



“They, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them: and they perished from among the congregation”

(Numbers 16:33)

KEY TO THE LAYOUT OF THIS STUDY

The verses being studied are in bold type

Supporting and illustrative Scripture texts are in italics

PENN FREE METHODIST CHURCH
BIBLE STUDY

5th April 2017
Numbers 16:33-50

**CHRIST PLEADS FOR SINNERS
AND HOLDS BACK THE PLAGUE
OF GOD’S JUDGEMENT**

The explanation and commentary on the verses being studied and of the supporting texts are in normal typeface

v33. **“They, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them: and they perished from among the congregation”**. The terrifying judgement of God has just come down upon the leaders of a rebellion in the Israelite camp against the authority of Moses and Aaron, namely upon Korah, Dathan and Abiram. The Lord has caused a very localised earthquake to occur and the ground has literally opened up under the feet of the three rebel leaders. They and their servants and supporters disappear into a great fissure in the earth’s surface, here called ‘the pit’ and meaning a horrible mass grave. We know from Numbers 26:11 that the children of Korah were not included in the judgement, possibly because they did not follow their father in his wickedness, or because they were too young to be actively and willingly supporting the rebellion. As the sparing of the main rebel leader’s children is specifically referred to in this way, it is a reasonable inference that the young children of the second rank of rebel leaders, Dathan and Abiram, were also spared. However, other family members who supported the rebellion would have shared the fate of their family head. Korah was a Levite, and his particular sin, along with his fellow Levites, was attempting to take on the priest’s office, which God had appointed to be held by Aaron and his sons alone.

v34. **“And all Israel that were round about them fled at the cry of them: for they said, Lest the earth**

swallow us up also". The people are terrified by the shrieks of those disappearing into the great chasm suddenly opening up in the earth. Yet those who are being thus judged had had many opportunities to repent, but had despised them. They have been exposed to so many manifestations of God's truth and power, but still they rebel, such is the hard-heartedness of men to their Maker.

v35. "There came out a fire from the LORD, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men that offered incense". There now follows a second frightening judgement. The scene moves to the other faction of the rebels, the 250 princes who desired to take up the priestly functions to themselves. In doing so they are in direct defiance of God's appointed order. They have taken censers, or pans, full of burning coals, have placed incense in them, and have then presented them before the presence of the Lord at the door of the tabernacle. Suddenly, the cloud of God's presence becomes a destroying fire and utterly consumes them, whilst Aaron, standing right by them, remains totally untouched. The judgement of God is thus perfectly discriminating, and these noblemen receive the justice which they rightly deserve.

This terrifying event is recorded as a warning to all men today. Many choose to reject the authority of God's appointed Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. Many choose to blame God because their circumstances are not as they wish. Many, in the pride of their hearts, try to make themselves as God, dictating to Him what He should do. Korah The 250 princes, by burning incense at the tabernacle, were arrogantly assuming that they were qualified to enter into God's holy presence, whenever they thought fit. How little did they appreciate God's utter holiness and the corruption of their own hearts. It is God alone who determines how He must be approached. The failure of the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram teaches us that "God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29), and that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

v36. "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, v37. Speak unto Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest, that he take up the censers out of the burning, and scatter thou the fire yonder; for they are hallowed". Aaron's son, Eleazar, who was a properly appointed priest, is now told to collect together the censers held by Korah and the 250 princes and to scatter the burning coals in a distant place beyond the camp, for God will have nothing to do with this unclean offering. The incense is not a pleasant fragrance in His nostrils, but a foul stench. It must be cast away.

"The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord" (Proverbs 15:8). The censers themselves, however, have been used to make an approach to the Lord. So they have now become hallowed; they are now sacred objects which can never again be put to common use.

v38. "The censers of these sinners against their own souls, let them make them broad plates for a covering of the altar: for they offered them before the LORD, therefore they are hallowed". The rebels have brought about their own immediate deaths, having sinned with such a high hand. God now requires that their censers be burnt in a furnace and that the smelted-down metal be beaten into plates to be used as a covering for the brazen altar where the sacrifices were offered up in the court of the tabernacle.

v38. "... and they shall be a sign unto the children of Israel". So in future, whenever the priests and Levites approach the altar of burnt offering, there will be a reminder in front of them of how they must never take lightly the task in which they are engaged, or be presumptuous in the manner in which they approach the holy God.

v39. "And Eleazar the priest took the brasen censers, where they that were burnt had offered: and they were made broad plates for a covering of the altar". So, whenever the priests and Levites approach the altar, there, always in front of them, will be copper plating made out of the censers of the rebels whom God slew in His wrath. What a vivid reminder of disregarding the holiness of God and of the dangers of setting aside the authority of His word. As Matthew Henry very rightly comments, "God has provided that His wonderful works, both in mercy and judgement, should be had in everlasting remembrance, that the end (or

purpose) of them may be answered, and (that) they may serve for instruction and admonition”.

v40. “To be a memorial unto the children of Israel, that no stranger, which is not of the seed of Aaron, come near to offer incense before the LORD; that he be not as Korah, and as his company : as the LORD said to him by the hand of Moses”. The plating on top of the altar is to be a reminder, not only to the priests and Levites, but to all Israel. Let none ever forget what God did to Korah and the 250 princes. Let none ever again dare to bypass God's appointed priesthood. He alone determines how He will be approached. Even Aaron and his sons, the rightful priests, had to go through the most rigorous ceremonies of purification, before they could presume to approach the altar. They had to wash their bodies, and offer up sacrifices to atone for sin, and they then had to put on special garments. All this was in order to teach Israel the absolute holiness of God.

“I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me” (Leviticus 10:3). God is too holy for any sinner to enter into His presence in his own right. Only a designated priest devoid of any taint of sin can approach God as the mediator on behalf of the people. There is no one who can approach Him with, as it were, his own censer in his hand. The holy God can only be approached through His appointed priest. In New Testament Times, however, there are no God-appointed priests living on the earth. The office of priest became defunct in AD70, when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. The task of the priests was to offer up sacrifices and burn incense, but there is no altar and no temple today, and so the office of earthly priest has been abolished.

Therefore, when Paul in his epistles sets down the officers of the New Testament church, there is no mention of priests at all. He refers to evangelists, elders, pastors and teachers, but not to priests. So if there is no way to God except through God's designated priest, and if there are no earthly priests in the church today, how are men supposed to approach God? The answer is that God has provided a new priesthood, of which the former priesthood was but typical. We thus read in Hebrews 7:12, “The priesthood is changed”. There is now a new priestly order. No longer is it the temporary priesthood of the sons of Aaron, but it is now the eternal priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

“There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus ” (1 Timothy 2:5). So God has decreed that He may only be approached through the priestly mediation of His Son.

“This man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by him ” (Hebrews 7:24-25). The earthly priests served for a while and died, but Christ is the eternal priest through whom today all must approach God in order to be saved.

v41. “But on the morrow all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron, saying, Ye have killed the people of the LORD”. How hard-hearted this people must be that they so quickly forget the lesson of the dreadful events of the previous day, the earth swallowing up Korah, Abiram, Dathan and their households, and fire from heaven devouring the 250 princes. Despite such obvious manifestations of God's anger, the people still persist in their rebellion against God's appointed leaders Moses and Aaron. They even use religious language to justify their rebellion : “Ye have killed the people of the Lord”, they claim, arguing that the death of the rebel princes was the fault of Moses. This shows us that people can witness mighty acts of God, and even be terrified by His control of His creation, but still remain unhumbled and rejecting of God's truth. Such is the hardness of the heart of fallen man. People can engage in outwardly religious forms and ceremonies, and take God's Name onto their lips, but still have no real love for Him in their hearts.

v42. “And it came to pass, when the congregation was gathered against Moses and against Aaron, that they looked toward the tabernacle of the congregation: and, behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD appeared”. The cloud representing God's presence was permanently situated above the tabernacle during the wilderness encampments, but now there is a special manifestation of God's glory,

because in gathering against Moses and Aaron, the people are gathering against God Himself. Even though they have just witnessed an earthquake swallow up the rebel leaders, they carry on in their rejection of the God who has graciously spared them thus far.

v43. “And Moses and Aaron came before the tabernacle of the congregation. v44. And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, v45. Get you up from among this congregation, that I may consume them as in a moment. And they fell upon their faces”. The Lord is now coming down against this people in His holy and righteous anger. He is full of mercy and compassion, but there comes a point where wickedness becomes so unrestrained that justice is more fitting than mercy. With God mercy is never an obligation, but justice always is. Let not the unrepentant think that they can carry on with impunity in their defiance of God, for there will come a day when the door of God’s mercy will be firmly and irreversibly shut. Moses and Aaron now fall on their faces in urgent prayer.

v46. “And Moses said unto Aaron, Take a censer, and put fire therein from off the altar, and put on incense, and go quickly unto the congregation, and make an atonement for them: for there is wrath gone out from the LORD; the plague is begun”. A grave crisis has suddenly developed. The Lord in His perfect justice is already striking down with a sudden-death plague various of the hard-hearted Israelites. Moses tells Aaron, the high priest, to take a censer, fill it with burning coals and to place incense upon the coals. The resulting rising smoke of the incense is the outward sign of the high priest’s cries for mercy ascending to God.

v47. “And Aaron took as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the congregation; and, behold, the plague was begun among the people: and he put on incense, and made an atonement for the people”. Aaron with great courage now runs into the midst of the people who hated him and who were also being struck down by plague. What courage he shows, and what a heart of love he shows. He runs amongst the dying people, carrying a censer of rising incense denoting his prayers of mercy that atonement might be made between sinful man and the holy God. Aaron thus stood before the Lord to plead mercy for the people. In this way he fulfilled the true role of high priest, the only one whom God permitted to stand between unworthy sinners and Himself.

v48. “And he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed”. God heard Aaron’s prayers and held back His anger against the rest of the Israelite camp.

v49. “Now they that died in the plague were fourteen thousand and seven hundred, beside them that died about the matter of Korah. v50. And Aaron returned unto Moses unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation: and the plague was stayed”. These deaths prove the seriousness of this rebellion by the Israelites. God has struck down more on this day than on the day before. Aaron had gone from the glory and security of the Lord’s presence at the tabernacle right in amongst the rebels who despised him in order to save them. In this he shows himself to be Israel’s true priest, and in his actions we see a prophetic foreshadowing of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has descended from His Father’s heavenly throne to this sinful earth to stay the plague of God’s anger against sinful men.

Jesus Christ is the sinner’s great high priest today. Through Him alone can hard-hearted sinners be saved from the judgement which they deserve. He alone can represent men and plead for them before the holy God. He is our true Aaron, our only Mediator, and we need no other priest but Him, *“for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12)*. It is Christ alone who has entered in amongst dying men who are stricken with the plague of sin. He today with the incense of His prayers as the sinner’s representative can hold back the plague of God’s righteous anger. He is in heaven right now as our merciful High Priest pleading on the sinner’s behalf with His heavenly Father. *Wherefore he is able also to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by him” (Hebrews 7:25)*.