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# Session 4 - Korah's rebellion

## Bible Passages

Numbers 16:1-50

## Brief Notes

After the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea, chapters 15-19 cover the entire 38 years of wandering whilst a whole generation died out before they could finally make their way again towards the Promised Land. From all that time we are given just one story (chs.16-17), one shocking glimpse of those wasted years. This is a shocking chapter: nearly 15,000 dead in just two days; not at the hand of some enemy army or a terrible natural disaster, but from the hand of their God. This is the God who is “slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion” (Nus.14:18), not some grumpy belligerent deity, so it must have been a very serious thing that provoked his anger, and we need to take heed. These stories in Numbers are warnings to us (1 Cor.10:11) and we should therefore pay careful attention.

## The Rebellion (verses 1-15)

The leaders of the rebellion have slightly different agendas and gripes but are united by a simple complaint that Moses has got too big for his boots (v.3). Korah's complaint is addressed first and seems to be the issue that lies at the heart of the chapter. He was a Levite, responsible for looking after the Tabernacle, and his family was responsible for some of the holiest items, including carrying the Ark of the Covenant (see Nus.4), but he resented the fact that of the Levites only Aaron and his family could serve as priests (so vv.8-10) – Why must it be Aaron? Why shouldn't I

be able to come before God? Why shouldn't God accept my sacrifices? After all, aren't we all holy? It's a contemporary complaint: we like to think we can come before God on our own terms, that we should be acceptable to him; exclusive claims in matters of religion sound arrogant. Moses' response makes it clear though that the arrogance is Korah's, not Aaron's, for it is God who decides how he is to be approached, and it is God they are rebelling against (v.11).

Dathan and Abiram's complaint is simply blatant defiance and unbelief – rejecting Moses' authority and God's redemption. They even refer to Egypt as “a land flowing with milk and honey”, akin to a nominal Christian saying they liked the sound of Hell. The fact that Korah has joined forces with these Reubenites, casts his rebellion in the same dark light: they are rejecting God and the Gospel.

## **The Showdown (verses 16-40)**

Alarm bells should have been going off in their heads when Moses told them to appear with censers before the LORD, since not long before, whilst camped at Sinai, two of Aaron's sons had taken censers to offer unauthorised incense and had died (Lev.10), but they present themselves the next day, sure of their own holiness and clearly understanding little of God's holiness. God threatens to put to death not only the 250 rebels, but the entire people gathered in support. Moses and Aaron fall on their faces and intercede, pleading for mercy, so God says that all who separate themselves from this rebellion will be safe. Then Moses says that God's verdict on these rebels – his verdict on the right way to approach him – will be made clear when God judges them by the earth swallowing them alive. The ringleaders duly perish, and the 250 co-conspirators are burnt alive as “fire came out from the LORD” (v.35). From the smoking remains of these rebels, the censers are gathered up and made into a permanent reminder that no one can approach God on their own terms as though their offerings or good deeds should secure God's favour (v.40). Here surely is the lesson the people then and we today are to learn: we can only approach God on his terms, through his appointed priest.

## **The Mediator (verses 41-50)**

We might have thought the day's events would have put the fear of God into the people and have given them some respect for Moses and Aaron, but v.41 shows otherwise. Again the glory of the LORD appears and God wants to wipe them out there and then. If we were Moses or Aaron we might have said “Go ahead! I've had enough! How can they say that Korah and his gang were the LORD's people, or that I killed them?!” but they don't. They fall on their faces again and plead for mercy, as God would have them do – this was the very responsibility given to them by God, to act as mediators. In their response we are to recognise a different side of God's response: yes, in his holiness he is provoked to wrath, but in his compassion he longs to show mercy. Unlike the rebels' offering of incense, which had incited God's wrath, Aaron's offering now turns aside God's wrath. Atonement usually requires blood to be shed but presumably there was no time for that and the fire from the altar represented the sacrifices offered there. Aaron is shown to be the true priest,

and points forward to the perfect priest God has provided for us in Christ.

## Discussion Questions

- How do you react to a story like this?
- What seems to lie at the heart of Korah's complaint?
  - Look at Numbers 4 to see what responsibilities Korah's clan (the Kohathites) had.
  - What significance was there in wanting the privileges of the priesthood too (v.10)?
  - How today might someone voice a similar complaint?
- What is the nature of Dathan and Abiram's complaint?
  - What light does this cast on Korah's complaint, given that he has joined forces with them?
- How is it to be decided who the LORD chooses to come near him?
- Why does the LORD's anger burn against the entire community (v.20-21)?
- What is the effect of Moses' and Aaron's prayer?
- How does God judge the three ringleaders and the other rebels?
- How does God ensure that lasting lessons are learnt from this?
  - What lessons are we to learn do you think? Are they lessons we need to learn?
- How is the grumbling of the people on the following day utterly stupid?
  - What is God's response?
  - What is Moses and Aaron's response?
- What is more remarkable: that 14700 should have been killed or that so many should have been spared? Why?
- What does this story teach about God's character and how we may draw near him?
- How does it point forward to the work of Christ, and our need of him?

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