

ONE GOD, TWO BROTHERS, AND THREE REBELLIOUS MEN

Presented by

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In one of my previous sermons titled, “Ten Spies Who **Wouldn’t**—And Two Spies Who **Couldn’t**,” I related to you the story of how, after the Israelites left Mount Sinai and headed toward the Promised Land, Moses sent twelve spies into Canaan to bring back a report to the rest of the Israelites about their new home. Unfortunately, when those spies returned, ten of them said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we” (Numbers 13:31), while only two of the spies (Joshua and Caleb) said, “Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it” (Numbers 13:30). Because of the lack of trust in God that the majority of the spies exhibited on that occasion, God proclaimed, “The carcasses of you who have complained against Me shall fall in this wilderness—all of you who were numbered, according to your entire number, from twenty years old and above, except for Caleb and Joshua” (Numbers 14:29-30). As a result, the Israelites were forced to wander in the desert for thirty-eight years after leaving Mount Sinai while those people died. That singular event marked a truly tragic time in Israel’s history. Unfortunately, however, it was not the **only** such tragic event during the nation’s extended period of wilderness wandering.

In fact, as hard as it may be to believe, the next terrible tragedy in the Israelites’ lives occurred almost immediately after God’s proclamation that they would have to wander in the wilderness for a total of forty years. After the disastrous events recorded in Numbers 13 and 14, we see God, in Numbers 15, giving Moses various rules and regulations for the people to follow. In fact, several times in that chapter we find God saying to Moses, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them...” Apparently, however, there was a group of people among the Israelites who had grown tired of Moses telling them what God wanted them to know. Numbers 16:1-3 explains the actions these people decided to take. According to the Bible, some men by the name of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram

“rose up before Moses with some of the children of Israel—two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation who were representatives of the congregation and who were men of renown. 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?’”

This verbal assault upon Moses and Aaron, in which Korah, Dathan, and Abiram complained about the authority that God had bestowed upon them, was no small thing. How do I know that? First, Exodus 33:11 tells us that “the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, **as a man speaks to his friend.**” Second, Deuteronomy 34:10 informs us that “there had not arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, **whom the Lord knew face to face.**” Third, in Exodus 24:14, when Moses and Joshua were about to ascend Mount Sinai to receive instructions from the Lord, Moses told the people of Israel, “Wait here for us until we come

back to you. Indeed Aaron and Hur are with you. If any man has a difficulty, let him go to them.” This complimentary reference to Aaron, coupled with the fact that he was appointed to be the first high priest of Israel, shows that God had confidence not just in Moses, but also in his brother Aaron.

What happened when Korah, Dathan, and Abiram rebelled against the authority of Moses and Aaron? Numbers 16: 4-5,16-19 tells us.

“When Moses heard this, he fell on his face; 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.... Tomorrow, you and all your company be present before the Lord.... 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...’ 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. And Korah gathered all the congregation against them at the door of the tabernacle of meeting.”

Thus, the next morning the stage was set for “the big showdown.” Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their 250 followers had challenged Moses and Aaron, stating that the two brothers had “taken too much upon themselves.” So how did this sad saga end? Numbers 16:23-27 says that on that fateful morning,

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the congregation, saying, “Get away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.”’ Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. And he spoke to the congregation, saying, ‘Depart now from the tents of these wicked men! Touch nothing of theirs, lest you be consumed in all their sins.’ So they got away from around the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; and Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, with their wives, their sons, and their little children.”

Moses then said,

“By this you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, and that I have not done them of my own will. If these men die **naturally** like all men, or if they are visited by the common fate of all men, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord **creates a new thing**, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the pit, then you will understand that these men have rejected the Lord” (Numbers 16:28-30).

The Bible then says simply,

“As soon as Moses finished speaking all these words, **the ground under them was split apart. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, along with their households....** So they, with all that belonged to them, went down alive into Sheol; the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.... **And a fire came out from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense**” (Numbers 16:31-33,35).

God had made His point: No one had the right to challenge the authority that He had given to Moses and Aaron. **No one!** As the psalmist wrote, “**Whatever the Lord pleases He does**, in heaven and on earth” (Psalm 135:6). On this occasion, it pleased God to defend—in front of the entire Israelite nation—Moses and Aaron. And while we are on this topic, we also would do well to remember what Genesis 18:25 tells us: “The Judge of all the earth **will do that which is right.**” Korah, Dathan, Abiram, their families, the 250 men who followed them, and all their families, died a horrible, very public death because they challenged not just Moses and Aaron, but also God Himself! In fact, this event in Israel’s history was deemed

so important that in the New Testament, Jude, writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, referred back to it when he spoke of those who had “**perished in the rebellion of Korah**” (Jude 11). Surely this memorable event taught the people of Israel a lesson that they badly needed to learn—right?

Wrong! Just one day after the Israelites had witnessed the miraculous deaths of Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and those who followed them in rebelling against God, Moses, and Aaron, we read, “On the next day **all the congregation of the children of Israel** murmured against Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘You have killed the people of the Lord!’” (Numbers 16:41). You would think that the Israelites would have learned their lesson, wouldn’t you? **But they had not!**

As a result, “the Lord said to Moses, ‘Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment’” (Numbers 16:45). Realizing what was about to happen,

“Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take a censer and put fire in it from the altar, put incense on it, and take it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them; for wrath has gone out from the Lord. The plague has begun.’ Then Aaron took it as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the assembly; and already the plague had begun among the people. So he put in the incense and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living; so the plague was stopped. Now those who died in the plague were **fourteen thousand seven hundred**, besides those who died in the Korah incident” (Numbers 16:46-49).

Is this not incredible? One day, the Israelites saw more than 250 people die because they had wrongly challenged Moses and Aaron’s authority, and in so doing had rebelled against God. Then, **the very next day**, “all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron” **again!** As a result, God slew **14,700** of the Israelites in a single day! I repeat my earlier statement: **You would think that the Israelites would have learned their lesson!** But they obviously had not.

Now I have a question for you. We know from Romans 15:4 that “whatever things were written before were written for our learning.” My question, then, is this: What lesson is there in this sad story that **those of us today should learn?** I will leave you to answer that question for yourselves. As for me, I already know the answer.