



## Numbers - Chapter Sixteen

### III Numbers 13:1-19:22 - Forty Years Near Kadesh (continues)

#### Summary of Chapter Sixteen

This story heads a section concerned with demonstrating the privileges and mediatorial role of the priesthood. It begins with Korah overemphasising one truth to the exclusion of others, which is what heretics and founders of cults commonly do. He claims that since all in the congregation are holy all have equal access to God. As a result, he and his followers demand that they should have all the privileges of priests, to enter God's presence in the tabernacle itself. However, God judged them swiftly, and the final episode ends with all the people crying out in fear. They have learned that only the priests may approach the tabernacle, and this protects the rest of the nation from death.

#### III.c Numbers 16:1-50 - Revolt of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram

Refer to the chapter summary above.

#### III.c.i Numbers 16:1-14 - The Complaints of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram

After the leaders of the revolt are introduced (vv.1-2), Korah targets his complaint against Aaron's high priesthood (vv.3-11), and then the scene switches to Dathan and Abiram, who grumble about leaving the comforts of Egypt for death in the wilderness (vv.12-14).

<sup>1</sup> Now Korah son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth – descendants of Reuben – took <sup>2</sup> two hundred and fifty Israelite men, leaders of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men, and they confronted Moses. <sup>3</sup> They assembled against Moses and against Aaron,

and said to them, ‘You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?’

### Numbers 16:1-3

Korah was a Levite, but not a priest, from the Kohathite clan. They camped near the tribe of Reuben (2:10-11 and 3:29), from which the other leaders Dathan, Abiram, and On came. This could explain their collaboration. On is not mentioned later in the story. This rebellion, like all, had a leader and followers, all of whom would perish: <<*Woe to them! For they go the way of Cain, and abandon themselves to Balaam’s error for the sake of gain, and perish in Korah’s rebellion*>> (Jude 11).

The Kohathites had the most exalted duty among the Levites; their charge was to carry the most holy things of the temple, after Aaron and his sons had covered them with the specially prepared coverings (Numbers 4:15). The name Korah means baldness.

You have gone too far! Korah was not content with what the Lord had called him to do in serving with the other Levites of the family of Kohath. He accused Moses of pride and exclusionary leadership. It was significant this accusation was made publicly, in front of two hundred and fifty Israelite men, leaders of the congregation. Men like Korah are always playing to an audience, always trying to draw a following after themselves, after Moses has already gathered the nation and led them this far, of course! This was a clever attack. Korah acted as if he represented the people and fought for their interests. The truth was that he desired a following and a position for himself. On a human level, Korah was successful because so many people followed him. History is full of such leaders but it is only those whom God chooses that will have eternal success.

The claim that all the congregation are holy could be based on the repeated call in the law to be holy, e.g. Leviticus 11:45 and 19:2, and Numbers 15:40. However, this ethical holiness is not identical with priestly holiness, which confers the right to approach God in the offering of sacrifice and incense.

So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord? Korah accused Moses and Aaron of pride and self-seeking. The truth was that Moses had not aspired to his position, that God had indeed called him, and Moses did not in fact see himself as above the congregation. When the Kohathites claim that Moses and Aaron exalt themselves, they show that they have missed the point, not understanding that the priesthood is a matter of God’s own appointment: <<*And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was*>> (Hebrews 5:4).

<sup>4</sup> When Moses heard it, he fell on his face. <sup>5</sup> Then he said to Korah and all his company, ‘In the morning the Lord will make known who is his, and who is holy, and who will be allowed to approach him; the one whom he will choose he will allow to approach him. <sup>6</sup> Do this: take censers, Korah and all your company, <sup>7</sup> and tomorrow put fire in them, and lay incense on them before the Lord; and the man whom the Lord chooses shall be the holy one. You Levites have gone too far!’ <sup>8</sup> Then Moses said to Korah, ‘Hear now, you Levites! <sup>9</sup> Is it too little for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to allow you to approach him in order to perform the duties of the Lord’s tabernacle, and to stand before the congregation and serve them? <sup>10</sup> He has allowed you to approach him, and all your brother Levites with you; yet you seek the priesthood as well! <sup>11</sup> Therefore you and all your company have gathered together against the Lord. What is Aaron that you rail against him?’

#### Numbers 16:4-11

When Moses heard it, he fell on his face. Moses first prayed. Being a humble man, he probably asked God if his critics were right or had something to teach him. He probably asked God what should be done in this situation. He certainly asked God to spare the nation and he asked God to not allow these divisive men to bring permanent harm to the people of God.

Then he said to Korah and all his company. It is not known how long Moses prayed for, but after prayer he had a sense of God’s direction for this crisis. He issued a challenge whereby Korah and his followers would come before the Lord, and Moses and Aaron would also come, so that the Lord would choose his leaders: *<<Their prince shall be one of their own, their ruler shall come from their midst; I will bring him near, and he shall approach me, for who would otherwise dare to approach me? says the Lord>>* (Jeremiah 30:21).

You Levites have gone too far! This shows that Moses did not doubt the outcome of the test. He knew that God would prove him right and Korah wrong. Therefore, Moses was unafraid to put it to the test. The Levites already enjoy great privileges in serving in the tabernacle, so they should not seek the priesthood as well.

Is it too little for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel. Moses knew that the rebellion of Korah was rooted in ingratitude. They were not thankful for the wonderful ministry God gave them to do. He rebuked the pride and self-seeking that prompted their challenge. Even if Korah was right, this was the wrong way to approach the problem. A power play like this was the wrong way to remove a leader like Moses. The methods of Korah,

i.e. his use of accusation, intimidation, and the gathering of a rival following, revealed his rebellious, divisive heart.

<sup>12</sup> Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab; but they said, ‘We will not come! <sup>13</sup> Is it too little 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 lord it over us? <sup>14</sup> It is clear you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Would you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come!’

### Numbers 16:12-14

Dathan and Abiram were co-conspirators with Korah (v.1). They would not even meet with Moses, nor answer his challenge. They chose to accuse Moses instead and paid the price: <<*The earth opened and swallowed up Dathan, and covered the faction of Abiram*>> (Psalm 106:17).

You have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey. This shows that Dathan and Abiram coloured the past. They thought of Egypt as a land of milk and honey, even for the Hebrew slaves. Rebels and divisive people commonly create a past of their own preference, a past that puts leaders like Moses in the worst possible light.

This shows that Dathan and Abiram had unfair expectation of Moses. It was true that Moses had not yet brought them to the Promised Land, and it was true that some of the blame must lay at the feet of Moses because he agreed to the demand of the people to send spies into the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 1:19-23). Yet, it is wrong to wholly blame Moses for this, or to think that Korah could have done any better. It is unbelievably easy for the Korahs of this world to sit back and say, “If I was leading the nation at Kadesh Barnea, I would have done things differently.” But Korah was not leading the nation, and men of his type rarely do. God rarely puts the backseat drivers in positions of real leadership, except as a chastisement, to show them just how difficult leadership really is, and that perfect leadership, like perfect anything, is impossible except through Jesus: <<*Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong*>> (2 Corinthians 12:8-10), and: <<*For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified*>> (Hebrews 10:14).

The Reubenite complaint is somewhat different from Korah's. The Reubenites object to dying in the wilderness instead of in Canaan or Egypt. This is rebellion against God's will and purpose akin to that provoked by the spies, who died of a plague (14:37). The complainers here will perish in even more spectacular fashion.

That you must also lord it over us? This shows that Dathan and Abiram refused to acknowledge growth in Moses. It was true that Moses was at one time a prince, a self-confident man who thought he could deliver and lead Israel in his own strength. God broke him of that with forty years of leading another man's flock in the wilderness. Yet Dathan and Abiram threw it back in his face, as if God had never dealt with Moses in these areas.

Would you put out the eyes of these men? In their culture, deliberately blinding someone was seen as degrading the person, as it was later on as well: <<***But Nahash the Ammonite said to them, 'On this condition I will make a treaty with you, namely that I gouge out everyone's right eye, and thus put disgrace upon all Israel'***>> (1 Samuel 11:2), and: <<***He put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him in fetters to take him to Babylon***>> (Jeremiah 39:7). Perhaps Dathan and Abiram did not speak for all of the two hundred and fifty leaders, representatives, and men of renown. Yet none of those two hundred and fifty men were heard to raise an opposing voice to their harsh accusations. Some of the two hundred and fifty thought that maybe Dathan and Abiram were going a little far; but they did not have the courage to speak up. They were wrong because they allowed Moses be accused this way with no one to defend him. It was easy for them to stand back and say, "Well, I won't take sides. I can be friends to both groups." But here and in many subsequent conflicts, silence is taken as agreement. If a godly man or woman, especially a leader, is being falsely accused, and nothing is said, that person has sinned: <<***When any of you sin in that you have heard a public adjuration to testify and – though able to testify as one who has seen or learned of the matter – do not speak up, you are subject to punishment***>> (Leviticus 5:1), because their silence is received as agreement.

We will not come is repeated and shows that Dathan and Abiram considered themselves under no authority. It said, loud and clear: "Moses, we have no respect for your authority. We will listen to God, but not to you. Your word means nothing to us." They simply would not submit.

### III.c.ii Numbers 16:15-19a - The Death of the Kohathite Supporters of Korah I

Moses responds to their challenge in anger and calls them to attend before the Tent of Meeting the following day for the Lord to rule on the issue.

<sup>15</sup> Moses was very angry and said to the Lord, 'Pay no attention to their offering. I have not taken one donkey from them, and I have not

harmed any one of them.’<sup>16</sup> And Moses said to Korah, ‘As for you and all your company, be present tomorrow before the Lord, you and they and Aaron;<sup>17</sup> and let each one of you take his censer, and put incense on it, and each one of you present his censer before the Lord, two hundred and fifty censers; you also, and Aaron, each his censer.’<sup>18</sup> So each man took his censer, and they put fire in the censers and laid incense on them, and they stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron.<sup>19a</sup> Then Korah assembled the whole congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

### Numbers 16:15-19a

Moses was very angry and said to the Lord. After the words of Dathan and Abiram, Moses was angry, very angry. He knew he has done nothing to deserve such an accusation, and he did the right thing, he left the situation to God. Remember that Moses was, after all, a man of political power; it was certainly within his capability to have Korah and his followers, like Dathan and Abiram, arrested and/or executed. Instead, he left the situation to God. Sometimes people are offended that a man like Moses was angry with men like Dathan and Abiram. They think a gentle, easy love is the proper response. Such thinking is understandable, but wrong. Shepherds are gentle with wayward sheep that might injure themselves, but they are passionate against wolves that would injure the flock.

I have not taken one donkey from them, and I have not harmed any one of them. This shows that Moses was a man of integrity and service to the people. Moses could rest in his clean conscience before God. This is reminiscent of Paul’s testimony before the Ephesian elders: <<*Therefore I declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. I coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive”*>> (Acts 20:26-35).

When a leader is troubled by rebellious and divisive people, there is something glorious about a clear conscience but remembering also the words of Paul: <<**My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me**>> (1 Corinthians 4:4 NIV).

**Let each one of you take his censer, and put incense on it, and each one of you present his censer before the Lord.** This specified the challenge. God would approve or disapprove of these two hundred and fifty men gathered with censers of incense before the door of the tabernacle. God used the censers with fire and incense in this test for a good reason. A censer is a metal pot used to burn incense, and they were used in the priestly worship of God. Since Korah and his companions questioned Moses and Aaron's right to lead the nation and conduct the priesthood, each group would come to the Lord as worshipping priests, and God would show which group he accepted. Moses made the rebels take the position they desired, the position of priest. Often the best judgement on the divisive and rebellious is to let them lead. Humanly speaking, the odds were not good. It was Moses and Aaron who stood alone against the entire congregation. Yet it was God who would make this choice, and not popular opinion.

### III.c.iii **Numbers 16:19b-35 - The Death of the Ringleaders and their Families**

God instructs Moses and Aaron to separate themselves and the rest of the congregation from the sinners and their families in order that they may be spared his righteous judgement on those who have called Moses leadership into question. The ground then opens to swallow up Korah, his family and supporters, and all their possessions, bringing to an end this uprising against Moses.

<sup>19b</sup> And the glory of the Lord appeared to the whole congregation.  
<sup>20</sup> Then the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying: <sup>21</sup> Separate yourselves from this congregation, so that I may consume them in a moment.

#### **Numbers 16:19b-21**

**And the glory of the Lord appeared to the whole congregation.** God was not just showing himself to Moses with further instructions; he was letting the whole of Israel know his decision firsthand.

**Separate yourselves from this congregation.** It is as if God said, "Moses and Aaron, will you please move away? I'm going to destroy all these rebels in an instant, and I don't want you to get hurt."

**So that I may consume them in a moment.** God decided to make his choice immediately evident. Sometimes this is not the case when God deals with modern Korahs and their followers.

<sup>22</sup> They fell on their faces, and said, ‘O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation?’

### Numbers 16:22

They fell on their faces. This was true devotion from Moses and Aaron for God and a demonstration of love for the people. Undoubtedly, one of God’s reasons for allowing such a painful event in the life of Moses was that God wanted to see this kind love drawn out of Moses. Perhaps it was only the prayer of Moses and Aaron that can spare the lives of these men who have tried to bring them down. Such love for the undeserving shows that Moses and Aaron were growing in love, and being transformed into the image of Jesus, before Jesus ever walked the earth. Again, the importance of prayer is emphasised. It seems as if there were no prayer, then the rebellious congregation would be destroyed. It is clear that Moses’ prayer was essential.

Shall one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation? Moses and Aaron realised the danger posed to all the people through the acts of a few, just as Abraham had once foreseen: <<***Then Abraham came near and said, ‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?’***>> (Genesis 18:23). Although many were involved, more perhaps than two hundred and fifty followers, one man was at the centre of it all, Korah. His sin, his drawing of a group after himself, was the cause of all this mess. This does not make the followers innocent in the sight of God, but Moses wants God to be merciful towards those who were being misled by the ringleaders: <<***Let their own eyes see their destruction, and let them drink of the wrath of the Almighty***>> (Job 21:20).

<sup>23</sup> And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>24</sup> Say to the congregation: Get away from the dwellings of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. <sup>25</sup> So Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram; the elders of Israel followed him. <sup>26</sup> He said to the congregation, ‘Turn away from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, or you will be swept away for all their sins.’ <sup>27</sup> So they got away from the dwellings of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; and Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the entrance of their tents, together with their wives, their children, and their little ones. <sup>28</sup> And Moses said, ‘This is how you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works; it has not been of my own accord: <sup>29</sup> If these people die a natural death, or if a natural fate comes on them, then the Lord has not sent me. <sup>30</sup> 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.’

### Numbers 16:23-30

Get away from the dwellings of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. This ominous warning builds suspense among the entire people of Israel, and especially among these three men and their families. God is preparing to punish them and affirm the leadership of Moses in a dramatic, public way.

The elders of Israel followed him. This was glorious. God had appointed elders back in Numbers 10:16-30 in response to another attack on Moses’ leadership. There, the elders were to be men with the same spirit and vision as Moses, men to help him bear the burden, men to stand with Moses. Here they did exactly what God appointed them to do.

Or you will be swept away for all their sins. Moses, in response to God’s command to get away from the tents of the leaders of the rebellion, i.e. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, pleads with the people to separate themselves from the divisive people. The same attitude should be among God’s people today. They should stay away from divisive, argumentative, contentious people in the body of Christ. Those not involved in the contention do not want to be close to those who are should God deal with them. A divisive, contentious man will influence bystanders, and they do not want to be consumed in the sins of others.

**The NT also speaks along this same principle:** *<<I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offences, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them. For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded>> (Romans 16:17-18), and: <<After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions, since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned>> (Titus 3:10-11). It should be remembered that a divisive, contentious person will never claim to be divisive and contentious; they always consider their work a noble cause. Therefore, Christians need some discernment and to look at what others do, not only at what they say: <<Your servant thought, “The word of my lord the king will set me at rest”; for my lord the king is like the angel of God, discerning good and evil. The Lord your God be with you!>> (2 Samuel 14:17), <<Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?>> (1 Kings 3:9), and: <<Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect>> (Romans 12:2).*

Then you shall know. God gave Moses supernatural insight to know some special judgement, i.e. something new, was going to come upon Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. The earth would swallow them up, as evidence that these men have despised the Lord.

<sup>31</sup> As soon as he finished speaking all these words, the ground under them was split apart. <sup>32</sup> The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, along with their households – everyone who belonged to Korah and all their goods. <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> All Israel around them fled at their outcry, for they said, ‘The earth will swallow us too!’ <sup>35</sup> And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense.

#### Numbers 16:31-35

The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up. God executes swift judgement on those who thought they could assume the privileges of priesthood for themselves. This was just the way Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were destroyed, along with their families. Many Christians are uneasy seeing the families destroyed also, but it clearly shows that the families of the rebellious, divisive, contentious people suffer also, often greatly.

Sheol is the place of the dead, often pictured as being under the earth; examples can be found in Genesis 37:35, Psalm 6:5 and 9:17, and Isaiah 14:9-20.

The earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. The judgement from God was swift and absolute. The form in which the judgement occurred also may have given a symbolic hint of their future condition, away from the presence of the Lord.

And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense. God brings swift judgement, showing that no one should presume to come before his presence without God’s own authorisation, which has been given to believers under the new covenant: <<***Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach 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***>> (Hebrews 10:19-22). For a similar judgement on the unauthorised offering of incense refer to Leviticus 10:1-3.

III.c.iv Numbers 16:36-40 -  
The Death of the Kohathite Supporters of Korah II

Even though they had offered unauthorised fire to God, the implements they used became holy because it was offered. Therefore, God instructs Moses to have Eleazar the priest to hammer out the bronze censers, making them a part of the holy altar on which the sacrifices were offered.

<sup>36</sup> Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>37</sup> Tell Eleazar son of Aaron the priest to take the censers out of the blaze; then scatter the fire far and wide. <sup>38</sup> For the censers of these sinners have become holy at the cost of their lives. Make them into hammered plates as a covering for the altar, for they presented them before the Lord and they became holy. Thus they shall be a sign to the Israelites. <sup>39</sup> So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers that had been presented by those who were burned; and they were hammered out as a covering for the altar — <sup>40</sup> a reminder to the Israelites that no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, shall approach to offer incense before the Lord, so as not to become like Korah and his company — just as the Lord had said to him through Moses.

Numbers 16:36-40

Then scatter the fire far and wide. The fire was not holy and was to be scattered away. It was a strange fire, not acceptable to the Lord at all.

A covering for the altar is mentioned in Exodus 38:2. This new one may have replaced the old one but was more likely incorporated into it. It served as a reminder that no outsider shall approach to offer incense before the Lord.

Thus they shall be a sign to the Israelites. Each time the people came to give an offering, the bronze cover would remind them of the unrighteous acts of Korah and his followers: <<*This shall be the sign to you, says the Lord, that I am going to punish you in this place, in order that you may know that my words against you will surely be carried out*>> (Jeremiah 44:29).

If Christians today encounter ungodly, divisive leadership they should do what the two hundred and fifty followers of Korah did not do. The right thing to do is to, if possible, remove themselves from such leaders without becoming rebellious and divisive. If it is not possible, leave it up to God to deal with it, just as David allowed God to deal with Saul instead of taking matters into his own hands.

In the Hebrew edition of the OT v.36 marks the beginning of Chapter 17.

### III.c.v Numbers 16:41-50 - Judgement Averted by Aaron

If the previous episode showed that non-priests offering incense provoked divine judgement, then this one shows that priests are indeed appointed to minister atonement. The plague provoked by the protest of the entire congregation was stopped by Aaron holding a censer and standing between the dead and the living.

<sup>41</sup> On the next day, however, the whole congregation of the Israelites rebelled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, 'You have killed the people of the Lord.'

#### Numbers 16:41

On the next day, however, the whole congregation of the Israelites rebelled against Moses and against Aaron. Poor Moses! He no doubt hoped that all the trouble was over when the rebels were judged. But now he had to deal with those who were sympathetic to the divisive people and who felt sorry for them.

**The word translated rebelled here is also translated as murmured. It should be noted that murmurs and quiet dissent in church could easily constitute rebellion, not against the leaders, but against God!**

You have killed the people of the Lord. Their accusation against Moses was absurd. Moses certainly did not kill them. When the earth opened up and swallowed more than two hundred and fifty people, it is evidently the hand of God, not of Moses. Not only that, but Moses had prayed for mercy to be shown to those who had sinned. They should have joined Moses in praising God for withholding righteous judgement on the whole congregation and thanking him for removing the rebellious from amongst their ranks.

<sup>42</sup> And when the congregation had assembled against them, Moses and Aaron turned towards the tent of meeting; the cloud had covered it and the glory of the Lord appeared. <sup>43</sup> Then Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, <sup>44</sup> and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>45</sup> 'Get away from this congregation, so that I may consume them in a moment.' And they fell on their faces.

#### Numbers 16:42-45

Get away from this congregation, so that I may consume them in a moment. God reacted the same way towards the sympathisers as he did towards Korah and his company. Evidently, these people deserve to be judged.

And they fell on their faces. This humble, desperate reaction showed that they took the threat of judgement seriously. They understood that it was no small thing

to sympathise with a divisive, contentious person. God takes it seriously, and so should all who wish to serve him.

<sup>46</sup> Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take your censer, put fire on it from the altar and lay incense on it, and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them. For wrath has gone out from the Lord; the plague has begun.’ <sup>47</sup> So Aaron took it as Moses had ordered, and ran into the middle of the assembly, where the plague had already begun among the people. He put on the incense, and made atonement for the people. <sup>48</sup> He stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stopped. <sup>49</sup> Those who died by the plague were fourteen thousand seven hundred, besides those who died in the affair of Korah. <sup>50</sup> When the plague was stopped, Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

#### Numbers 16:46-50

Take your censer, put fire on it from the altar and lay incense on it, and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them. God had promised judgement: <<*that I may consume them in a moment*>> (v.45). Therefore, Moses told Aaron, as the high priest over God’s people, to immediately offer incense to make atonement for the congregation.

So Aaron took it as Moses had ordered, and ran into the middle of the assembly. Moses and Aaron might have had an interest in letting God consume all those who sympathised with the people who had rebelled against their leadership. Instead, out of love, they tried to stop the plague. There is no reason to think that Korah or his group would have shown the same mercy to Moses. They probably would have passively said, “Well God, go ahead and give them what they deserve. I knew they had it coming to them!” Korah and the complainers did not have the same shepherd’s heart for Israel that Moses and Aaron did, and it was to people like these that God said: <<*For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings*>> (Hosea 6:6). Aaron ran into the midst of the congregation; his sense of urgency is characteristic of true intercession.

He put on the incense, and made atonement for the people. A censer filled with burning incense was used to stop the plague. Incense is a picture of prayer in the Bible, as in: <<*Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel*>> (Revelation 8:3-4), because the sweet-smelling smoke of incense ascends

to heaven as a believer's prayers would. This was a dramatic picture of Aaron, as high priest, interceding for God's people.

**He stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stopped.** The plague stopped where Aaron prayed. Intercessors do the same thing today; they stand between the dead and the living, beseeching God's mercy, preserving and promoting life with their prayer. To stand between the dead and the living speaks of how serious the matter of prayer is; it is no casual pursuit, no fatalistic exercise in self-improvement. Prayer moves the hand of God, and moves it to stop death and to give life, both physical and spiritual.

**Those who died by the plague were fourteen thousand seven hundred.** This is a vast number of people to lose their lives in this way, but not so when compared to the consuming of the whole nation. Even now, the generation of unbelief was perishing in the wilderness, so a new generation of faith and boldness could be raised up to take the Promised Land. Most importantly, Aaron the high priest's work here is a picture of the ultimate and final high priest Jesus, and his work on behalf of the entire world. Everyone was a guilty sinner deserving God's righteous judgement, being rightly plagued. When Jesus the Saviour was sent on his mission, he was unjustly accused and attacked, he prayed on behalf of all those who would believe in him, he 'ran' to save them, he stood between death and life for them, and he is the only chance for salvation, being the dividing line between death and life: *<<There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved>>* (Acts 4:12).