

'Who will save us from God's Wrath?'

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 July 2026

Preacher: Mark Chew

[0:00] Okay, turn your Bibles back, if you will, to Numbers chapter 16. Now, sometimes in life, you don't get to choose your leaders.

So, for you still in high school or at uni, you don't get to choose your teachers or lecturers. Too bad. And if you're working at the moment, probably not your bosses.

And of course, you know, if you want a different boss, you go and get another job, right? Now, thankfully, we get to vote out our democratic governments, even if our say is only a very small one. You know, one vote out of thousands or even millions. Well, this week, a very similar situation arises for Israel's leaders. Now, these men, as we will see shortly, they were leaders themselves. But they weren't happy with their own leaders, namely Moses and Aaron. And so, these so-called ringleaders, as I've called them, are revealed to us in verse 1.

[1:06] So, let's look at that. They are Korah, a Kohathite, Bathan, and Abiram, both related because they're sons of Eliab, and On, son of Peleth.

The last three were Reubenites, while Korah was a Levite. Now, if you recall last year, if you were here with us looking at Numbers chapter 2 and 3, you'd see that this diagram that I had on the handout last year, you'd see that actually the camps of the Kohathites and the Reubenites were actually together.

They were neighbors. And so, it could very well be that all of this began because they were just having a bit of a grumble about life back at camp over the back fence, if they had fences, which they don't.

Now, we're told that they became insolent and rose up against Moses, verse 2. Not only that, they agitated another 250 well-known Israelite men, leaders in the community.

And I think at this stage now, it would probably be leaders from the other tribes as well. And so, what we have, point 1, verses 1 to 19, is the first rebellion. And you'll see in the outline that there is going to be more than one.

[2:21] We discover, firstly, in verse 3, the nature of their complaint. They came as a group to Moses and Aaron and said to them, You have gone too far. The whole community is holy, every one of them.

And the Lord is with them. Why, then, do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly? So, they were unhappy with their position in the hierarchy, so-called.

And what they use is actually an argument which is partially true, to justify themselves. Because God had declared in Exodus chapter 19, in verse 6, that they were a holy nation.

They were a kingdom of priests. That is true. So, why, then, was Moses and Aaron being set apart from them? So, Korah must be thinking, Why can't I have a turn?

Right? You know, at school, you always have this class monitor thing. Everyone gets to be the class monitor. So, Korah probably wants to, you know, Why can't I have a turn at offering the sacrifices?

[3:23] Maybe hear from God directly, like Moses, you know, from time to time. And maybe even move my tent a bit closer to the tabernacle. Right? But as we all know, that's naked envy, isn't it?

And jealousy. And that was to misunderstand as well the role of Moses and Aaron. Now, Moses doesn't defend himself. He's actually more concerned for them as ringleaders.

And actually, the trouble that they're going to get themselves into, and the wrath of the Lord that they would incur. And so, verse 4, Moses fell face down, and he said to them, In the morning, the Lord will show who belongs to him and who is holy.

He will have that person come near to him. The man he chooses, he will cause to come near to him. Now, the fact of the matter is that no one is entitled to nominate themselves as priests.

That is a position that the Lord chooses for himself, who will be holy and therefore can draw near to him. And so, the test as to who the Lord does choose, while Moses says, You, Korah, and all your followers are to do this.

[4:35] Take senses, and tomorrow put burning coals and incense in them before the Lord. The man the Lord chooses will be the one who is holy. And you, Levites, have gone too far.

Now, Korah, in particular, there is a particular irony about this, because he himself was already a Levite. Because Levites are actually set apart already from the rest of Israel.

Moses addresses, therefore, Korah, first of all, in verse 8. And he says, Now you listen, Levites. And I think when he says Levites, no, it's not just Korah, but all the other Levites that might have joined the rebellion.

Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the Lord's tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them?

He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. And so, the Levites already had a mediatory role between the people and the Lord, the job of drawing near to the temple to do the work there or the tabernacle, but also to minister to the people.

[5:50] But no, Korah and the others wanted more, to offer the sacrifices which only the priests could do. And so, to me, this was a me too sin, right?

What about me? Why can't I have what they have? And as a consequence then, I think that his grumble wasn't really against Moses or Aaron.

Moses says, It's against the Lord that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him? This has nothing to do with Aaron.

He did not choose to do this job, but rather it is the Lord that you're grumbling against. And you know, to go against the Lord is to venture into very dangerous territory.

And friends, that's the same for us as well when it comes to authority that we're under. Paul says in Romans 13 that all authority is appointed by God.

[6:51] And so, those who rebel against authority are rebelling against God. Now, there is a right way to call bad government to account. And we've seen a lot of instances of bad government.

But to defy the law or to be disrespectful of authority, unless, of course, that means going against God's own law, that's not the way to do it.

Now, as for the others, Dathan and Abiram, now Moses turns to them. You notice that On's name is no longer there. And we're not sure why.

He may have likely had a change of heart, which was a good thing for him, I think. But with Dathan and Abiram, what we have is open defiance in verse 12.

They start by saying, We will not come. You're calling us? We will not come. Is it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness?

[7:52] And now you also want to lord it over us. Moreover, you haven't brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards.

Do you want to treat these men like slaves? No. Can you imagine, like, some of us, for our parents, get this when, you know, you have a defined child that says, Nope, and they're standing, we will not come.

That's the picture I have of these men. Now, forgive the pun, but they're really digging a hole for themselves, aren't they? Not only are they finally not wanting to go, they have thrown accusations at Moses, false accusations.

They're saying that he has deprived them of freedom. Really? From Egypt to this, and they've been deprived of freedom? And Egypt is to them a land flowing with milk and honey?

Now, what were they doing then, groaning at the start of Exodus, if that was such a paradise for them? And, you know, fancy calling Egypt the land of milk and honey.

[8:58] That is to mock God, isn't it? Because that is the very phrase that God used of the promised land. That they were going to go into a land flowing with milk and honey. And now they're calling Egypt the land of slavery, a land of milk and honey.

Now, again, for us, we need to be aware of grumbling against God, don't we? Now, there is a sense in which we can lament, and if we're suffering to say, Lord, this is really hard.

Why me? Or even, Oh, Lord, how long? But, to start then accusing the Lord and saying, you are the one to be blamed, or you are not doing good in my life.

That is to doubt that what God does in our lives is actually for our good. That God is not a good God, but that He's a God that is intent on evil.

Now, the other thing that's even worse, of course, is that the only reason why they're in this situation, wandering in the wilderness, is because two chapters ago, they were the very ones who said, when the Lord said, go in, I've given you the land, they had said, no, we don't want to do it.

[10:09] Now, the ever-patient Moses finally gets angry, isn't it? And he actually says to the Lord, don't accept any more of their offerings. And, you know, he has a point, isn't it?

Because this is open rebellion. Korah complaining about Aaron, Dayton and Abiram defying Moses' authority, but actually, ultimately, the one that they're opposing is God Himself.

And so now to bring an offering to the Lord, the very one they're defying and opposing, that is hypocrisy, isn't it? So, with Dayton and Abiram sort of refusing to leave their tents, so that you can see that they're down south there, in that little map that I showed, Moses now turns back to Korah, who did come to the tent.

And he proposes, in verses 16 to 19, what I call the showdown with the senses. The senses, if you're not aware, are those vessels or trays that a priest would use to put burning coals and incense when they come into a worship space.

And so I've got a picture of that. There are still churches that do this, mainly Orthodox churches and Catholic churches. But in Israel's time, only the high priest was allowed to do this, to bring incense to the Lord into the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement.

[11:33] And the result of that is that the smoke that comes from the burning incense would then fill the room and therefore protect Aaron himself by being consumed in the Lord's presence.

And so this incense offering then was a symbol of God's way of saying who is acceptable, who is holy, and therefore acceptable to him. And you know, the Lord's answer actually, comes even before the showdown in verses 20 and 21 because he already gives Aaron and Moses a warning to separate yourselves, he says, from disassembly so I can put an end to them at once.

So you don't need to guess what will happen. The Lord is going to judge them. And he doesn't want Moses and Aaron to be collateral damage, as it were. Now again, Moses and Aaron, like they've done in the past, they don't really care for themselves so much as for the people.

And so they intervene and they say, oh God, the God who gives breath to all living things, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins? Now it's not one, it's three of them, maybe 250 even.

But the point is, don't punish the whole assembly for the instigation or the leadership of a few. And so God does relent again, as he does, as he did in the past.

[12:59] And this time then he says in verses 23 and 34, okay then, now ask or tell the whole assembly to move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.

And so, of course, Moses is not quite where the tents are, so he goes to the tent in verse 25, and then he tells the assembly in verse 26, who have gathered around him to then, you know, stand away.

And so you can imagine the scene around the tent once he does. The elders, the whole community are all encircled around the tent. Dathan and Abiram now emerge from their tents.

I don't know whether it's like in defiance or, you know, maybe it's a bit late in the morning, whatever. And then the thing that you read there is that their families were with them.

And this is the little detail that I think really breaks my heart. It says there, even the little ones, you know, ankle biters maybe, even, I don't know.

[14:04] But they'll soon suffer, wouldn't they, for the sins of their fathers. Now, Moses then says, everyone don't get too close. And again, the picture I have in my mind is, this, you know, we've seen some people on TV, this demolition of towers, you know, you know, it's like when they then set up a cordon and tell people not to get too close because there'll be fallout.

Well, there's going to be fallout, isn't it? Moses calls out in verse 28, and I think he's talking here not to the people at the tents, but actually everyone around them.

This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things, and that it was not my idea. If these men die a natural death and suffer the fate of all mankind, then the Lord has not sent me.

But if the Lord brings about something totally new and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive in the realm of the dead, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt.

And as soon as Moses finished saying this, the ground split and swallowed them out. I think this is a bit like a sinkhole.

[15 : 16] I don't know whether you've seen sinkholes, but it's one that sort of kept expanding. I think people started running away, running from the edge because they were afraid that it was going to keep going and swallow them up.

Now, meanwhile, this is where the tents were. Meanwhile, back at the tent of meeting, the tabernacle, verse 35, fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.

Now, this is a picture, isn't it, of God's wrath that is revealed against all rebellion, against Korah, but also Dathan and Abiram, and sadly, their households suffer with them.

But so too, the 250 well-known leaders. These are not, these are well-regarded leaders of the community. It says right there in the verse one. So they should have known better than to join in. Although it seems, thankfully, it was just them, not their families as well. But you know, God in His mercy, He actually uses this occasion, and we go now to the verses we didn't read, verses 36 to 40 and onwards, God actually uses this occasion as a warning for the others.

[16 : 28] And we read that the senses that were used by the leaders for the incense, are now considered holy to the Lord. So I think, you know, they were burning the incense, you know, thinking it's just burning the incense, and then they got burnt, and then, I don't know, maybe the incense just dropped as they all kind of became ashes.

But what's happened is that because these were being offered to the Lord, and we know from the altar, anything offered, even the sacrifices, anything offered to the Lord is now considered, belongs to the Lord, and therefore is considered holy.

And so these senses now are holy because of that. So, it's not like then anyone can just go in there and go, oh, just pick up the rubbish here and pick up the senses, right?

It can't just be thrown away. It can't be returned to the community. In fact, as we read, it's only Aaron as the high priest and his son, Eliezer, that can actually themselves go and retrieve the senses because they were chosen by the Lord.

They were the holy ones, weren't they? They could do that and not themselves be burnt. And verse 37, what the Lord says is that they are to hammer these bronze sheets.

[17 : 42] So these senses are bronze. Hammer these bronze senses into sheets and then overlay it, you know, have a double kind of, double layer altar, as it were.

Overlay it around the altar. Because, verse 38, they were presented before the Lord and have become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites.

And verse 40, the reminder. It is to serve as a reminder or warning that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the Lord or he would become like Korah and his followers.

Now, if you've just witnessed the wrath of God, tell me if I'm wrong.

But the right response is to take note and humble yourself. Right? And to be clear, God's wrath is not the result of him losing his temper, you know, lacking self-control or just lashing up at the people that, you know, he doesn't like.

[18 : 48] God's wrath is always a measured and intentional response against sin. And in particular, defiant sin.

And last week, we saw in chapter 15, the consequences of that man in the wilderness who collected wood, what defiant sin looks like. But we also saw last week in chapter 15 that when we do repent, there is always forgiveness so that we don't have to fear God's wrath.

And there are other verses in the Bible that give us this same assurance. So, Psalm 51, verse 17, when David sinned, he said, my sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

James chapter 4, verse 6, humble yourself before the Lord and he will, he will lift you up. Jesus himself ate with sinners who welcomed him.

And so, there is nothing to fear when we come humbly before God. In fact, Jesus says in Revelations that he's standing at the door of our hearts knocking and anyone who opens the door to

me, I will come in and eat with them.

[20:06] So, I say again, there is no fear of God's wrath when we are repentant and come humbly to him. Now, what did Israel do instead?

Verse 41. They compounded their sin, didn't they, with a second rebellion. And here it says the next day and I think part of it is that actually they were meant to go home, sleep on it, think about it and realize that, no, you know, we've done the wrong thing.

But what happened? The next day, and that happened in chapter 14 as well, the next day, early in the morning, the next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. You have killed the Lord's people, they said.

So, instead of contrition, they blame Moses and Aaron. They haven't taken heed of God's warning. And again, this is not just a sin against Aaron and Moses anymore, is it?

But God. And they, the cheek of them to call Aaron and Moses killers of the Lord's people. Where is their reverence for the Lord?

[21:10] Now, this time, the Lord doesn't even wait for Moses to come to him. he just suddenly appears, verse 42. And Moses and Aaron know exactly what's about to happen. So, they rush to the tent.

But the Lord warns them to stay away, get away from the assembly yet again, so that I can put an end to them at once. And again, Moses is just concerned, not for himself, but the Lord's people. And so, he instructs Aaron, take your censer and put incense in them, along with burning coals from the altar, and hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them. Wrath has come out from the Lord.

The plague has started. And so, Aaron did exactly as Moses said and ran into the midst of the assembly. But the plague had already started. Aaron did offer the incense and made atonement for them, standing between the living and the dead.

But the plague did stop, but 14,700 people died anyway, in addition to those who had died because of Korah. then Aaron and Moses returned to the tent for the plague had stopped.

[22:16] So, yes, Aaron acted quickly, as quickly as he could, but still could not prevent the death of 14,700. God's wrath was inverted, but only partially because although the plague was stopped, not everyone was spared.

And Aaron's censer here is a bit like if you go back to Exodus, the blood of the Passover lamb because there, you know, the blood painted over the household spared the people that were within it because it had turned away God's wrath against sin.

It made atonement, the blood did, or the lamb did. And here, Aaron's incense made atonement for the people's sin, turned away God's anger. And God did do that because he was honoring his word. He had chosen Aaron to be the holy one, and therefore anyone that offered incense before him, he would accept. And so it's on that basis that even though he did not instruct Aaron to do this, when Aaron offered the incense before the Lord amongst the people, that was effective to turn away God's anger from the people even though they were sinful.

Now friends, that's the end of the chapter, but we don't like talking about God's wrath, do we? Our image of God, which is rightly so, is that he's loving, he's forgiving, he's kind.

[23:44] He is indeed all these things, but it is not inconsistent with the truth that he is also holy and just. And that's been clearly revealed to us today.

And this is a picture that is not just here and in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament. It is wrong to think that the God of the New Testament and Jesus is somehow different to the God of the Old Testament.

No, they're still the same God. He is the same God from beginning to the end. And what happened to the 250 leaders was a sign, really, of God's holiness, which the people too quickly ignored.

It just took overnight and they forgot everything. And friends, we must not make the same mistake as well. When we read the Bible and we witness God's wrath in it, when we look out at the world and we see sometimes that God's judgment comes upon the world, it's like the bronze senses around the altar.

It's meant to be a warning, it's meant to be a reminder of what happens to all sin. And friends, if God does not act against any sin, any sin, then we cannot claim that he is just.

[25:00] Which means, actually, if we don't have a just God, we can have no confidence that he will right every wrong. Every wrong that you feel like you've suffered in your life, there is no comfort

without a just God that he will deal with it one day.

Everything you look around in the news and you go, how evil that is, and you wish that God would act, only a just God will guarantee that he will act on it.

maybe not right now invisible to you, but he will act. And so we actually need a God that is absolutely just, even if that means he has to deal with our sin.

And that's the thing, we like God to deal with other people's sin, don't we? It's very hard to ask God to deal with our own sin. But the truth is, God has dealt with that sin in the person of Jesus, at the cross, isn't it?

Jesus is God's chosen one, just like Aaron was, holy. And when Jesus offered his blood, like Aaron did the incense, it does turn away God's wrath.

[26 : 14] God looks at it and he will accept it and we will be rescued just as those people will even though they were sinful from his wrath. And that's why Paul encourages us in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 verse 10 to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

And again, the passage that Joe read, for God did not appoint us to suffer wrath because he's already provided for us to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus.

He died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, that is whether we've died or, you know, we're still alive and the Lord comes again, we may live together with him. Friends, God being God has to deal with sin.

But God being God has also graciously given us his son to rescue us from his wrath. And the reality is that because we've sinned, God's wrath already hangs over all of us.

All right? It's a bit like the guillotine that's waiting to fall. But in his mercy, he's withheld it from us to give us a chance to repent.

[27 : 27] And, you know, actually, if we believe in Jesus, the guillotine has already fallen, not on us, but on Jesus, his son. But unless we repent, the fate is sin for all.

There are no exceptions. And, you know, when we look out and we see that there is judgment in the world, and sometimes we do, we shouldn't be thinking, oh, you know, these poor people, they're being judged as though, like, God was never going to judge them in the first place.

No, actually, all of us are under judgment already. And when it happens in this world, God is merely sort of bringing it forward to give us a glimpse so as that we can be warned, so that we can be reminded that it's only in Christ that we can be saved.

So that we can then draw near to God and not become like Korah and his followers, consumed or swallowed up alive. Look, this might sound all like bad news, and we don't like bad news, but if it is the truth, we need to hear it, don't we?

And actually, we also need those we love and care for to hear it. Because to withhold truth from people is actually not loving. But, you know, and we have to, you know, yes, tell them the truth, but doing it in a loving and gentle way, yes.

[28 : 47] But actually, on top of the bad news, we also should give them the good news, shouldn't we? That actually, God's wrath has been averted. And that this good news is actually way better, way more wonderful than the bad news.

It solves all the bad news, the problems that the bad news brings for us. Because God, in His love, has given us His Son to save us. So friends, if you today are still wondering whether you should believe in Jesus, let me encourage you to put your faith and trust in Jesus because only in Him will you be saved from the coming wrath.

But if we already believe, then let's also ask God for courage to tell our friends, to tell our family that Jesus has come as God's Holy One.

And if we put our trust in Him, if we humbly repent, then God will, God must, actually, because of Jesus, embrace us and accept us into His presence.

Let's pray. Father, give us, forgive us when we treat our sin lightly, when we give excuses for it and think that, oh, it doesn't really matter, it's not that, it's not that bad.

[30 : 06] And worse, still forgive us when we get angry at you for dealing justly with us. Please help us to see just how grievous it is. Please help us to run to Jesus for refuge, to be forgiven, to have life in Him and through Him find everlasting life and relationship with you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.