

"Who is Holy?"

Numbers 16

When we left Numbers a few weeks ago, we read about one of Israel's worst moments in history, when ten of the 12 spies who went into the land of Canaan purposely spread false information about the land so as to scare the majority of people from wanting to go in. Caleb and Joshua passionately tried to convince the nation - the same people who saw the miracles of the exodus - that God (whose visible presence was seen everyday) would fulfil His promises to get them into that land flowing with milk and honey. But false information (one of Satan's favourite tools) won the day and the people lost the land for 40 years. God took the lives of the 10 spies to show how serious this was, but in Ch. 16 we see that a number of people did not learn this lesson.

The chapter begins,

16:1 *Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites—Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—became insolent² and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council.³ They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?"*

"They came as a group" tells us that Korah and the other 3 have been working behind Moses and Aaron's backs secretly conspiring to take control of the people. These were leaders in the community. There's nothing sadder than people who say they have your back but only want to stab you in the back. Sadly, it even happens in ministry. Which is what was going on here. Korah was a son of Kohath. Kohath was the second son of Levi along with 1st born Gershom and 3rd born Merari. Back in Numbers 3 Moses told them the responsibilities that God gave them as the caretakers of the Tabernacle. Korah displays his poor understanding of God, his unappreciation for his ministry and his refusal to listen to God's Words when he says what he says. Sadly, those he convinces to rebel against Moses and Aaron also display their lack of and/or unwillingness to listen to God.

While we're not given a timeline here, we must assume that this event happened not long after the rebellion of Ch. 13-14. He accuses Moses of selfish leadership ['You have gone too far']. He is correct that the whole community is holy but he is incorrect that every individual is holy because he obviously is not. Generally speaking, God is with them all, but God is not with you if you are not with God. Korah displays his disobedience and unbelief in God, and failure to understand holiness.

Holiness is Not a 'Title' We Compete For **(16:1-11)**

Some people treat being holy as an achievement to show others we're closer to God than they are. God does not bless competitiveness when it comes to spirituality. We see this in Moses and Aaron. When God's people complain, Moses and Aaron hit the dirt. They are praying for these ones who think leadership and spirituality is a contest. That's how the world works; Jesus once told the 12 in Mark 10:42

"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first

must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Korah and the others want to be lords, most likely because they want to take Israel back to Egypt. While we're not told Moses heard from God while on his knees, he either did or is so close to God that he knows God is going to do something drastic here. So he challenges Korah and his companions to do what only Aaron and his sons are called to do, bring incense before the Lord the next morning, and confronts Korah, 'You have gone too far!'

He then reminds them of the privileged position they already have. The sons of Korah were responsible for the handling of the Ark of the Covenant, and all the other tabernacle furniture that could only be carried by poles and covered. This was not a small honour (v.9) as Moses pointed out. God had graciously allowed them – not the 1st born Gershonites, to come nearer to God than anyone else other than Moses, Aaron and Aaron's sons. They didn't appreciate what God called them to do. And we can get caught up in spiritual competitiveness, thinking God blesses us more because we're holier than others. When that attitude starts to creep in,

****Thank God that He called us to be holy**

God saves us by His grace and calls us to Himself. We didn't do anything to earn that. Paul addresses believers in Rome with,

1:5 Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. ⁶ And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. ⁷ To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are called by God into a relationship with Himself through faith in His Son Jesus. Through grace which means unmerited favour. The purpose is for His Name's sake, not ours. We are called to belong to Christ together and called to be saints, which means to be holy. Holy simply means set apart. God sets us apart from the world because we have believed Jesus died for our sins and accept Him as our Lord and Saviour. Now our purpose to see more people saved unites us where we need to work together.

Paul confronted the divisiveness of the Corinthian church by reminding them that God called them into a community.

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge— ⁶ because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. ⁷ Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

'Called to be holy, together' (v.2) and 'called into fellow-ship with His Son Jesus' (v.8). How can we be in fellowship with Jesus when we're trying to make ourselves look more holy than someone else? We can't. Be thankful we are called at all and we have a purpose together and let's

help each other mature and grow in holiness. Even Moses said to Korah in 16:5, *The man the Lord chooses will be the one who is holy.*

Moses appeals to Dathan and Abiram, who refuse to meet with him. Instead they claim that Moses took them from the land of milk and honey in Egypt (v.13) and that he appointed himself as leader of Israel. The false charges continue in v.14 that it was Moses who failed to bring them into the land and give them an inheritance (factcheck: no, your disobedience to God did that). Moses prays that God would ignore their offering and then tells Korah and the 250 other leaders who oppose Moses and Aaron to appear before the Lord in the morning – and they do. This is so sad.

God is Saddened by Our Holier-than-Thou Attitudes **(16:12-22)**

It's sad when people accuse others falsely because of their own disobedience. It's sad when they twist the truth. It saddens God when His people refuse to submit to Him to iron out their differences. And it's sad whenever any of us thinks we're more spiritual or pleases God more than others. All of this came out of a thankless spirit of discontentment, as pointed out by Moses back in v.9,

⁹ Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the Lord's tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them?

When Korah appeared the next morning by the tent of meeting with all those who opposed Moses and Aaron, the glory of the Lord appeared but it was not good. God said to Moses and Aaron

Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once.”²² But Moses and Aaron fell facedown and cried out, “O God, God of the spirits of all mankind, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?”

Moses and Aaron again intercede for the entire nation. God is angered by their rebellion. We don't see our discontentment and sin as 'rebellion' though and we certainly don't think of God being angry about it, because He graciously gives us time to repent. And we should as soon as a holier-than-thou attitude begins. To avoid that we need to

****Learn to be content to grow in godliness.**

Paul challenged Timothy in this regard while he wrote about false teachers in 1 Tim. 6:3

He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions⁵ and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.⁶ But godliness with contentment is great gain.⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.⁹ People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Korah was not content with God's calling in his life. He wanted the milk and honey land they left behind [forgetting about the whole slavery thing]. He wrongly thought he was just as holy as Moses, but his whole attitude reflected an ungodly mind. Godliness or holiness (walking humbly with

God and being Godlike) leads to being content where we are, and not where we want to be. Paul says if we have what we need, be content. My guess is that Korah, a Levite was unhappy that Levites didn't get any land. Their inheritance was coming close to God. Isn't that what being holy means, becoming closer to God? God didn't choose the Kohathites to come close to Him because they were more holy, He chose them to come close to Him so they could become more holy. Korah missed it badly. He focused on his circumstances and what he didn't have, not on what he did have. Paul learned contentment. He tells us in Phil. 4:11-13,

¹⁰ I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

“I can do everything” has sometimes been taken out of context to mean I can do anything at all, even if I'm not equipped or gifted to do it. Clearly, Paul means he can handle all situations in life because he knows Christ is with him in every situation in life. Contentment, then, is peace in Jesus' ability to sustain you and meet your needs no matter the situation, because He is always with you.

²³ Then the Lord said to Moses, ²⁴ “Say to the assembly, ‘Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’”

Korah has not bowed the knee to the true God. He is insolent and insulting. Korah is a good reminder for all of us to

Respect/Fear God, Not Test Him **(16:23-42)**

²⁵ Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. ²⁶ He warned the assembly, “Move back from the tents of these wicked men! Do not touch anything belonging to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins.” ²⁷ So they moved away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. Dathan and Abiram had come out and were standing with their wives, children and little ones at the entrances to their tents.

Moses gave them a final warning and then said,

²⁹ If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the Lord has not sent me. ³⁰ But if the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt.” ³¹ As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart ³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah's men and all their possessions. ³³ They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community. ³⁴ At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, “The earth is going to swallow us too!” ³⁵ And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.

When we were in Num. 13-14 God said to Moses after the 10 spies sent a bad report that caused the nation not to go into the land of Canaan,

²¹ Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth, ²² not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times— ²³ not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.

Back in Ex. 17 when the people complained about a lack of water, we twice read that they ‘tested the Lord’. In 17:7 we read this explanation of what that meant:

⁷ And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Testing God means to doubt His ability to act on your behalf after you have seen Him act on your behalf. To see God’s miraculous provision and complain due to lack of faith, He can do it again. That’s why it is so heinous to do. People who test God do so out of arrogance. What’s the best way to keep us from acting that way?

****Pray regularly for us to walk humbly**

Prayer puts us in the servant position, entreating God, who is our Master. Prayer should keep us humble. But not just the act of praying but what we pray for because I doubt we pray every often for our own humility – maybe others, because they need it more than we do. 😊 The apostle Peter, no stranger to pride wrote

^{1 Pet. 5:5} Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” ⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

In the ‘same way’ was a reference initially to elders to serve their congregations not for gain but in service and to God’s glory, using Jesus as our example. But that’s also a universal principle for all God’s people to live a life of service to others, not for personal gain to glorify God. Peter did apply this to all of us in v.5, *All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another.*

Unfortunately, the chapter doesn’t end yet.

⁴² But when the assembly gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron and turned toward the Tent of Meeting, suddenly the cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord appeared. ⁴³ Then Moses and Aaron went to the front of the Tent of Meeting, ⁴⁴ and the Lord said to Moses, ⁴⁵ “Get away from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once.” And they fell facedown. ⁴⁶ Then Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer and put incense in it, along with fire from the altar, and hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them. Wrath has come out from the Lord; the plague has started.” ⁴⁷ So Aaron did as Moses said, and ran into the midst of the assembly. The plague had already started among the people, but Aaron offered the incense and made atonement for them. ⁴⁸ He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped. ⁴⁹ But 14,700 people died from the plague, in addition to those who had died because of Korah. ⁵⁰ Then Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, for the plague had stopped.

Like these Israelites,

We Too Can Be Slow to Learn from our Past Sins **(16:42-50)**

Their spiritual maturity was quite low and now they blame Moses (the next day!) for what happened. Moses and Aaron hit the dirt knowing God is going to judge again. Aaron intercedes, but not before 14,700 people die. Is there any hope for God's people at all? Yes, because ***God is always willing to forgive and restore***

And next week we will see God's grace and mercy even out of this tragedy.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message, please
contact us at olivet@rideau.net