

Who Do You Think You Are?
Numbers 16:1-7, 12-22, 31-35, 41-48; 17:1-8

Who do you think you are? Why do you think you can tell me what to do? We Christians are increasingly accustomed to hearing this challenge from the unbelievers all around us. In fact, as our culture careens ever further from its Biblical foundations, more and more people are wondering why they should get married or stay married, why they should work hard at their jobs, indeed, why they should pay attention to any man-made laws, let alone the words of Scripture.

But today's passage warns us that such lawlessness isn't just a problem for those outside the Church. For remember: all the people in these two chapters were part of God's Old Testament people, the nation of Israel. All of them had put the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts. All of them had been released from slavery in Egypt and had been delivered from Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea. All of them ate the miraculous manna God showered on them every day from heaven.

And yet Dathan and Abiram had absolutely no faith that God would actually lead them to the Promised Land. And yet Korah and his accomplices insisted that they, as Levites, had just as much right to conduct the ceremonies in the Tabernacle as Aaron did. And yet all the people complained when their unbelieving brethren experienced the consequences of their rebellion. In these two chapters, all of God's people, in one way or another, actively rejected the leadership of Moses and Aaron.

So, what are we modern Presbyterians to make of all this? After all, we believe in the perseverance of the saints, the Biblical teaching that once we have received the grace of God in Christ, once we are joined to Him by faith, we can never lose our salvation. So, how do we explain Dathan and Abiram, Korah and the Levites? How do we explain God sending a plague on all the people, killing more than fourteen thousand of them?

Well, at the very least, passages like these should serve as a sobering reminder that it is possible to deceive ourselves about our spiritual condition, being a member of the Church and yet having no real, saving faith at all. That certainly seems to have been the case with Dathan and Abiram, doesn't it? Because of the rigors of life in the desert, they had become nostalgic about Egypt, the place where they had been nothing but slaves, insisting that it had actually been a land flowing with milk and honey. Because they had not yet received the material blessings they craved, the fields and vineyards Moses said awaited them in the Promised Land, they had lost all faith in his leadership.

And their doubt combined with their pride. After all, they were members of the tribe of Reuben, the firstborn son of Jacob. But Moses and Aaron were descendants of Jacob's younger son Levi. So why should they get to make all the decisions?

But Dathan and Abiram weren't unique among God's people in their arrogant materialism, were they? After all, the Palm Sunday crowd was only interested in the sort of Messiah Who would give them the power and wealth and independence that they craved. And when Jesus didn't deliver the goods, they dropped him like a hot rock: like Dathan and Abiram, they had no intention of following a leader who wouldn't instantly satisfy all their desires, and relieve all their pain and suffering,

And don't we still know people like this, people who call themselves Christians, but who only follow Jesus for what they can get out of the deal? After all, those false prophets of the "health-and-wealth" gospel have thousands flocking to their so-called churches every week. Oh yes, those who insist that you can have it all both in this world and the next have never had any trouble attracting followers.

But while it's easy to laugh at those perfectly coiffed con-men and their dupes, there's another way for Christians to fall into the sin of Dathan and Abiram. For what about those who just can't see why God would allow them to live in poverty or oppression? What about those who give up on following Jesus when pain or suffering or grief comes their way? No, we've all faced the choice between happiness and holiness, between what we want and what God wants. And we all know folks who, when faced with that choice, make the wrong decision. But as the earth opened up and swallowed those who rebelled against God, we can see that's not really the best option for us.

Okay, so what about Korah and his kinsmen? They weren't like Dathan and Abiram. They weren't turning away from God in bitter disappointment or in arrogant self-will. No, they wanted to draw even closer to God. They wanted to have a chance to perform all the ceremonies in the Tabernacles, ceremonies that were reserved only for Aaron's family.

For just like Aaron, Korah and his kinsmen were Levites, members of the tribe that had been set apart for God's service. So they didn't see why Moses and Aaron got to make all the decisions and do all the really important parts of the rituals, while they were limited to strictly supporting roles, carrying and maintaining the Tabernacle and its furniture. After all, as they insisted in verse 3, they were just as holy, just as set apart for God. So, why shouldn't they be able to offer God some sweet-smelling incense, as they tried to do in verse 17?

Well, of course we understand why. We know that all the ceremonies conducted in and around the Tabernacle pointed, in one way or another, to the Person and Work of Christ. We know that when Aaron lit the lamps and put the bread on the table inside the tent, he was acting out the fact that Christ alone is the Bread of Life and the Light of the World. We know that when Aaron burned incense on the golden altar at the time the people gathered for prayer, he was making it clear that we can only pray to the Father as we are joined to Christ by faith. And as Aaron shed the blood of animals and burned them up on the altar, he was helping the people look forward to the cross of Christ, the only sufficient sacrifice for the sin of the world. Yes, that's why it was critical for there to be only one Old Testament High Priest at a time – because there is only one Christ.

So by rejecting Aaron, what were Korah and his friends really saying? That they didn't need Christ to tell them what was right and wrong – they could figure things out for themselves. That they didn't need to draw near to Christ to pray to the Father and receive life from Him – they were holy enough to connect with God by themselves. Worst of all, they were saying that they didn't need Christ to shed His blood for them – they were perfectly capable of standing on their own two feet in the presence of the Lord, depending on their own holiness.

And there are still plenty of people, even those who call themselves Christians, who believe the same sort of thing. And no, it isn't just those so-called "progressives" in our former denomination who insist that they don't need the blood of some man on them in order to be accepted in the sight of God. There are plenty of us evangelicals who rely on our own thoughts or feelings instead of looking to the Word of God when we have to make decisions. There are plenty of us who pray in selfish ways, without searching the Scriptures to determine what the will of Christ would be. There are plenty of us who insist that we don't need the teaching or the corporate worship or the sacraments or the mutual accountability that only the Church can provide – believing instead that we can worship God on our own and in our own way, thank you very much! Yes, we independent, self-sufficient American Christians are a lot more like Korah and his friends than we might like to admit.

Okay, so what happened when they tried to stand on their own in the presence of God, offering up their own incense, their own prayers, without any connection to the atoning sacrifice of Christ? Verse 35 tells us that the fire of God's holiness and power consumed them. And isn't that what Jesus said would happen to any branch that is separated from Him, the only true Vine? As Korah and his kinsmen could testify, those who are not connected to Christ will be thrown into the fire and burned.

And that brings us to the third, and largest group of rebels against God: the whole congregation of the sons of Israel. At the end of chapter 16, we find them grumbling against Moses and Aaron, accusing them of causing the death of those who openly defied God's commands. And as a result, the Lord sent a plague among the people, killing over 14,000 of them. No, it's no wonder that, at the end of chapter 17 says, the Israelites came to a shocking and despairing conclusion: "We are all dying! Everyone who comes near to the Tabernacle of the Lord must die."

But if we stop there, simply fearing the Lord's holiness and power, we have missed the good news we find in today's passage. For even though everyone in chapters 16 and 17 rejected the authority of Aaron in one way or another, Aaron never stopped acting as their priest, doing the sorts of things Christ does for all His people. Over and over again, when the people rebelled against God, Aaron and Moses fell on their faces before God, pleading with God not to consume them in His anger. And when God sent a plague to punish the people for their rebellion, Aaron made atonement for them by burning incense, offering not the proud, ambitious offering that had brought only death to Korah and his kinsmen, but the humble, selfless prayers that brought life to God's people.

So, why did God heed Aaron's prayers? Because remember: Aaron himself represented the Lord Jesus. Moreover, the fire Aaron put into his censer came from the altar, the place that symbolized Jesus' sacrifice for sinners. In every way, Aaron was thus symbolically connected to Christ.

And Jesus insisted that if we are connected to Him, if we abide in Him, if our thoughts and feelings are closely aligned with His, well, we will receive anything that we ask, just as God heard the prayers of Aaron and Moses who, in a very Christlike way, begged for the lives of the very sinners who had rejected their leadership.

But Jesus didn't just say that He would hear the prayers of those who abide in Him. In fact, He promised us much more than a fruitful land like the one Dathan and Abiram desired. For Jesus said that if we are joined to Him, the only source of life, we ourselves would bear much fruit.

And isn't that the same truth to which Aaron's rod points? Remember, God told each tribe to supply a rod, a staff, to be placed in the Tabernacle overnight. And on the next day, Aaron's was the only rod that had life in it, putting forth not only buds but blossoms, and even ripe almonds. Because only Aaron and his family could model the ministry of Christ to the people, only his rod could bear fruit.

And that's the good news: abiding in Christ doesn't just save us from the consequences of our rebellion against Him. For even though in ourselves we are only branches, having no independent power or life of our own, if we are joined to His life-giving Spirit we will bear fruit, just as Aaron's rod did. Yes, as we abide in His love, we will be able to demonstrate His self-sacrificial, faithful, unconditional love, praying for and working for the salvation even of those who reject Christ, even of those who reject us, just as Aaron did time and time again.

So, sure. We can fall into the self-centered, materialistic bitterness of Dathan and Abiram. We can give in to the self-righteous confidence of Korah and his kinsmen. We can challenge the authority of Jesus. Like the unbelieving world, we can demand of Him, "Who do you think You are?"

Or we can admit that we are nothing more than branches, while He is the only true vine. We can surrender ourselves completely to Christ, letting His life flow through us as we follow His lead. And as we thus abide in Him, who knows what fruit He might allow us to bear?