

Showdown in the Wilderness

Numbers 16

One of the things you will probably encounter at some time in your life will be people with some kind of assumption or worldview of universal salvation. (Picture) It's an idea that can take on many forms. Some will say that God is a God of love and therefore won't condemn people to hell. Others will say that people are basically good and don't deserve condemnation, except for a few who are really, really bad. Others may say that we all worship the same God, we just take different paths to get to him – Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism – whatever you are doesn't matter, as long as you believe in something. And there are other forms as well. But the idea is the same – we're all going to get to God or heaven.

But if you're a Christian who believes what the Bible says is true, you can't agree with that. The Bible says that there is only one way and that is through faith in Jesus Christ. And if you believe that and talk about it, you're eventually going to face people who question, challenge, and despise that idea. The Christian gospel is very exclusive – there's no way of getting around that. Jesus himself said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." The Bible is clear: Jesus is the only way. Christianity is the only right religion. That's what we believe.

And a lot of people don't like that. They think it sounds prideful, arrogant and exclusive. "Who do you think you are to think you're right and everyone else is wrong? That only Christians will be saved? You think because you were born in the right place and stumbled into the right religion, you're better than everyone else?"

How do you answer that kind of challenge? And how do you answer those questions for others or for yourself? Is there only one way to God and salvation? Do you know why Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me"? Today we're going to read a powerful story in the book of Numbers that has all kinds of parallels to these things and can help us see why we believe what we believe, and why there has always, only been one way to God.

So far in this series we've seen that the people of Israel made it to the Promised Land and were on the verge of going in to take possession of it. God promised them victory and success and that he would go before them to drive out the wicked inhabitants. He had proven himself over and over. But they rebelled.

In my last sermon we saw how faithless leaders used manipulation and fear to lead the people into rebellion. So God came and pronounced judgment: for every day the spies were in the land there would be one year of wandering in the desert – 40 years – until all the faithless, rebellious Israelites 20 years old and older died. Only two men would go in – Joshua and Caleb – because they had remained faithful to the Lord. That's where we left off.

As you keep reading you see that after hearing God's judgment, the people actually revolted again and tried to force their way into the Promised Land but they were defeated and humiliated – driven back by the Amalekites and Canaanites. And that began the 40 years of wandering. Not much is written about that time. Only 5 chapters and not many details. I don't get the impression that the people were on the move all the time, it's more like they were just out there in no man's land. They couldn't get to where they were going and there was no possible way to go anywhere else. God provided their food and water right there and if they tried to go anywhere else they would die.

So they camped and settled in the wilderness south of Kadesh. Numbers 15-19 cover that time and most of those chapters contain laws for when they would eventually go in and take possession of Canaan. But chapter 16 has a powerful story of another rebellion that happened. And that's what we're going to look at today.

Numbers 16:1-3

Now Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and Dathan (Dothon) and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men. ² And they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. ³ They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all in the

congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?"

So there were 4 primary leaders in this uprising. The first was Korah, who was a Levite, and then three others from the tribe of Rueben: Dathan, Abiram, and On. It's important to note that Korah's clan of Levites were camped near the tabernacle and near the tribe of Rueben, which probably contributed to this conspiracy and also becomes significant later on when we see God's judgment.

Korah seems to be the ringleader and probably the one making the accusation in these verses. And he along with the others had stirred up a large group of people to join them – 250 chiefs. They were essentially planning to overthrow Moses and Aaron and take over the leadership for themselves.

From what we see here, Korah is accusing Moses and Aaron of wrongfully exalting themselves above everyone else in their offices before the Lord. Moses was the overall leader of Israel and Aaron was the high priest, and they each had exclusive authority and privileges in their ministry before God and in the tabernacle that everyone else was forbidden from doing. They alone could appear before the presence of God had authority over the whole community. And Korah claimed that it was fabricated, and they had exalted themselves. He claimed that all the people in the congregation were holy and that the Lord was among them and therefore the positions of authority that Moses and Aaron held were unnecessary and for their own personal gain.

By doing this, he was denying that God had chosen and appointed Moses and Aaron to their positions. He was denying that God had given all the rules about the chief priest and his ministry and the tabernacle and the sacrifices. He was nullifying all those things, saying they were fabricated and unnecessary, and that all the people were holy and God was among all of them.

It was an ancient form of universalism, at least among the Israelites. "We don't need a Mediator. We don't need a high priest. We don't need the veils of separation in the tabernacle and Holy of Holies. We are all holy and God is already among us." Not that much different than those in our day and age that

claim God is a God of love and deny the exclusive need for Jesus or believe that people are generally good and don't really need salvation.

Let's see what Moses and God think about these things...

Numbers 16:4-11

⁴When Moses heard it, he fell on his face, ⁵and he said to Korah and all his company, "In the morning the Lord will show who is his, and who is holy, and will bring him near to him. The one whom he chooses he will bring near to him. ⁶Do this: take censers, Korah and all his company; ⁷put fire in them and put incense on them before the Lord tomorrow, and the man whom the Lord chooses shall be the holy one. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!" ⁸And Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi: ⁹is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself, to do service in the tabernacle of the Lord and to stand before the congregation to minister to them, ¹⁰and that he has brought you near him, and all your brothers the sons of Levi with you? And would you seek the priesthood also? ¹¹Therefore it is against the Lord that you and all your company have gathered together. What is Aaron that you grumble against him?"

So Moses is confounded with these accusations and he concedes to go along with Korah's idiotic claims that all the people are holy and God is among them (and therefore Moses and Aaron are a scam). He essentially says, "You think you're holy and can minister before God in his tabernacle as priests? OK. Come back tomorrow and bring your censers and act like priests. We'll stand before God together at the tabernacle and let him show us who his priests are."

Moses knew what was going to happen, but these guys had gone too far – they crossed the line and he was giving them over to the consequences of their foolishness and rebellion against God.

Korah's accusations were already bad enough, but it didn't end there. Now we see the defiance and rebellion of two of the other guys.

Numbers 16:12-15

¹² And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and they said, “We will not come up. ¹³ Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also make yourself a prince over us? ¹⁴ Moreover, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up.” ¹⁵ And Moses was very angry and said to the Lord, “Do not respect their offering. I have not taken one donkey from them, and I have not harmed one of them.”

So when Moses called them to appear before the Lord at the tabernacle, they refused to go, saying that he had already tried to kill them by bringing them out of Egypt into the wilderness and now he was going to try to make himself prince (or king) over them. They accused him of lying to lure them away from Egypt and now he wanted them to gather at the tabernacle so that he would punish them by putting out their eyes.

So Korah would defy Moses’ leadership by showing up at the tabernacle and Dathan and Abiram would defy him by not showing up: “You can’t tell us what to do anymore.” Keep in mind that these guys were camped not too far from the tabernacle.

So now Moses goes back to Korah...

Numbers 16:16-19

¹⁶ And Moses said to Korah, “Be present, you and all your company, before the Lord, you and they, and Aaron, tomorrow. ¹⁷ And let every one of you take his censer and put incense on it, and every one of you bring before the Lord his censer, 250 censers; you also, and Aaron, each his censer.” ¹⁸ So every man took his censer and put fire in them and laid incense on them and stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron. ¹⁹ Then Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation.

It doesn’t get more intense than this. It’s a showdown in the wilderness and either Moses and Aaron are going to walk away or Korah and the others.

Everybody was gathered, and the glory of the Lord appeared and now we'll see what happened.

Numbers 16:20-24

²⁰ And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, ²¹ "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment." (That's what happens if you stand before God and don't have a Mediator and High Priest.) ²² And they fell on their faces and said, "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and will you be angry with all the congregation?" ²³ And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²⁴ "Say to the congregation, Get away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram."

So Moses interceded on behalf of the people who had not joined the rebellion, and God listened and told them to get away from those who had rebelled. So I'm picturing Korah with the 250 chiefs before the tabernacle, and then, in the nearby camp were the rest of their people. And then a little further out were Dathan and Abiram and their people who had rebelled and refused to go up. And Moses is going around, warning everyone else to get away from them. People would have to either choose to join the rebellion, or trust Moses and remain with him.

Numbers 16:25-35

²⁵ Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. ²⁶ And he spoke to the congregation, saying, "Depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins." ²⁷ So they got away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. And Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, together with their wives, their sons, and their little ones. ²⁸ And Moses said, "Hereby you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, and that it has not been of my own accord. ²⁹ If these men die as all men die, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then the Lord has not sent me. ³⁰ But if the Lord creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord." ³¹ And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. ³² And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their

goods. ³³ So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. ³⁴ And all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up!" ³⁵ And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men offering the incense.

Wow. This is a powerful story, with a powerful message, and terrible consequences for anyone who rejects it. This story shows us that the purity and power of God's holiness is dangerous and deadly to us because of our sin, and if you reject God's chosen Mediator, and High Priest, and Intercessor, and his gift of protection and salvation that he offers through him, you will utterly perish when you come before God in his holiness and glory.

Jesus is God's chosen Mediator, and High Priest, and Intercessor for us. He is the only way to have protection and salvation before God because of our sins. We are not holy or able to dwell in the presence of God without Jesus. So if we reject Jesus we will be consumed.

The whole book of Hebrews talks about this and the author pleads with them to not do what the rebellious Israelites did. Jesus is the only way. Not Buddha or Muhammad or anyone else. They are like Korah and Dathan and Abiram and anyone who chooses them and not Christ will be consumed. They do absolutely nothing to remove the penalty and punishment for our sins so that we can stand before a holy God. ONLY JESUS.

Hebrews 10:19-31 says this: *"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. ²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of*

judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ *Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses.* ²⁹ *How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?* ³⁰ *For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.”* ³¹ *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”*

But that’s exactly what you do if you reject Jesus or choose to go any other way than Jesus. Only Jesus did what was necessary in his life, death, and resurrection for us to be forgiven, reconciled, made holy, and able to draw near to God. He is our Mediator, High Priest, Intercessor, Savior, Lord, and Life. He is the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through him. He is the only one who takes away our sin so we can survive and rejoice in the presence of a holy God.

So don’t be ashamed of what you believe, even if people shame you for being exclusive. You didn’t make up your beliefs, God did and he chose one way and only one way for us to receive salvation from our sins – Jesus Christ.

Believe it, rejoice in it, keep telling people about it, and invite them to it. And if you’ve been on the fence and have never surrendered to Jesus and put your faith in him, receive him today, and all he is for you! Put your faith in him!