

# Numbers Chapter 16

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] So, starting in Numbers 16, verse 31. As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all those associated with Korah, together with their possessions.

They went down alive into the realm of the dead, with everything they owned. The earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community.

At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, The earth is going to swallow us too. And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.

The Lord said to Moses, Tell Eliezer, son of Aaron, the priest, to remove the censers from the charred remains, and scatter the coals some distance away, for the censers are holy.

The censers of the men who sinned at the cost of their lives, hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar, for they were presented before the Lord and have become holy.

[ 1 : 1 6 ] Let them be a sign to the Israelites. So Eliezer the priest collected the bronze censers brought by those who had been burned to death, and he had them hammered out to overlay the altar, as the Lord directed him through Moses.

This was to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the Lord, or he would become like Korah and his followers. The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

You have killed the Lord's people, they said. But when the assembly gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron and turned towards the tent of meeting, suddenly the cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord appeared.

Then Moses and Aaron went to the front of the tent of meeting, and the Lord said to Moses, Get away from this assembly so that I can put an end to them at once. And they fell face down.

Then Moses said to Aaron, Take your censer and put incense in it, along with burning coals from the altar, and hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them. Wrath has come out from the Lord. The plague has started.

[ 2 : 2 3 ] 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. He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped.

To those who had died because of Korah. Then Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance to the tent of meeting, for the plague had stopped. Good evening. Thank you, Joel, for leading us this evening. I'm trying to save my voice a little bit, and for that reason, Joel very kindly has led us so far. Turn back then, if you would, to that long chapter, chapter 16 of Numbers.

And as Joel reminded you, I was unwell, unfortunately, a couple of weeks ago, and wasn't able to preach in series as I should have done, so you should have had 16 before 17.

And you'll understand, I hope, now why 17 was there. Probably Joel told you why, because of what happens in chapter 16. But we're going to look together at this, as he said, very sobering and serious chapter.

[ 3 : 3 6 ] I wonder if you've come across, there's a phrase that's become more popular of late. It goes on like this, if you can't be a good example, then you shall become a terrible warning.

If you can't be a good example, then you shall become a terrible warning. And the sad truth is, is that when we read through the Old Testament, not more often than not, but pretty 50-50, we find that God's people there are either a good example, or they're a terrible warning.

And as we come to Numbers 16, we come to those people of God who were a terrible and are a terrible warning. In fact, they're a terrible warning that Moses reminds the people about later on in Numbers 26.

There's a census again about counting the people, and we're told there, Dathan and Abiram were the community officials who rebelled against Moses on Aaron and were among Korah's followers when they rebelled against the Lord.

The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them along with Korah, whose followers died when the fire devoured 250 men, and they served as a warning sign.

[ 4 : 54 ] They served as a warning sign. And not just a warning to God's people there in the Old Testament, but a warning to us, God's people today. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul, speaking about the sin of the people in the Old Testament before they went into the land, writes this, These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us on whom the culmination of the ages has come.

And in fact, of course, as you know, when we read through the passage, we were told about how the censers that the men had used, those metal sort of orbs with holes in them where they burnt incense to the Lord, how they were taken and beaten into sheets and laid over the altar to warn the people.

And there in verse 40, This was to remind the Israelites that no one except the descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense. So this chapter is all about warning.

And we have peculiarly, in one sense, not just one, not just two, but three judgments from God. Three acts of God's justice and anger against people in which they lost their lives.

And as we go through, we find that there's almost an escalation, well, there certainly is an escalation, as it were, in the numbers of people who die. And there's a building up to the terrible plague at the end.

[ 6 : 33 ] And so the first judgment of God was against Dathan and Korah and Abiram and their families. Ground opened up beneath them and then closed up over them. And probably a few dozen were killed in that act of judgment.

And then there was the 250, just a moment later, really, as they were offering incense to God. They were consumed as a fire went out from God. And they were instantly killed.

Then thirdly, we have this terrible plague that swept through the community so that ultimately 14,700 were killed. What a terrible two days.

Terrible situation. A terrible warning. But what are we warned against? That's the thing, isn't it? It's no good just having a warning.

There must be a reason for the warning. We must be warned to not do something or warned to do something. Well, each one of these groups that died, died because of God's judgment and justice.

[ 7 : 41 ] They died as he justly punished their sins. These people were men and women who sinned against the Lord and we are warned against their sin.

Sins that they committed, we might think, are peculiar to numbers. Sometimes when we read the Old Testament, we find ourselves dislocated from it and thinking, well, what has this got to do with me?

How can this speak to me? But the reality is that the God of the Scriptures, Old and New Testament, is the same God. He has the same attitude towards sin.

He hasn't eased off on sin. He doesn't count it now less serious than he did in the past. But rather, he is the same. And the lessons that we must learn and the warning we must take from the sin of God's people here is something which I believe is very important.

But what was the sin? Sin did these three men, particularly they were the ringleaders, we might say, Korah and Dathan and Biram. They were the ringleaders. They were the ones who headed up this rebellion against Moses and Aaron.

[ 8 : 56 ] What did they do? What was their sin? Well, if we were to look at it just at first glance or just read through it in one sense, we would say, well, their only crime appears to be the fact that they didn't like the way Moses led the people.

They were unhappy with him. They felt he was far too bossy. There in verse 3, they came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, you've gone too far.

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 thought that Moses was too big for his boots.

It got too grand an opinion of himself that he got above his station and he was treating the community with disregard and arrogance and flaunting, in one sense, his authority over them.

Later, as we read through, we find that they were very unhappy with Moses in the way that he led them. They felt he'd been a very bad leader. He'd let them down. Verse 13, Isn't it enough that you've brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness?

[10:07] Now you want to lord it over us. Moreover, you haven't brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. He'd let them down.

He hadn't led them into the promised land. He hadn't brought them into that place of blessing that God had promised. And they claimed even more that Moses had misled them, deceived them. This strange phrase there at the end of verse 14 says, Do you want to treat these men like slaves? You've probably all got a footnote if you've got the New International Version. The original is, Will you gouge out these men's eyes?

In other words, you're blinding them to the truth. You're treating them as if they're ignorant with no understanding. You're deceiving them. These are very serious allegations, aren't they, against any leader of God's people or any leader at all.

Too bossy, a bad leader, a deceiver, all sorts of things that they were leveling against them. And if these allegations were true of Moses and Aaron, then they were right to confront Moses and Aaron about them and call their leadership into disputes.

[11:19] However, they were not the truth. These accusations, this opposition, was just a smokescreen.

A smokescreen for these men's own wickedness. They invented charges against Moses for their own evil motives.

Now we can know for certain, in fact we do, as we go on through the wilderness journeyings, as they're called, that Moses was not a perfect leader. He wasn't a perfect man.

He didn't do everything completely right. Well, of course he didn't. As somebody said, the very best of men are men at best, failing and faulty.

But, these accusations really were just hiding something which was in the heart of these men and their followers, which was indeed so wicked in God's sight that it called for their death.

[12:21] So what is it? What's the sin that's being covered over by these false accusations?

What's the sin that in fact is a sin that we ourselves struggle with and no doubt have committed in some time or other?

What is the sin that these people committed against the Lord? I believe that they have committed this sin of covetousness.

Covetousness. It was the tenth commandment. Remember the commandments that were given by the Lord to Moses on the mountain. The tenth of them that was written by God's finger onto the stone tablet said this, You shall not covet your neighbor's house.

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor. I believe that they were committing the sin of covetousness.

And I'll explain why in a moment. But when you compare that sin, that last commandment as it were, at the end of the ten commandments, it seems a little bit over the top, isn't it?

[13:35] It's a bit unnecessary. When you think about the other commandments, they're about stealing and murder and lying and adultery and all sorts of nasty things. Oh, cowardousness.

It's not comparable, is it? Surely it shouldn't be that bad. It's something that everybody does and feels at times. But the reason why God put it there at the tenth of the ten commandments, the reason why God acts as he does with such anger against that sin here is because covetousness in reality is at the root of every other sin.

Every other sin begins with the sin of covetousness against one another and therefore against God. Think about it. A person will only steal from their neighbor if they first covet what their neighbor has. A person will only commit adultery with their neighbor's husband after they have coveted their neighbor's husband. And so we could go on all through the commandments and see that every single one of them is traced back to the heart which of course is why when our Lord Jesus explained the commandments and their relevance for today in the New Testament, he made it clear that these things begin with the hearts.

But why do I accuse these men of covetousness? Because of what Moses tells us about their motivation for opposing him and Aaron.

[15:11] Why did they do these things? Why did they call them these bad names? Why did they tell them they'd gone too far? Well, see, the reality is this, that covetousness is not only restricted to

possessions, to wealth, to people, but at the end of that commandment, anything that belongs, anything that is rightfully the possession of your neighbor.

And in this instance, Korah and Dathan and Abiram and those who were their followers coveted, not things, but they coveted Aaron's position. They coveted his place as God's high priest over the people of God.

We see it there as Moses wonderfully, surgically, as it were, puts his finger upon the really diseased area of these men's hearts. Verse 10, God has brought you and all your fellow Israelites near him, but now you're trying to get the priesthood too.

That's the problem. They coveted that exclusive place that God had given to Aaron and his descendants to be a priest before God, to mediate with God and his people.

A position, not a thing, not money, not finances, a place. And let me ask you, dear friends, this evening, have you ever or do you still covet another person's position?

[16:43] Perhaps another person's position at work. They're the line manager, the head of department, the director, and you want and long for that place.

Do you covet another person's position within the local church? A deacon, a church officer, an elder, perhaps even the pastor? I want to have that position in the church.

I think I deserve it, or whatever the reason may be. Or perhaps even you covet another person's popularity at school. You covet another person's likability, that everybody seems to be their friend and you're Billy No-Mates.

You covet their joviality, that they can spout jokes, their sense of humor, or even their intellect at the grades they have in their GCSE or A-levels or degrees.

Covetousness is there in each one of our hearts. And all of these covetous desires are a sin against God.

[17:53] A sin which he counts extremely serious. But why? Why are they so bad? Why are these covetous desires and temptations indeed sinful at all?

We've seen that they are the beginning as it were to a heart and a life that lives in contradiction to God's word. But really, if they just stay in the heart, are they a sin?

It's a big question, isn't it? It's a big, it's a way of viewing the world which is very different to the way of the world. Men and women would say the only sin that if we can call anything sin is actually an action.

You can't call heart or mind or thoughts or motivation sins. They are the things that people do. Even as Christians we can get into that way of thinking, that wrong way of thinking, that somehow sin is only on the outside, when in fact as we said before, Jesus declares sin begins in the heart.

So why does God put to death these men and women for having such covetous desires? Well to understand that we again need to go back a step further.

[19:10] We need to recognize that covetousness is a reaction. It's a reaction to discontentment. Discontentment.

That's the problem here with these three men. They are discontented with their lot in life. And yet, as we read here, they were a greatly honored and blessed people.

The Levites particularly. Verse 8, Moses also said to Korah, Now listen you Levites, 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, to stand before the community and minister to them?

He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself. The Levite tribe was the most honored of the tribes. God had called them apart and set them apart wholly for himself.

Their responsibility was to care for the tabernacle and all the furniture within it, the altars and the candlesticks and the ark and so on. They were the ones who alone could touch them and put up the tabernacle and take it down.

[20:25] They were given the very practical affairs of the dwelling earth. What an immense privilege, what an immense honor was given them.

Yet they were discontented with it. It wasn't enough for them. They wanted more. As we saw there in verse 10, you're trying to get the priesthood too. You've got the greatest honor over all the tribes and yet still it's not enough for you.

You're not content with it. You want something more. The offering of the incense was one of the duties that only a priest was allowed to carry out.

And therefore these 250 men, as it were, had already decided that they should be chosen to be priests. And so Moses' command to take up a censor and come to God that he might choose who are his priests or not was indeed exactly what they wanted.

They wanted to show that they were just as good as the priests, just as acceptable to God, that they could take their place, that they could assume that place of authority, that place that God had reserved for Aaron and his sons.

[ 21 : 46 ] They were unhappy with the position they were in. contentedness, says the apostle Paul, with godliness is great gain or is great reward.

It's a great place to be contented. In fact, Paul himself testifies he's had to learn to be content. In writing to the Philippians who had very kindly sent him gifts, he tells them, I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty.

I've learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Contentedness was what these people lacked, and it brought about in them a covetousness for what others had. We are living, dear friends, aren't we, in a world of discontentment.

In fact, we see it over and over again in the most extreme forms, rightly or wrongly, in the riots that are going on in Chile and France and Hong Kong, where men and women are rising up on the streets discontent with the government, and maybe they have very good reason to, I'm not saying they don't, but we see it more and more through society than we've ever seen before, this sense of discontentment, people unhappy with their life, people unwilling to accept where they're stationed in life, if I put it that way.

[ 23 : 30 ] What about you, dear Christian? Is there in your heart a discontentment about where you are in life? I always wanted to be an airline pilot.

I always wanted to be married with seven children. I always wanted, I always wanted, if only, if only, what a way to live, isn't it?

It's no way to live. Discontent, coveting, what others have, never happy. And this is where the problem really is.

This is where, ultimately, we get to where this covetousness and discontentment leads to sin against God. Because in one sense, as I've explained, and as we think, and the world thinks, discontentment is just, well, it's unhappy, it's miserable, it's not a very good place to be, but really, is it such a serious sin that God should strike and should kill?

Well, Moses tells us what the real problem is, and we can understand it a little bit more.

[ 24 : 44 ] He says there in verse 30, at the end of the verse, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt. See, God isn't, as it were, standing up for Moses and Aaron when he slays these men.

He's not saying, well, I'm going to fight your battle for you Moses and Aaron. I'm upset that you've been upset by them, so I'm going to stand up for you and slay them. No, it's nothing to do with that. In one sense, yes, though, God was angry because of this sin against those that he'd chosen to serve. That wasn't why he destroyed them. It was a sin against God himself, and it was a sin of contempt.

Attitude comes out, doesn't it, in the way these men and their followers speak about what God has done for them, already so far through Moses? Look back there to verses 12 and following.

Moses summoned these three men to stand before God. No, we won't do that, they said. And then they, listen how they speak. Isn't it enough that you, that's Moses, have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness, and now you also want to lord it over us.

[ 26 : 01 ] Moreover, you haven't brought us into a land with milk and honey and given us an inheritance and vineyards. Hold on, am I reading the same story? Was it Moses who brought them out of Egypt?

Was it Moses who parted the Red Sea? Yes, he was God's servant and God's leader, but he didn't do that. And notice the contempt that they have, ultimately, for what God has done.

Listen to verse 3, isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey? What land were they in? Egypt.

They'd been slaves for 400 years. Their children were thrown into the Nile to be put to death. They were beaten and abused and oppressed. Now, God has delivered them and brought them out of that and they said, and they've said it before, haven't they?

We are better off without God. Look how badly we've been treated. And then they give to God in one sense and accuse him of evil intent to kill us in the wilderness.

[ 27 : 10 ] God had done these things and God had an intention to kill them, to harm them and they blame God that they weren't in the promised land. Now, we know the story, don't we?

We know that God took them to the promised land and they rebelled against God and they said, no, we're not going to go into that land. We don't trust you. You're not faithful enough. They blame God for bringing them into the wilderness and they blame God that they haven't got what they wanted. God has failed them in their eyes. God has let them down in their eyes. And that attitude that's pervasive here in Dathan and Abiram and Korah is also the attitude that comes out the next day in the rest of the people of Israel.

Do you see them there in verse 41? The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. Hold on. You have killed the Lord's people. Moses and Aaron.

They could open the ground, could they, for the people to fall into. They could send fire from heaven, could they? No, of course they couldn't. In truth they were angry at God for putting these people to death but they dare not speak it out loud.

[ 28 : 27 ] And so they direct their anger against Moses and Aaron. One sense they're representatives of the Lord. Now you may say that's a million miles from me but let me put it in our own language.

It's God's fault that I'm discontent. It's God's fault that he's not been good to me. It's God's fault that he has treated me badly.

Because if God really loved me, if God was good to me, then I'd have more money. Then I'd have that better health. Then I'd have that superior place in church or at work or in the world. or I'd have those gifts or those abilities or qualities. Or I'd have. I'd have. God has withheld these things from me. God has acted unjustly towards me.

Do you see, dear friends, where covetousness begins? Do you see what is such a wicked sin against God to say I am discontent with my lot because ultimately we are pointing to the God who gives us every good and wonderful gift and we're saying, God, you haven't been good to me because otherwise I'd be happy.

[ 29 : 47 ] Otherwise I would have what I want. Otherwise I would be content. Can you see, dear friends, why the Lord acted in such justice and judgment?

Why he had to, in one sense, we might say, cut off the weed at the root. God cannot be treated with contempt and we treat him with contempt when we say it's not fair.

let me close with a spark and a glimmer of wonderful grace because that's not all this chapter is it? In the midst of all this sin against God and against his servants, in the midst of all this grumbling, complaining, covetousness and greed, in the midst of all that's going on, we see the wonderful grace and goodness of God bursting forth as Paul says in Romans, where sin doth abound, grace abounds much more.

And so as this plague is spreading through the people and those who've responded and reacted to God's goodness with such aggression and contempt and although God would have been quite within his rights to slay the whole community as he said to Moses, just earlier on and he said it more than once, hasn't he?

[ 31 : 26 ] When he says to them, get away from them, I'm going to put them all to death because they're all, as it were, tarred with the same brush, they're all of that same attitude and Moses intercedes and prays for them as he's done before.

Here God steps in as the plague begins to spread and God provides forgiveness for these wicked people and an end to judgment. Verse 46, Moses said to Aaron, take your censer and put incense in it along with burning coals from the altar, the place of sacrifice.

Hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them. Wrath has come out from the Lord, the plague has started. And 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. He stood between the living and the dead. The plague stopped.

In the midst of sin there is forgiveness. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Dear friends, you and I deserve the same thing too.

[ 32 : 41 ] We deserve God's full eternal judgment for our sins. We're no better than anybody else.

Let's not pretend. Let's not fool ourselves that somehow we are less covetous, less discontent, less contemptuous. We know our own hearts, I hope, enough to acknowledge that we deserve God's judgment.

But he has provided for us a great priest. A priest better than Aaron. A priest that was willing to stand between the living and the dead. And a priest who was not only willing to offer a sacrifice from the altar of incense but one who is willing to offer himself as the propitiation for our sins.

One of the sadnesses is that in many translations that word is taken out, propitiation. I understand why but it's such an important word. It means one who absorbs and deflects God's anger.

And as Aaron stood there, bravely, I have to say, as the plague was spreading towards him and the people behind him and he stood there with the offering and God stopped at that very moment and no one else died.

[ 34 : 00 ] So the wonderful truth is that when Christ died on the cross, the anger of God came up to and was absorbed by him in all of its fullness and wrath and justice so that all those who, as it were, stood behind him and stand beside him are forgiven, are spared, are delivered, are accepted.

Jesus, our great propitiation, has turned away God's wrath. There's no wrath. Yes, dear friends, we do sin and we can't just treat it lightly but dear friends, there's forgiveness for you and I.

Forgiveness in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Whatever our sins may be, no matter how many they may be, how deserving we may be, if we are standing beside Christ, if we are standing behind him, if he is your priest and your savior, if he's your mediator, the one who took your sin upon himself and you've put your faith in him, then there is complete and everlasting forgiveness for you.

John writes this in 1 John chapter 4, In this is love. Not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Not that we were