

Another Sin of the Wilderness: Rebellion

Number 16:1-24

Numbers 16:1-24 - *"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, sons of Reuben, took men; ² 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. ³ They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "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 assembly of the LORD?"*

⁴ So when Moses heard it, he fell on his face; ⁵ and he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, "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. ⁶ Do this: Take censers, Korah and all your company; ⁷ 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. You take too much upon yourselves, you sons of Levi!"

⁸ Then Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi: ⁹ 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; ¹⁰ 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? ¹¹ Therefore you and all your company are gathered together against the LORD. And what is Aaron that you complain against him?"

¹² And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, but they said, "We will not come up! ¹³ 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? ¹⁴ 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!"

¹⁵ 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."

¹⁶ And Moses said to Korah, "Tomorrow, you and all your company be present before the LORD—you and they, as well as Aaron. ¹⁷ Let each take his censer and put incense in it, and each of you bring his censer before the LORD, two hundred and fifty censers; both you and Aaron, each with his censer." 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. ¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ²¹ "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment."

²² *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?”*

²³ *So the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,* ²⁴ *“Speak to the congregation, saying, ‘Get away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.’”*

Background Notes

In the New Testament book of Jude we read about the false teachers who were beginning to infiltrate the 1st century churches with their false teaching. Jude, verse 11: *“Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah.”* The sin of these false teachers is likened to “the rebellion of Korah,” because Korah’s rebellion was a rebellion against **God’s authority**. The rebellion of Korah was not just a rebellion against Moses and Aaron and their positions of authority - it was rebellion against God Himself, because God had given Moses and Aaron their positions (v11). This is true today as well. When there is rebellion against an authority structure that God has ordained (whether it is family, or church, or state), it is rebellion against God. And **rebellion is a serious sin**.

The rebellion of Korah was not just a rebellion of one individual. No, this was a major rebellion. Besides Korah, some Levites, and some men from the tribe of Reuben, and 250 leaders from all the tribes of Israel participated in the rebellion (v1-2). These 250 men were not just rabble-rousers, like the “mixed multitude” that complained in Numbers 11. No, these were well known leaders in Israel! They were *“men of renown”* (v2) - and they certainly had many followers.

It’s easy **not** to join a rebellion when only a few little-known upstarts are the instigators. However, when well-known leaders in the congregation are involved, it’s easy to get caught up in what looks like a legitimate movement to overthrow an existing authority. We need to heed this warning! **Be careful!** The rebellion of Korah was a major sin of the wilderness.

Doctrinal Points

1. The sin of contempt results from rebellion in the human heart.

Do you remember our diagram of the “tree of pride” and the “sins of the wilderness”? The “tree of pride” has many “branches,” and many “leaves” on those branches. We’ve seen four of them in our study of the sins of the wilderness.

In Numbers 11, we saw the branch of **discontent**, with leaves of **complaining**. In Numbers 12, we saw the branch of **jealousy**, with leaves of **criticism**. In Numbers 13 and 14, we saw the branch of **unbelief**, with the leaves of **compromise**. Here in Numbers 16 we have the branch of **rebellion**, with the leaves of **contempt**.

Notice that the rebellious leaders showed contempt for Moses and Aaron: *“They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, “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 assembly of the LORD?” (v3). In other words, “Who do you think you are, Moses and Aaron? You’re nobody special! **We**’re as good as you are!” They looked with contempt at the leaders that God had chosen.

Contempt of God-given leaders is evidence of rebellion in the human heart – then and today. Is it possible that you’re despising someone in an authority structure that the Lord has placed in your life? Are you showing disdain or lack of respect for them? Maybe you’re disrespecting the leaders in your family, or maybe a church leader - an elder or a pastor. The sin of contempt is the result of rebellion in the human heart.

Look how Dathan and Abiram showed a lack of respect towards Moses: *“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? 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!’”* (v12-14).

Another telltale sign of a rebellious spirit is **distorting the truth**. In verse 14 the rebels actually accused Moses of blinding the people to the truth! *“Would you put out the eyes of these men...?”* Who were the truly “blind” people here? The rebels were! They called Egypt a *“land flowing with milk and honey”* (v13), when they had been slaves in Egypt! That was certainly a distortion of the truth!

Have we ever said about a spiritual leader, “Who are **you** to tell us what to do?” Or “We’re not coming to meet with **you**!” Have we ever shown an attitude of contempt towards people in positions of authority over us? The sin of contempt results from rebellion in the human heart.

2. The sin of contempt results in severe discipline from the Lord.

Moses proposed a test to prove that he and Aaron had divine authority. Korah and his rebellious company were to bring incense censers and present burning incense before the Lord, and the Lord Himself would show who were the true priests. Offering burning incense was a function of the priest. Levites or non-priestly Israelites were not authorized to burn incense. And the Lord spoke -- in no uncertain terms (v20-21)!

Once again, Moses and Aaron had to intercede for the people. In their intercession for the people, both Moses and Aaron are spiritual pictures, or *types*, of Christ.

Aaron, the high priest, is a picture of Christ as our High Priest. Moses, as mediator, is a picture of Christ as the only Mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). Because Moses and Aaron intervened, God refrained from wiping out the whole congregation - but Korah, Dathan, and Abiram suffered God’s judgment for their rebellion against Him.

Despising those who are in a God-given position of authority over you, and treating them with contempt, is a serious sin, and it must be disciplined. Contempt for authority shows that there is rebellion in your heart.

Listen to what God says of the sin of rebellion in 1 Samuel 15:23 - *“For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.”* You probably never thought that “a little contempt” or “just a little rebellion” would be as bad as the sins of witchcraft and idolatry, did you? But in **God’s** sight, they are! God must use severe discipline when He sees rebellion and contempt for authority.

Do you wonder why God may be disciplining you at this present time? Is it possible that you are showing a lack of respect for a spiritual authority, or rebelling against it? The sin of contempt results in severe discipline from the Lord.

Practical Application

Accept the position that God has given you!

Verses 8-10: *“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...? And are you seeking the priesthood also?’”*

God had given the Levites a wonderful and important position in Israel. God chose them to be His special servants. They were to carry out all the ministries associated with the Tabernacle - God's dwelling place in the midst of the people of Israel. But Korah and his company were not satisfied with just being Levites; they wanted to be priests as well. They were unwilling to accept the position that God had given them.

What about us? Have we accepted the positions that God has given us? Are we disappointed and bitter because we feel we deserve more, and that God is unfair? Are you despising the person who has what you want, and showing it by your contempt? Are you perhaps even speaking out your contempt?

Or, have you thanked the Lord for the gifts and talents that He has given you? Are you satisfied with being the man or woman that God has made you? Or are you a rebel at heart? Accept the position that God has given you!