

Korah's rebellion

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[0 : 00] Good morning. If you are new here, I am Hong Park, one of the elders of the church.

That was an incredible story, isn't it? What an incredible incident that took place in the history of Israel. Imagine one day you receive a letter from the palace inviting you to meet with the Agong. Perhaps you are getting an award. Along with the invitation, there will be a reminder for the dress code. And so you quickly check the royal protocol that you have to follow.

Often there will be a rehearsal where the protocol officer will tell you what you need to do. Like how to address the king, how to bow, how to walk towards him, how to walk away from him, how to sit, how to kiss his hands if he offers his hand.

The invitation to see him will come from the palace with terms and conditions. You definitely cannot go and see him uninvited, wear whatever baju you fancy, in whatever manner you want.

[1 : 31] No, you are received on his terms and on his terms alone. Today we see the Israelites wanting to change God's ordained rules which allowed them to go near him.

Now God is the divine king of kings, not a human Agong. Sorry. And he has made his presence in the tabernacle at the center of their camp.

Now he has put in place SOPs to follow when you want to present your offerings to him. Some people are questioning this SOP. Paul says that the incidents recorded in Israel's wilderness journey was to serve as examples and warnings to us.

So what can we learn from this incident? Let's pray. Father, we just ask that your spirit will illuminate your word to us.

And glorify Christ. In Jesus' name. We have been journeying with Israel in the wilderness over the last few weeks.

[2 : 47] And it has been an exciting journey. As we heard, things turned bad around Numbers 10, when Israel started grumbling and complaining and rebelling.

Ultimately, missing their chance to enter the promised land due to their fear and lack of faith. And last week, there was a brief respite where God reassured Israel that he had not cancelled his commitment to them to be their God and they, his people.

He promised them abundant living and bountiful harvest when they settled into the promised land. From the bountiful produce, they were to bring their offerings and their gifts and sacrifices.

He had mandated the priests to mediate between the people and himself to present the worshippers' gifts and offerings on their behalf at the altar.

Now, Aaron and his sons were ordained priests back in Exodus 28. And God said that the priesthood was a lasting ordinance for Aaron's descendants.

[3 : 57] Aaron and Moses were Levites. But Aaron and his male descendants were the only Levites to be appointed as priests.

The rest of the Levites were appointed in Numbers 3 to assist Aaron, representing the other tribes, to do the work of the tabernacle.

And what the Levites did was to care for the furnishing of the tabernacle, to maintain, to dismantle it, transport it, and to set it up. But only priests were allowed to minister on the inner parts of the tabernacle.

They called it the sanctuary. And to present offerings and sacrifices at the altar. The Levites were not allowed to go near the furnishing of the sanctuary or the altar.

And just before today's passage, God reminded the Israelites that they are a people consecrated to him. That is, they are a holy people.

[5 : 01] So in Numbers 16, there arose four ringleaders. Korah, a Levite, and three Reubenites. Dayton, Abiram, and On.

On is never mentioned again. The ringleaders then influenced the whole assembly and a total of 250 community leaders were sent as representatives.

What was Korah's complaint? The question that he made viral was this. Did God really say? This sounds like an echo from Genesis 1 or Genesis 3.

Did God really say that Aaron and his descendants can be priests before him as a lasting ordinance? Only Aaron and his descendants? He accused Aaron of self-appointment and of hogging the priesthood.

Didn't God just say we are all holy? If we are holy, surely we can present our offerings directly to God. Moses rebukes Korah saying, You Levites have gone too far.

[6 : 18] Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel had brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself to serve him? But now you are trying to get the priesthood too.

He asked, Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him? Since it was Yahweh who set up the priesthood of Aaron, it was against him that you are rebelling.

Moses challenges Korah and the 250 to present their offering of incense directly to the Lord the next day. Let them test to see if it was acceptable to God for them to present offerings without Aaron's mediation.

It was really foolhardy of them to willingly accept this challenge. They must have forgotten that Aaron's own sons, Nadab and Abihu, divinely appointed priests, had tried to offer unauthorised fire and died for their folly.

The Rubinites had a slightly different complaint but a more familiar complaint. Dayton and Abiram rejected Moses' leadership.

[7 : 29] Moses, you summoned us? We will not come. Isn't it enough you plucked us from Egypt, a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in this wilderness?

Where is this fertile land you promised us? You have failed us. Worse still, you deceived us. You brought us out of Egypt so that you can make us your slaves.

Again, it was not Moses that they were ultimately rebelling against. The rebellion is against Yahweh, who was the one who had freed them from slavery in Egypt and who was leading them to the promised land.

It seemed not to register with them that it was exactly the same complaint, like this one, that lost the Exodus generation, the promised land.

They were not praising God, their liberator. Instead, they were calling God a deceiver, who really wanted to kill them and enslave them. Moses said to Yahweh, don't accept their offering.

[8 : 34] In other words, don't forgive them. The next morning, the rebels got together with Aaron and they brought their offerings of burning coal and incense before the Lord.

The glory of the Lord appeared to the whole nation and the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, separate yourself from this assembly so that I can put an end to them at once.

The whole assembly? Why? Well, the whole assembly, the whole nation was complicit because each clan had leaders representing them.

Ultimately, you see, ultimately, you see Moses and Aaron, sorry, immediately, you see Aaron and Moses performing the priestly duty of interceding for the people.

God, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins? In his mercy, the Lord hears their prayer and limits his judgment to the ringleaders and their associates.

[9 : 40] The way they were judged left no doubt in the eyes of everyone that it was God himself punishing them for treating him with contempt. The ground swallows Dayton, Abiram and their household, and Korah and his associates, and all their possessions.

And meanwhile, fire came out from the Lord and consumed those offering unauthorized incense. Those who wanted to rise up were buried.

And those who wanted the right to burn incense were burnt themselves. You cannot approach God willy-nilly or call him evil and get away with it. Isn't the human heart rebellious?

Without the empowering of the Holy Spirit, if left to our own devices, our default mode is always to sin and to worship a God of our own making. The universalist will say in his heart, God is loving and good.

Surely he is a safe, indulgent deity who will not punish sin or send people to hell. You can do anything you want and he will smile like an indulgent father.

[10:57] But this is not the Creator God who revealed himself. If we approach God on our terms, we run the risk of incurring his wrath. If he has clearly ordained a certain way to approach him, doing it another way means death.

We cannot be casual in our relationship with him. For the Israelites who are under the old covenant, he had appointed priests to mediate between a sinful people and himself.

But he will only accept a priest he has appointed, not those who self-appoint themselves as priests. And also we notice that from the prayer of Moses and Aaron, we see God would limit his judgment when his appointed priest makes intercession.

If you notice the psalm that we read this morning, it was written by the sons of Korah. The sons of the ringleader in this story.

And Numbers 26 states that the line of Korah did not die out. It looks like the line of Abiram and what's his name, the other guy?

[12:18] Dayton. I think their whole family was wiped out. They, their children, and their little ones. But in his mercy, the sons, the line of Korah, did not die out.

And this means that the Korah's sons who were not involved were spared. They lived on to write some of our beloved psalms. The mercy and grace of God will inspire the human heart to repentance and worship.

You would have thought that that was the end of the matter, right? I mean, the ground opened up and swallowed the rebels.

Perhaps the people would repent as they should. But no. The sudden death of the rebels and the 250 community leaders not only frightened the Israelites, but also angered them too.

You have killed the Lord's people, they said. Israel's anger may be directed at Moses and Aaron, but again, it was actually against God.

[13:26] Look at the way they turned towards the tent of meeting as if confronting God. The glory of the Lord appears. Wrath comes out from God and a plague begins.

People start dying. There was no time for intercession. Aaron, under the instruction of Moses, runs into the midst of the assembly, stands between the living and the dead, offering incense with burning coal from the altar, making atonement for the people.

The Lord accepts the atoning sacrifice of his appointed priests and shows mercy. Whereas Korah's illegitimate incense provoked God's wrath, incense of Aaron, the appointed priest, stops it.

But 14,700 people had died by then. It is foolish to oppose Yahweh. God is God.

Who is the creature? who does the creature think he is to shake his face in defiance at the Creator? But notice that even then, he allowed his chosen priests to make effective atonement for the people.

[14:49] Even though God is a holy God and all-consuming fire, make no mistake, he is also a loving and gracious God. He takes no pleasure in punishing his people.

See how, in his grace, he provides his people with visual reminders to avoid future occasions that can incur his anger. He really has no desire for his people to die.

Look at the visual reminders. Firstly, he instructs Elisa, the son of Aaron, to collect the senses that had been used for the unlawful offerings and to hammer them into sheets to overlay the altar.

The bronze altar covering was to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the Lord or he will become like Korah and his followers.

Secondly, he provides a visual reminder in the form of Aaron's staff. As we read, Aaron's staff not only sprouted in the Lord's presence but budded, blossomed and produced almonds all in one night.

[16:03] It was a miracle of abundance and everyone could see who God has chosen. Aaron's staff was placed in front of the Ark of the Covenant as a sign to the rebellious that they end their grumbling against God concerning the priesthood and so not die.

Now notice that these reminders were initiative from God himself, not Moses or any human being. He initiates like he always does. It is he who first reached out to his people so that they, if they trust and obey, can have continued fellowship with him.

He is a gracious God. This final confirmation that God and his descendants, sorry, this final confirmation that Aaron and his descendants are God's appointed priests and the reminder to stop their grumbling caused the people to realize their truly precarious position and they viewed their position as hopeless.

They cried to Moses, we will die. We are lost. We are all lost. Anyone who comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die.

Are we all going to die? No, no, and no. God assures them in chapter 18, which we didn't have time to read, that they will not die.

[17 : 36] He reminded them that he had made provisions to protect them through the ministry of the Levites and the priests. In addition to the duties mentioned earlier, the Levites and the priests were to be on guard duty at the tabernacle to prevent anyone from getting too close.

Any willful trespass will be met with capital punishment. The Levites will guard the outer parts and the priests the inner sections. All these were put into place so that never again will wrath consume the people as a result of the trespass into the tabernacle.

Let me summarize the lesson so far. One, we can only come near to God according to his terms, not ours. We see the importance of the mediatory role of the priests so that a sinful people can come near to a pure and holy God.

But it is not just anybody who can be priest. It must be one of God's own choosing. And God will allow such a person to make intercession and atonement for ordinary Israelites.

What about us today? We, like the Israelites, are in constant battle with sin in our lives. God is still a holy God, a pure God, and we are in constant need of a mediator.

[19 : 08] In the old covenant, God's terms for men to approach him was through the mediation of a human priest. The Aaronic priesthood, however, was only a foreshadow of the real thing to come.

In the new covenant, he has set new terms for us to approach him. This new agreement is that we come to him through the Lord Jesus Christ, his Son, the one he sent to make atonement for us and who continuously intercede for us.

Jesus has been appointed our great high priest. There's no other name under heaven by which we can be saved.

And the writer of Hebrews took seven chapters from Hebrews 4 to 10 to explain that Jesus is our final and eternal high priest and to explain how his priesthood is far superior to Aaron's.

Like Aaron, he had to be called. In Hebrews 5 verse 4, he writes, And no one takes this honour that is to be a priest on himself.

[20 : 31] He cannot be self-appointed, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest, but God said to him, You are my son.

Today I have become your father, and in another place you are priests forever in the order of Melchizedek. What is so special about the order of Melchizedek?

You see, Jesus did not come from the priestly line of Aaron. He was not a Levite. Instead, his human ancestry descended from the tribe of Judah.

But Jesus' priesthood is from a line that existed even before Levi was born. His is the priesthood of Melchizedek. Melchizedek means the king of righteousness or the king of peace.

And he made his appearance in Genesis 14, verse 18 to 20. He was a priest of God's Most High, and he met and blessed Abraham, the patriarch of Israel.

[21 : 43] And he brought him bread and wine, and Abraham in return gave him a tenth of everything he had. If you will turn your Bibles to Hebrews chapter 7.

I would like to read with you from verse 17. Hebrews chapter 7, verse 17.

For it is declared, you are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.

The former regulations, that is the old covenant, is set aside because it was weak and useless, for the law made nothing perfect.

A better hope is introduced by which we draw near to God. God and it was not without an oath.

Others became priests without any oath, but he, that is Jesus, became a priest with an oath when God said to him, the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind.

[22 : 56] You are a priest forever. Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant. Now, verse 23, Now there has been many of those priests, that is Aaron's descendants, since death prevented them from continuing in office.

But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Verse 25, Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Verse 26, Such a high priest truly meets our need, one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifice day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priest men in all their weaknesses, but the oath which came after the law appointed the Son who has been made perfect forever.

[24 : 15] Jesus, the Son of God, is our perfect, permanent, divine high priest who lives forever, unlike the Old Testament priests who are weak, sinful, and mortal.

Instead of sacrificing animals like the priests of the Mosaic law, he sacrificed himself for our sins once for all. He himself is our atonement for sin, an offering that need not be repeated, offered once for the forgiveness of all sins.

This priest meets our great need for all our sins to be forgiven. He also makes perfect forever those who are being made holy.

He saves completely all who come to God through Him because He always lives to intercede for them. Now, this is a high priest that we need.

We, too, are on a journey and have yet to arrive at our promised land. We are still living in a world defiled by sin, constantly battling temptations and often failing.

[25 : 26] Jesus, our high priest, is not one who cannot understand our struggle. No, Hebrews tells us that Jesus knows our weaknesses and understands us because He, when He was on earth, was tempted in every way, in every way, just as we are, yet He did not sin.

So, when we are in need of healing, of comfort, of guidance, of assurance, of forgiveness, we must not hesitate to go to God.

We can approach God's throne of grace with confidence and receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need because Jesus is there.

John writes in 1 John 2, My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. And His priesthood has brought us benefits that Aaron's priesthood could not.

[26 : 47] Now, notice that Aaron's priesthood in fact prevented ordinary people from going into God's presence for their own safety, for their own protection.

The curtain in the tabernacle and then the temple separated human beings from God in the Holy of Holies. And it needed the priestly sacrifice of Jesus to tear that curtain from top to bottom at the moment of His death on the cross of Calvary.

Jesus, through His atoning sacrifice, effectively removed that which separated God and man. And so, what was denied ordinary Israelites is now a reality for us.

Through Jesus, we now have direct access into the very presence of God. We no longer need protection from God if we are in Christ.

instead, each one of us, if we are Christians, are now priests who are called to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

[28 : 01] And this is our true and proper worship. And even more amazing, this holy God, this all-consuming fire, is pleased through Jesus to make His home with us.

We are now the temple of the Holy Spirit. God now lives in us, not just near us. And since this is true, let us be careful in certain ways we say things, so as not to confuse.

For example, asking God to descend on us at our meetings, or to invite Him to come to our service, can give the impression that He has gone far away every time our meeting ends.

Actually, He is always with us. So instead, we can instead thank Him for His presence with us, or ask that He make His presence tangible to us.

This free access, closeness, and fellowship is a gift. We cannot earn it. We cannot sing for it. We don't have to create an atmosphere for His presence.

[29 : 17] We have nothing to offer or contribute, but only our faith that results in repentance and obedience. If you are not a Christian today, and you want reconciliation with God, you can only go through His one and only mediator, Jesus.

No other substitute is accepted. Paul says there is only one mediator, Jesus Christ. Anyone who offers another way to God is a fraud.

There are thieves who come only to steal, to kill, and destroy. Anyone who tells you that Jesus is not the only way is a liar.

God is a God is God is a Christian. If you are already a Christian, rejoice that Jesus is our great High Priest. Think of all that Jesus is doing for you, of what He has accomplished for you.

Thank Him for being your High Priest, your Atonement, your Intercessor, your Advocate. Your salvation is already guaranteed, guaranteed on His finished work.

[30 : 31] However, you have to guard your heart that you will not allow anyone else or anything else to take the place of Jesus, your Mediator.

You should not even let anything share that position that belongs to Christ exclusively. Your achievements, your money, your career, other people, even your loved ones, cannot reconcile you to God.

That role belongs to Jesus alone. And let's not add to the Gospel or nullify the Gospel by advocating a salvation that is based on Jesus plus something else.

That something else may be work righteousness or spiritual experiences like speaking in tongues. God says you approach Him by grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone, on the merits of Christ alone.

False mediators can take the form of the Bomo or the witch doctor or the temple medium. They can take the shape of elevated saints or even Mary, the dead to whom some pray for favors and miracles.

[31 : 48] Jesus has no co-mediator or co-redeemer or co-mediatrix or co-redemptrix as Mary is called in a certain church.

They can take the shape of pagan idols or of counterfeit Jesus like prosperity Jesus, greed-affirming Jesus, Marxist Jesus, an all-tolerant Jesus, a new-age Jesus, and so on.

Have you heard of people who claim that Jesus has failed in his mission and so God had to send them as the new Messiah? Some even claim to be reincarnation of Jesus or claim to be the second coming of Christ.

Do not be deceived by the teaching of cults that look Christian but are devoid of the gospel of grace or devoid of the divine Christ. And I'm calling out the Jehovah-Bik Genesis, the Mormons, the Munis, and the Scientologists, among others.

And there are those who say that Dios is the final prophet sent by God. The Bible says that Jesus is the final word. I'm also curious of social media postings of some churches celebrating the feasts of the Old Covenant.

[33 : 11] Why celebrate feasts that have become obsolete, which have found their fulfillment in Christ. We must also be careful about supporting the rebuilding of the third Jewish temple in Jerusalem with a view to restart the animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant.

Any revival of the sacrifice, of the sacrificial rituals of the Old Covenant, is telling God that His Son's atoning death on the cross is ineffective and useless.

It is like the Jewish Christians of the first century who because of persecution were contemplating abandoning Christ and returning to Judaism.

The writer of Hebrews warned them in Hebrews 10, Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy at the testimony of two or three weaknesses.

How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the spirit of grace?

[34 : 24] Be warned that that is exactly what we will be doing if we abandon Jesus Christ and embrace another religion. If we renounce Christ to marry that girl or boy from another religion, or to get that position of power, or to receive financial rewards, or to be accepted by society, if we do that, we trample the Son of God underfoot.

So let us instead stand steadfast in our faith and devotion to Christ. Let us take seriously our priestly role to intercede through prayer for one another, for the church, for the nation, and for the world.

Let us be thankful for the priestly sacrifice and intercession of Jesus that has allowed us to be his people and for him to be our God. Through him, we are guaranteed to arrive at our promised land, the new heaven and the new earth, where we will dwell in God's presence forever.

Let's pray. Thank you, God, that Jesus is so glorious. We thank you that he is our glorious high priest. Father, our words are not enough. We just want to just worship you and glorify you. Teach us to give our lives to you, to trust and to obey you in everything.
[36 : 03] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.