve a place in the lower regions."
 - a. (Source: Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 231)

IV. Copper (or Bronze) Censers

- a. Read **Numbers 17:1-5**.
 - i. The censers of the 250 men who were killed by the fire coming from the Lord are to become a covering for the altar. (I assume referring to the altar of incense in the Holy Place.)
 - ii. If anyone not descended from Aaron is ever tempted to usurp the role of priest and offer incense to the Lord, seeing this covering over the altar should serve as a rather sobering reminder not to repeat that mistake!
- b. Read **Numbers 17:6-15**.
 - i. Again the people complain (they lost their fear of God and respect for Moses).
 1. They blame Moses for the death of those who sinned, rather than blaming the ones who sinned.

2. **Good idea:** When something bad happens, stop to think *whose sin* was the root cause of the problem in the first place!
 - a. Don't blame the person who is simply doing what the Lord said to do (in this case, Moses).
 - ii. Again the Lord is angry with the people and considers wiping them out; again, Moses is the mediator for the people before God.
 - iii. He offers incense to make atonement for the people, to appease the wrath of the Lord.
- c. A few thoughts on the meaning of the term "*atonement*".
 - i. There are two dominant 'models' of atonement (answering the question, "*WHY was it necessary* for Jesus to die on the cross?". They are:
 1. **Penal Substitution Model:** Christ had to suffer and die in order to *appease the anger of God* toward us. He died in our place to receive the punishment from God that we deserved. *OR...*
 2. **Ransom Model:** Christ had to suffer and die in order to pay the ransom to Satan, who had taken us captive. He took our place to free us from bondage. (This perspective was popularly portrayed in the C.S. Lewis book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.)
 - a. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a *ransom for many*." (**Mark 10:45**, NKJV)
 - ii. Most Protestants teach Penal Substitution model (only).
 - iii. It seems to me that more of the Scriptures line up with the Ransom model of the atonement. That is the older view, one that was held by several early Christian writers. (For more on that, see the audio message by David Bercot: *What the Early Christians Believed about the Atonement*, available through Scroll Publishing.).
 1. However, this passage in **Numbers** strikes me as one of the (few) places in Scripture where I can see the idea of the term "*atonement*" used in connection with appeasing the wrath of God.
 2. Is it possible that *both* views have some validity?

3. Regardless of your view on the atonement, and how you would explain why it was necessary for Christ to suffer and die for us, differing viewpoints on this should never become a cause to create division within the church!
- d. Note that it says, “14,700 died in this plague”, resulting from the sin of the ungrateful, blame-shifting people, who blamed Moses for the death of the household of Korah and the 250 incense-burning rebels. So the total death toll would have been almost 15,000 people!
 - i. I see these death tolls in the Wilderness as stark warnings for us, with God highlighting the dangers of sins that led to the death of many. Those killed in the Wilderness never made it to the Promised Land, and their dead bodies serve as an eternal example for us. Recall also:
 1. “About 3,000” were struck dead in the golden calf incident, in **Exodus 32**.
 2. Further, in **Numbers** we will see 24,000 total being struck dead due to sexual immorality with Midianite women (**Numbers 25**).
 - a. Paul refers to that incident in **1 Corinthians 10:8-11**, where he says that 23,000 died in one day, *as an example for us*.
 3. In view of the nearly 15,000 whose death is recorded to teach us a lesson, let us be sobered and not foolishly repeat their mistakes!

V. The Rod of Aaron that Budded

- a. Read **Numbers 17:16-28**.
 - i. Another miraculous sign from the Lord, demonstrating that the priesthood has been reserved for the descendants of Aaron.
 1. The rod of the Levite tribe, with Aaron’s name on it, blossoms, buds and produces ripe almonds.
 - ii. This sign would be preserved by the ark of the covenant, so that future generations would remember, as well.

VI. Take-Aways for Us

- a. God wanted the people to remember this lesson.

- i. The censers to cover the altar, Aaron's rod to be kept with the ark, and over 15,000 dead are all things to remind the people of tragic mistakes they had made.
- b. Prominent, religious people will rise up within the church who give trumped-up, spiritual-sounding rationales, but are motivated by bad motives (including envy).
- c. Respect whatever order God has established, and don't sway to the popular masses.
 - i. Roles in marriage.
 - ii. How we handle the government.
 - iii. Leadership in the church, and how we handle problems that will arise within church leadership. Relevant passages include:
 - 1. "Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct." (**Hebrews 13:7**, NKJV)
 - 2. "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you." (**Hebrews 13:17**, NKJV)
 - iv. WARNING: This story and these texts are often used by church leaders to push an agenda: "shut up and get in line; don't challenge us!"
 - 1. We don't want to be rebellious and complaining people. Also, we don't want to have the spirit of Korah and his friends.
 - 2. Perhaps our focus should be on obeying what the Lord says, rather than our feelings or what the crowd is calling for (church or world).
 - a. That includes selecting the kind of people who should lead us: spiritual, blameless men devoted to righteousness. (**1 Timothy 3, Titus 1:5-9**)
 - b. It also informs how we should handle problems in leadership when they arise. We need to maintain the high, Biblical standard of integrity and deal with problems rather than 'sweeping them under the rug'.
 - i. "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. Those who

are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.” (**1 Timothy 5:19-20**, NKJV)

- d. The antidote to this spirit of Korah and his fellow rebels, according to Jude, includes:
 - i. “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to *contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.*” (**Jude 3**, NKJV)
 - 1. Let us always strive to recover and advance the original faith, the one handed down by the apostles.
 - 2. May we never try to ‘innovate’ and change the faith as originally handed down by the apostles of Jesus.
 - ii. “But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.” (**Jude 20-23**, NKJV)
 - 1. Let us keep ourselves in the love of God, showing compassion toward others, yet living in the fear of God and pulling sinners out of the fire while we strive to maintain holy lives ourselves.