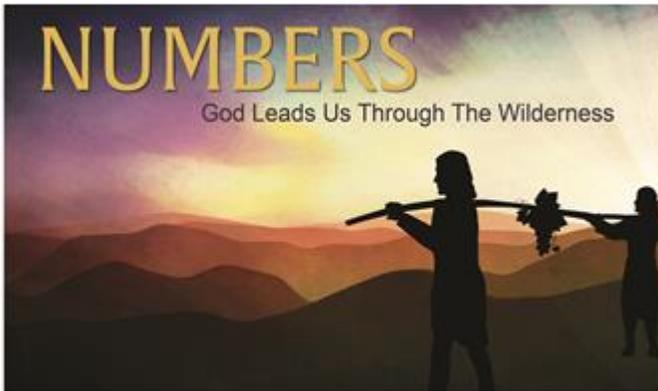


God Opposes Our Rebellion
Fall Sermon Series on Numbers
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
October 16, 2016

TEXT: Numbers 16:1-7, 15-35

We continue this morning in our fall series on the Book of Numbers. If you are just joining us, Numbers is the fourth book of the Bible, and the Book of Numbers narrates for us an epic



journey through the wilderness. It's the interval of time between when God brings His people out from Egypt and they encamp at Mount Sinai for almost a year. They then move up from Mount Sinai to take possession of the land that He has promised. The Book of Numbers takes place over a 40-year period, although the narrative focuses at certain key points, and so we find

ourselves there again this morning. The Book of Numbers teaches us that there is much to learn about following God. We live in a society and a cultural moment today that offers quick rewards, inflated promises, and reels from lack of commitment. The Book of Numbers describes for us what it means to follow God. The God of Scripture draws us to Himself in a relationship that provides lasting change, unshakable promises, and everlasting covenant-commitment to us. Last week, we looked at how at a key moment in the narrative, spies went up to scope out the land.

They had left from Mount Sinai, come to the Desert of Paran, and looked at the land of Canaan. Yet, they were unwilling, the vast majority of them, to enter the land because of fear of what they had encountered there and a lack of trust in God. God spoke a word of judgment, and this morning we pick up and continue in the narrative. We find in this portion of Scripture, Number 16, that God opposes our rebellion against Him, and we will see, as this narrative unfolds, that the rebellion and the judgment against it actually vindicates God's authorized leadership in our lives.



Numbers 14:9 was the word of judgment:

“Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.”

I grew up in the United States, and so rebellion against unjust authority is in the fabric of my national identity, and this morning we learn this powerful lesson in the wilderness where rebellion against those whom God has placed in authority over us is exposed for what it really is. Some of us remember James Dean as the icon of the *Rebel Without a Cause*. In films and popular entertainment, many of the protagonists, or the hero, or the rebel, is the good character. Yet, I hope that by the end of the sermon you want nothing to do with that, because rebellion really masks for us a mistrust of authority. It is often a thin veneer for personal ambition. It is a mirage that says: “I can do this job better,” and it is also a false pleasure of having no accountability. The rebellion against the Lord that we see in this chapter has as its counterpoint a rebellion against God and His righteous leadership, and we will see a vision of leadership over the community that we need to embrace. We are going to jump into this narrative; it is a very intense passage. I hope that the rebellion we see in Numbers 16 strikes us as something odious and offensive and very dangerous for our souls. It will be a great work of the Holy Spirit if we leave this place thinking that rebellion is a negative thing. Let’s look at the narrative together.

Numbers 16 starts with Korah, who is identified as a Levite. The Kohathites are in fact entrusted with carrying the sacred vessels of the sanctuary. In other words, Korah and his family, the Kohathites, have the second most important task in the community—carrying the sacred vessels. They have a position of sacred leadership, and that is important to note right away. We read that Korah takes Dathan and Abiram and On, who disappears from the narrative—maybe he chickened out, sort of like how John Wilkes Booth's partners failed on their portion of the assassination plot against Abraham Lincoln. These men are Reubenites who are encamped right next to the Kohathites, so one of the things we see, if we are reading carefully, is that these men live next to each other and they are talking and grumbling with each other. At some point, that thin veneer of the righteous rebellion is masked in the mirage: “I could do this better. He's not doing a good job.” Personal ambition. We see in Numbers 16:2:

“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.”

These are people of status and stature. These are other leaders in the community, so we discover that Korah's rebellion is not spontaneous. It is planned; it is organized; it is well-conceived; it has been birthed over probably many nights around the campfire of discontentment. We see that they assembled together against Moses and against Aaron, and

we see the criticism in Numbers 16:3 as they say:

“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?”

Rebels often mask their charge to conceal the true intention, as Korah masks his true intention, as we will see. When Moses hears this active rebellion, this conspiracy, he responds with a vision of godly leadership—to fall on his face before God to intercede. He speaks to Korah and says in Numbers 16:5:

“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.”

He challenges Korah and his company to assume the prerogatives of the priesthood, because, as we'll see, that is what is really at stake. Moses says: “If you want to be the spiritual leader of the community, you think you should be that, why don't you go ahead and do it?” He challenges Korah, with all those with him, to take the fire of incense and put it on their pans and come into the Lord's presence. Moses charges Korah, as the narrative starts to unfold, and he accuses him rightly and says in Numbers 16:9:

“Is 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, and that He has brought you near Him, and all your brothers the sons of Levi with you? And would you seek the priesthood also?”

The Levites are assigned to assist the sons of Aaron. It is kind of like the vice president's not being content with being the vice president. It is kind of like the associate pastor's saying: “I don't want be the associate pastor; I would be the senior pastor.” It is kind of like that moment if you're working at Chick-fil-A, and you say: “I'm tired of taking orders from the guy in the fancy shirt. I want the fancy shirt. If I had the fancy shirt, I'd do a better job than he would.” When Moses says, *Is it too small*, this starts to unmask the reality of our rebellion. Rebellion starts to germinate in our hearts when we lack contentment in the portion God has given to us and assigned to us. It starts to multiply. Moses calls out Dathan and Abiram says: “You need to come forward as well. You can't hide.” They accuse Moses in Numbers 16:13:

“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?”

They got that all wrong. Egypt wasn't the land flowing with milk and honey. Moses' approval rating is plummeting in their eyes, and they say: “You haven't done a good job of leading us into the land that you said, and, by the way, why do you make yourself prince over us?” and they refused to come. This rebellion, Moses seeks to address in private. He pleads before the Lord

for them, and in Numbers 16:16, he pleads with Korah and says:

“Be present, you and all your company, before the LORD, you and they, and Aaron, tomorrow. And let every one of you take his censer and put incense on it.”

They prepare in Numbers 16:18:

“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.”

This rebellion does not remain private and Korah shows his true colors, as we see in Numbers 16:19:

“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.”

The visible fiery glory of God is there before the congregation, and you have open mutiny in the camp. The Lord speaks in the ears of the whole people and says to Moses and Aaron in Numbers 16:21:

“Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.”

We see Moses again fall on his face with Aaron and plead with the Lord for the life of the people. That's real leadership. The Lord speaks to Moses and tells him to say to the congregation in Numbers 16:24:

“Get away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.”

So the people separate, and as they are separating and moving back from these men, at that very moment Korah, Dathan, and Abiram come and they stand at the door of their tents with their wives their children and their young ones. This confrontation now is very much out in the open. It's public. The Lord speaks in this moment, and Moses says in Numbers 16:28-29:

“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. 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.”

Moses said that if these people die in the normal way, if they are visited by the normal fate of humanity, if they die a regular death, then has not sent him. But in Numbers 16:30, he says:

“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.”

For those of us who have been tracking with the series of Numbers, this last statement should make a profound connection to Numbers 14:11:

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘How long will this people despise Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?’”

This is the charge against the wilderness generation, that they have despised God. We readily tolerate rebellion. We tolerate a willingness to critique those that God has placed in authority in our lives. We tolerate a personal ambition that would tear down. We vainly imagine that if I were in charge, things would go really smoothly. Yet, Moses, pleading with the life of the generation, comes before the Lord, and he says if the Lord does something unprecedented, you will know. If the ground opens and swallows them alive and they go down, then you will know the reality and the outcome of despising God. As soon as he finished speaking these words, we read in Numbers 16:31-32:

“The ground under them split apart. 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.”

They perish from the assembly. Not only do Korah, Dathan, and Abiram perish, but then we read in Numbers 16:35:

“And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men offering the incense.”

This is the moment when you say: “Wow! I've been thinking all week what if I had been standing there?” What is being communicated in this passage that I need to hear, that we need to hear? At its most obvious level, we see that rebellion against the Lord is dangerous. We see that our personal ambition to reject authority in our lives is costly. We see that our willingness to speak against those whom God has entrusted with leadership risks the life of the community and those around us. But I want you to notice that God's judgment here is specific and it's measured. God's judgment is against those who led the rebellion, and it is against those who offered the incense. There is a judgment of guilty that falls on this portion of the community. If you and I had been an Israelite in the midst of the camp at this point, we would have been in awe of God's righteous judgment. Korah and his companions are not innocent in this moment. Their true colors are shown, and God's judgment is measured, just like this section of the narrative. It is measure for measure. They complained that God had led us up from Egypt so that we would die in the wilderness, and they end up perishing. They said they have the right to officiate at the altar and offer the fire before the Lord, and they are consumed with God's fiery wrath.

The narrative of Numbers 16 fits inside a cluster of chapters that actually go together. Numbers 16 narrates this act of rebellion that takes place in this interval in the wilderness, and the narrative point actually is not reached with this word of judgment. As the narrative continues, we see that the counterpoint to our rebellion is God's righteous authority and leadership in our lives and how that is expressed in Aaron's priesthood. I want to look ahead or follow the

trajectory of the passage to see what God is really driving at. What is He trying to uproot from my heart and yours? We see this as the narrative continues. After the judgment falls on Korah and his companions, the Lord speaks again. The censers that were offered are taken out from the fire and they are refashioned upon the altar in Numbers 16:27-28:

“Tell Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest to take up the censers out of the blaze. Then scatter the fire far and wide, for they have become holy. As for the censers of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives, let them be made into hammered plates as a covering for the altar, for they offered them before the LORD, and they became holy. Thus they shall be a sign to the people of Israel.”

The congregation complains and grumbles against Moses and Aaron again, saying in Numbers 16:41:

“You have killed the people of the LORD.”

It's dangerous to live in such proximity to God. In Numbers 16:46, Moses tells Aaron:

“Take your censer, and put fire on it from off 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.”

We see in Numbers 16:47:

“So Aaron took it as Moses said and ran into the midst of the assembly. And behold, the plague had already begun among the people. And he put on the incense and made atonement for the people.”

He stops God's judgment by making atonement. Numbers 16:48 says:

“And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped.”

We see that the priesthood, the authorized representative to make atonement for the sin of the community, is vindicated first by the judgment against Korah. Aaron's priesthood is vindicated a second time and we see the positive role of real leadership in the community. Then, Numbers 17 gives us a third vindication of Aaron's priesthood. Look with me ahead at this next chapter.

Numbers 17 is not a response or reaction to rebellion, but it is a test that God initiates. The Lord says in Numbers 17:2-4:

“Speak to the people of Israel, and get from them staffs, one for each father's house, from all their chiefs according to their fathers' houses, twelve staffs. Write each man's name on his staff, and write Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. For there shall be one staff for the head of each father's house. Then you shall deposit them in the tent of meeting before the

testimony, where I meet with you.”

Then in Numbers 17:5, the Lord says:

“And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout. Thus I will make to cease from me the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against you.”

Moses follows in obedience to God and deposits the staffs before the Lord in the tent of the testimony. We read in Numbers 17:8, that on the very next day:

“Moses went into the tent of the testimony, and behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds.”

He walks in the next day, and among these 12 staffs of leadership, there is one that has burst into bloom. Why? What was the Lord signaling? He was signaling that Aaron has been given the sacred responsibility. The language of blooming into blossom recalls the imagery of Exodus 28, where Aaron has a blossom or bloom on the frontlet, and this is the place where he is told that he will bear or carry the sin of the community. In Numbers 17:10, the Lord says:



“Put back the staff of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their grumbings against Me, lest they die.”

This rebellion is *inclusio* for the entire narrative. Keep it as a sign that you may make an end of grumbling.

This portion of Numbers exposes a sin that lurks within us. It is a sin that we easily ignore. It is the sin that risks our own lives and the lives of those nearby, and yet the resolution of this sin, the answer to our rebellion, is: When is it a good time to submit to leadership and authority in our lives? It's a good time when the authorities in our lives come from God. The Kingdom of God is not a democracy. The kingdom of God is a Monarchy, and the only time that a monarchy is just wonderful is when you have a very powerful and very good king. The antidote to our rebellion is right authority in our lives. It is not the absence of authority; it is the right authority in our lives. The counterpoint to Korah's rebellion is the vindication of Aaron's priesthood, and notice that Aaron's priesthood and the vision of leadership in the Kingdom of God is one that we have to hear. The vision of leadership in the Kingdom of God is to be entrusted with sacred responsibility. Numbers 18 and 19 describe the responsibilities of this priesthood, and there are

several. The priests bear the guilt of the community; they carry it. They assume responsibility in Numbers 18:5:

“And you shall keep guard over the sanctuary and over the altar, that there may never again be wrath on the people of Israel.”

The priesthood is entrusted with knowing the Scriptures. The priesthood is entrusted with being accountable before God. To have spiritual responsibility is a matter of great weight and significance in Scripture, and the exclusivity of this priesthood causes us to stumble in many ways. We think this is unfair. How can there be just these authorized to serve? Yet, when we see the full council of Scripture, the reason becomes clear. That will be our last application.

Let me see if I can apply Korah's rebellion to us in a couple of ways. We need this morning, all of us, to beware of *rebellion*. We need to take that word and have that word seem dangerous, unsafe. The Scriptures describe this in many passages. Psalm 66:5-7 says:

“Come and see what God has done: He is awesome in His deeds toward the children of man. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There did we rejoice in Him, who rules by His might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations—let not the rebellious exalt themselves.”

Psalm 68:5-6 says:

“Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in His holy habitation. God settles the solitary in a home; He leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.”

The New Testament in Hebrews 3:7-8, quoting Psalm 95, says:

“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness.’”

Rebellion is dangerous for our souls. Rejecting God-ordained and -established leadership places our lives at risk in a way that we can scarcely imagine. We need to beware of rebellion. We also need to see in this chapter a responsible response to it, which we see in Moses and Aaron. What was the first reaction to rebellion? It is not to fight back. The first reaction to rebellion is to fall on your face before God. They fall on their faces before God. They bring it out into the open. They try to correct in private, but then it is brought out into the open, and at the end of the narrative, the Lord is the one who vindicates. This is the right response. The end of the narrative teaches us in Numbers 17:18-19 that the real remedy for our rebellion is to receive and embrace this exclusive role of the priesthood, this exclusive role of Aaron and his sons. They have an exclusive place to stand at the altar, to make atonement, to intercede, to absorb God's wrath. Those who minister at the altar do not have an earthly inheritance. The Lord is

their portion. They represent us all so that we might be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The reason we need to submit to and received this exclusive priesthood is that the Lord is showing His people the future. The exclusive priesthood of Aaron in this portion of Scripture holds in trust the exclusive Priesthood of Jesus Christ. The real remedy to our rebellion against God is the exclusive Priesthood of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 9 tells us that Jesus is our High Priest, that He enters once and for all into the Holy Place and secures an eternal redemption. Hebrews 9:13-14 says:

“For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”

Numbers 16 exposes our rebellion for what it is: a real rejection of the Lord, but it also gives us God's gracious provision for that in a Priesthood that's exclusive and that offers offering on our behalf.

Numbers 16 is what scholars call *a text of terror*. It is terrifying. Some have suggested or sought a naturalistic explanation for what happened. They said that in this portion of the wilderness, in the Arabah there are these areas of ground that are called the *kewir* where the mud layer is thin and baked, and it's really soft and squishy underneath. It 'just so happened' that Korah and Dathan and Abiram happen to camp here, and when Moses spoke the words, the thin layer of mud cracked and they went down in the mud pit. Now, that is possible, but if so, then God's sovereignly has them camped on the *kewir*. The point isn't to seek the naturalistic causation, but the point is to see the reality of where rebellion takes us. We need this. I need this. It's astonishing to me how quickly and easily students will critique their teacher. It's astonishing how readily children will correct their parents. It's astonishing to me how regularly employees will critique of the practices of the management. It's amazing how even junior executives will lament the direction or performance of the leaders of a company. Have you noticed that the presidential debates have not exactly been characterized by edifying speech? I'm not sure what else to call that. We live in a moment in time in a society where we just readily say: “Those in charge shouldn't be in charge,” and it masks an ambition that can be deadly in our soul. The biblical vision of leadership is service. The counterpoint to my rebellion is God's providing great leadership in my life. That means that when we are entrusted with leadership, we have to act and conduct ourselves in a way that the priesthood is charged to act in these chapters: to serve the community, to make atonement, to intercede, to fall on your face before God, to seek the welfare of those around you. This is a wholly different vision of how I'm supposed to be living. The role of Korah and Aaron in these passages just gets wider and wider apart, and you see that Aaron's priesthood in the end holds in trust the ministry of our Lord Jesus “*who, though He was*

in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped or exploited, but humbled Himself and became a servant and was obedient unto death. Therefore, God has highly exalted Him that at His name, the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The scriptural vision of Numbers in these chapters moves us to see and recognize rebellion for what it is, that the seemingly innocent critique of those in authority really masks our ambition, our rejection of God, and we are invited to be a Kingdom of priests and a holy nation on the other side. But the congregation is to separate from that, get away from that. I need that. You need that. Just move away from that. We need new heroes. The hero in this passage is not the rebellious one. The heroes in this passage are Moses and Aaron, falling on their face, pleading with the lives of their kinsman, offering prayer, ministering in the sanctuary, making atonement, absorbing God's wrath, and staying humble before God. That is the vision of scriptural leadership. If you have leadership that God assigns in your life like that, then that is a joy to honor and respect and strive to become. That exclusivity of the priesthood signals for us the exclusivity of Christ's leadership in our lives. That's true for all of us, for me as much as for any. Let's pray and humble ourselves before the Lord.

Lord, we thank You for sweeping narratives that reveal Your holiness. We thank You, Lord, for portions of Scripture that we might be tempted to look past. Lord, I pray with all my heart that You would be at work in us as a people and that we would offer to You, Lord Jesus, our great High Priest, our glad and full and complete and wholehearted submission to Your leadership in our lives. Lord, we pray that You would forgive us today where we have partaken of the intoxicating cup of personal ambition, where we have been swept along in the contemporary current of culture to speak and act in a way that would tear down those who have been entrusted with leading us. Lord, we pray that You would help us to embrace a Kingdom vision of leadership, humility, intercession, serving, fulfilling the mission that You have assigned. Lord, we ask for Your forgiveness, knowing, Lord Jesus, that You are our great High Priest and that the exclusivity of this Priesthood is modeling to us something so profound, so important for our souls, that we cannot officiate at an eternal altar ourselves, that we need Your priesthood in our lives. We thank You, Lord, that You have offered Yourself, once for all time, to secure our redemption and our forgiveness. Lord, we confess our rebellion to You, and we pray, Lord, that You would help us to live and follow You with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Lord, we delight in You. We take great joy in following You, the Greatest Leader in the land.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.