

I'd like to tell you a true story that I have taken to heart for my own future.

Not long ago an evangelical pastor retired from his excellent ministry of some 20+ years in a single church.

He had led well, preached from the Bible, and loved the people. People liked him. Now he was retired.

The pastor that followed him had some different ideas about the direction of the church.

It was not long before this pastor had won the leadership of the church to his new vision.

His ideas were not unbiblical, nor ungodly, they just would reshape some of the ministries of the church.

The retired pastor disagreed, and he did not sit by. He returned and led a rebellion against the current pastor.

Any pastor, any person who knows the Bible, ought to know better.

This retired pastor was in the wrong, is no longer ordained, and is instead under discipline until he repents.

In Numbers 16:26 we find the command of Moses to those tempted to join a rebellion against the Lord.

"Depart from the tents of the wicked."

Beware of the rebellious spirit. Beware of the temptation to rebel, and do not join in.

I. People are inclined to rebellion.

Numbers 16:1-3

It is important for us to understand the recent history of these people and their mindset.

And it will then be important to understand how this applies to us today, here... because it does.

The Bible says it does. **1 Corinthians 10:1-12** Verse 10 is a particular reference to Numbers 16.

In this case, "grumbling" means rebellion against God's chosen leader, Moses.

We learn that this means rebellion against God. God doesn't take it sitting down.

There are some understandable reasons that the people of Israel grumble and rebel against Moses.

Understandable, but inexcusable.

This is important for us to see, because our rebellion is often understandable, but inexcusable.

First, these people have been through a lot... a lot of stress, difficulty, adjustments, and disappointments.

And they have indeed seen amazing things from an amazing God. It has been overwhelming. Understandable.

God sent Moses to save them from slavery in Egypt. God did so by sending ten plagues on the Egyptians.

After putting the blood of the lamb on their doors, God spared them from the angel of death.

After getting trapped beside the Red Sea, God parted the waters and led them through.

After complaining about the lack of food and water, God provided for them in the wilderness.

After the Amalekites attacked (Exodus 17), God saved them in battle.

After they saw God's holiness on the mountain, God saved them with sacrifices.

After they worshipped the golden calf that they made, God killed many of them and forgave the rest.

After repeated grumbings, God has become increasingly frustrated with them.

After Miriam and Aaron led a rebellion against Moses, God gave Miriam leprosy.

After they refused to trust God my taking the promised land, God forgave them, but sentenced them to 40 years.

In the previous chapter, after a man was discovered breaking the Sabbath, he was stoned to death.

You might imagine the nature of the grumbling:

That Moses, he thinks way too much of himself. He doesn't understand our struggles.

He doesn't listen to us and what we want. We don't get a vote. Moses is too harsh.

Why doesn't Moses speak better of us to the Lord? Does Moses think he's the only one who knows God?

You see, you and I can understand this because we are human beings.

And human beings are inclined to rebellion.

We have been for at least 6,000 years, since Adam and Eve rebelled against God.

In fact, in these modern times, we have made rebellion a good word.

We live in a nation that was founded in rebellion against England.

We love the rebel. We make movies about him, or her. We want to be called "rebels."

We use the word "rebel" as an excuse to do what we want and get what we want.

And in our desire to rebel, we usually make fools of ourselves. Rebellion rarely ends well.

The events we read of here in Numbers 16 take place sometime in the 38 years Israel wanders near Kadesh. Korah comes along and takes advantage of the disgruntledness of the people. Korah has authority. He is a Levitical Priest. And he is joined by others who have influence. Korah knows just what to say. And the people listen, because it is exactly what they want to hear. Korah is a great politician. He has but one problem. God. God hears his words, sees his actions, and knows his motives. You can fool people. You cannot fool God.

Now, I want to qualify what we read in this chapter with an important consideration. These people here rebel against Moses, a leader appointed by God and walking with God. If a leader is living opposed to God and promoting ungodly actions, the situation is entirely different. But, even then, the godly response is usually not rebellion. Consider those who were in such situations: David fled from the ungodly King Saul and was careful not to oppose him. Elijah was hunted by Jezebel, but he led no rebellion. He just fulfilled his prophetic responsibility. Esther served a king who ordered the execution of the Jews, but God used her to change that king's heart. Daniel served under insane and idolatrous kings, but he was used as a witness, not a rebel leader. Jesus lived under the unjust rule of Jews and Romans, but was careful to avoid any appearance of rebellion. This was also true of all His disciples that we read of in the Bible. We think that the answer to injustice is rebellion. Under God, the response to injustice is prayer, witnessing, endurance, and courage. It may be that action is required, but we must be sure that we are following the leading of the Lord. Therefore, beware of the sinful enticement that rebellion usually offers. God hates a rebel, especially the person who rebels against Him or His leaders.

What is the nature of Korah's rebellion? What is his heretical message? It is a half-truth. This is the mark of every false teacher in the church. He emphasizes one truth to the exclusion of another. Beware teachers who do this, who do not teach the whole counsel of God. The truth is this, vs. 3: "For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them." True enough. The Lord has been trying to teach them this. Moses has been teaching this. The truth he excludes is in this, vs. 3: "Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" Why indeed? It is because the Lord has chosen Moses to lead them. Moses has not exalted himself. God has ordained him to speak for God. And, so, now Moses must do his job again. I imagine that this was unpleasant for him. But it is his job.

II. God's chosen leader responds.

Numbers 16:4-11

The nature of Moses' response is not argument. He does not engage in a debate over who is right or wrong. He simply challenges them all to appear before the Lord with him and see how God will decide. I am amazed, after all that these people have seen, that they think this might go well for them. Although it may have been a long time, possibly more than 30 years. People forget. Moses is old.

Moses' response has two parts:

- Part 1: The Lord will show who is his. In the morning come with your priestly incense and we will see. Notice, in verse 7, that Moses uses the irony of their own words to rebuke them, "you have gone too far..." (as they began in verse 3)
- Part 2: Why are you not content with service in the priesthood? And those of you who are not priests, why are you not content to be God's people? And why are you grumbling about Aaron? You do realize that your dispute is really with God? What these rebels do not see, that Moses sees clearly, is that the Lord Almighty has chosen him to lead.

III. Others join in the rebellion.

Numbers 16:12-14

They join in now by refusing to show up for the judgment of the Lord. Notice the arrogance in their response. We're not going to let you "lord it over us." We are not going to participate in your charade. You haven't done anything that you said you would. We won't play now.

IV. God's chosen leader responds.

Numbers 16:15-19

Now, Moses responds again, this time to God. Moses is upset and at his wits end.

This is probably because they are disparaging the faithfulness of God in their complaint.

In fact, the reason that they have not received the promises is because of their own unfaithfulness.

God has done what He has said He would.

They have not done what they said they would.

And, as Moses points out to the Lord, he has not gained anything for himself in the role that God appointed him.

So Moses prays.

I love Moses. I wanted to name my fourth kid Moses. We named her Katherine. Not sad about that.

When Moses doesn't know what to do, he prays. He cries out to God. He brings his complaints to God.

We all ought to be this way.

And the buck stops there. I complain to God. Then I'm done. I don't need to complain to people.

Then Moses talks to Korah again, "You'd better be there in the morning."

And the next morning, there they are.

Read the words at the end of verse 19, "And the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation."

At this point I imagine that the rebellion began to fall apart.

As soon as people realize that the Lord is real and really there, the wise ones cease their rebellion.

But then, rebels are often not incredibly wise to begin with. More is needed.

In Jude we are warned against following people like Korah, false teachers, leaders who encourage strife.

Jude 1:8-13 Beware people who seek to undermine the truth and God's appointed leaders.

Nearly every book in the New Testament warns about people like this. **Titus 3:9-11**

V. The Lord responds.

Numbers 16:20-35

So the ground opens up and has them for lunch, and fire consumes the rest of the leaders of the rebellion.

Notice that what happens is exactly what Moses predicts in verse 28-30.

The fear of the Lord again returns to the people of God.

The Lord shows His people similar lessons today.

He destroys the false leaders, sometimes right away, more often it takes a while.

The judgment of God shows up in their ministry, their families, their lack of character.

But the important lesson is this: You do not want to go down that road with them.

VI. Why is it important to follow godly leaders?

Professor of Old Testament and missionary Ian Duguid writes about this passage,

"Distrust of those who are in charge is a widespread phenomenon. It is easy to stir up dissention against those in authority, especially when life is difficult and progress is slow..."

There are indeed times when a change in personnel or the system is justified. Many such revolts, however, are generated by the wrong motivations and aimed at the wrong targets."

I have found that the perfect illustration of this very human dynamic is coaching.

Over and over again I have heard parents complaining about coaches and wanting them fired.

Why? Is it because the coaches are swearing? Being abusive? A bad example to the kids?

No. It is because the coach is not playing my kid, or is not winning games.

This is the way that the world works.

I think of the words of Jesus to His disciples on leadership, "Not so with you." Live differently. **James 5:9-10**

According to Jesus, the best training for a leader is learning to be a good follower. Peter learned. **1 Peter 5:5-6**

And leaders are to follow Jesus by living like Jesus. **1 Peter 2:21-24**

I think of the last words of the Apostle Paul to the leaders of the church of Ephesus. **Acts 20:27-30**

Beware of those who teach false doctrine and who cause dissensions.

What does it look like to be a good follower, of Jesus, and of the leaders He provides? **Hebrews 13:7, 17**

Worldly people are not going to appreciate this or understand it. But we are living for God.