

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Lessons Learned in the Wilderness
(Studies in Exodus and Numbers)

A Rabbi's Story

(Numbers 16, 21)

Study #5

***Message given as a dramatic monologue, from the perspective of a first century rabbi, instructing a class in Bible history, a little more than a week after Jesus' death and resurrection.

GREETINGS AND INTRODUCTION

Shalom.

And it is good to see you back here at my home, after the brief interruption of our class schedule.

For those of you I have not yet had a chance to meet, greetings. I am Rabbi Zacharias, a long-standing member of the Sanhedrin here in Jerusalem.

I serve with the noted Torah scholar, Nicodemus, and we are led, as a group, by Rabbi Caiaphas.

And, yes, these are troubling days. The Roman military remains on high alert, even after Passover is over.

The Romans are especially wary now, since, just over a week ago, we (the Sanhedrin) orchestrated the release of the insurrectionist, the revolutionary, Barabbas.

He was released so that we could do away with the Galilean, Jesus. Jesus was put to death - by crucifixion - in Barabbas' place, and I was in hearty agreement with that plan.

And, of course, it hasn't helped settle things down now that the body of Jesus has gone missing.

I know you've heard the rumors and the reports. I suspect you're confused. But you have not come to my home today to discuss such things. You've come to learn.

So, I will ask that you ignore the soldiers outside and put out of your mind the rumors as we give ourselves, again, to the study of God's holy Word.

ORIENTING TO TODAY'S STUDY

Prior to our Passover interruption, we had been exploring the lessons God taught our people when they were in the wilderness in the days of Moses.

Today, we're continuing with those studies, and I will tell you three stories. All three of these stories reveal both God's holiness and His grace.

The first story centers around what was, unfortunately, a rather common state of affairs for our people. They were rebelling.

This is the story of Korah's rebellion.

FIRST STORY: THE DANGER OF REJECTING GOD'S ANOINTED (The Rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; 16:1-40)

KORAH IS ANGRY

Now Korah was a Levite, just as Moses was a Levite. In fact, Korah and Moses were close relatives.

Korah's family had the weighty responsibility of caring for the Ark of the Covenant. Their job was to keep the Ark and its contents safe.

It was also up to Korah's family to transport the ark from place to place.

However, Korah's family was never to touch the holy objects. That was not their place. Only Aaron, the High Priest, and his sons, the priests, were to handle the sacred things.

This arrangement made Korah angry. It offended him. And his anger was pointed right at Moses.

DATHAN AND ABIRAM ARE ANGRY

And then there were others, like Dathan and Abiram, who were angry with Moses.

Dathan and Abiram were not Levites, but were members of the tribe of Reuben, and Reuben's tribe was one of the leading tribes of Israel in Moses' day.

These two accused Moses of exalting himself above all the rest of the Jews.

They demanded, "*Moses, why should YOU be singled out as especially holy, as if you were something special?*"

WHEN POLITICS AND RELIGION MIX

Now, please notice the reasons why these men were angry.

- Korah was upset that all he and his family could do was carry the Ark, while Aaron's family got to handle the holy objects.
- Dathan and Abiram complained about the authority they saw Moses taking, authority which they wanted for themselves.

In other words, Korah's complaint was *religious*; the complaint of Dathan and Abiram was *political*.

In this case, those with religious complaints and those with political complaints combined forces to oppose God's Anointed: MOSES.

Usually, of course, the religious and the political worlds have little to do with each other. But sometimes, they do link arms.

It happened just a week ago, right here in Jerusalem.

The **Pharisees** (our people's *religious* leaders) and the **Sadducees** (those with the *political* clout) joined forces to do away with that Jesus.

As our leader, Caiaphas, put it, "***It is better that one man should die for the people, than that the whole nation should perish.***"

Here in Jerusalem, the political and the religious leaders worked shoulder to shoulder to get something done. And that is exactly what happened in the wilderness in the days of Moses.

Korah, on the religious side, linked arms with Dathan and Abiram, the political power - to oppose Moses, the Lord's anointed.

It is amazing, isn't it, to see the certainty with which Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and those with them opposed Moses!

Those rebels were confident that they were right and that Moses was NOT God's anointed. And were they ever wrong!

Friends, this story tells us that we should be very careful when we oppose Someone who claims to be God's Anointed, especially if there is evidence that He might be God's Anointed.

It is possible to be tragically and completely wrong.

(First thoughtful pause...)

MOSES PROPOSES A SHOWDOWN

Well, Moses, who was a humble man of God, proposed a test to see who was truly God's Anointed.

This was the test.

Moses challenged Korah, Dathan, and Abiram to bring a sacrifice, held in their firepans, to determine God's choice.

He told them, *"We'll know who is the Lord's Anointed when we see whose sacrifice He accepts - yours or mine, offered by Aaron."*

DATHAN AND ABIRAM ARE CONFIRMED IN THEIR REBELLION!

When Moses called the rebels to the Tabernacle, Korah was eager for the test. He thought that he would be vindicated!

Each of them - **Aaron**, along with **Korah** and two hundred and fifty others who also opposed Moses (!) and **Dathan** and **Abiram** - went to the Tabernacle to present their offerings.

And that was when God showed up in glory.

MOSES WARNS OF IMPENDING JUDGMENT! (VV. 25-30)

The people were warned to get away from the rebels' tents. Something catastrophic was coming.

The people moved back, while the opposition stood in defiance.

Moses spoke once more.

"By this you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these deeds...If these men die the death of all men, or if they suffer the fate of all men, then the Lord has not sent me.

"But if the Lord brings about an entirely new thing and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that is theirs, and they descend alive into Sheol, then you will understand that these men have spurned the Lord."

As soon as Moses finished speaking, all the people felt a tremor beneath their feet. God's judgment fell and it fell hard!

JUDGMENT STRIKES THE REBELS! (VV. 31-35)

The ground on which they were standing split wide. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed the rebels.

Tents, furnishings, everything dropped into the gaping hole. And as soon as the earth swallowed them, the hole closed over them.

Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who had joined Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in opposing Moses.

Yes. It was a severe judgment. But such high-handed rebellion merited severity.

God's justice made necessary EXACTLY this form of judgment.

It is that serious an offense to reject the one whom God has anointed.

(Second pause...)

We must all remember that lesson from the wilderness. (thoughtful)

Well, the punishment of the rebels established that Moses was the God-ordained leader. His authority to lead came from God.

And here is where we come to our second story - after the judgment against Korah and the rest of the rebels, the people GRUMBLED! (Our people grumbled A LOT in the wilderness.)

SECOND STORY: JUDGMENT TURNED AWAY BY A SACRIFICE OFFERED BY THE RIGHT MAN! (16:41-50)

THE PEOPLE GRUMBLE (V. 41)

God's Word says, ***THE NEXT DAY all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, "YOU ARE THE ONES who have caused the death of the Lord's people."***

Now, I know what you are thinking.

You're thinking, *"Moses and Aaron weren't responsible for the rebels' deaths. That was God's doing. Moses certainly didn't cause the earth to open up and swallow them! It wasn't Moses who sent fire from heaven!"*

Clearly, God was responsible for the deaths of all those people.

He put the rebels to death - and the people didn't think He should have. So, they grumbled.

The people marched straight to the Tabernacle to complain against God (!?).

And, for the second time in two days, God judged them, this time, for their grumbling ways.

WRATH BREAKS OUT! (VV. 42-45)

The cloud that symbolized God's presence hovered ominously over the Tabernacle as the people gathered.

Instantly, there was chaos. There was panic.

The grumblers were dying due to a plague from God that was moving through the crowd.

When Moses saw what was happening, he turned to Aaron, the High Priest, and told him, *"Aaron, run to the altar and lay incense on it. Quickly!"*

Moses knew that there was a way to turn aside God's holy wrath. It was by means of a sacrifice.

However, to be an effective sacrifice, it had to be done in the right way and it had to be offered by the right man.

Aaron - the High Priest - was the right man. He was the only one who could make atonement for the sins of the people.

And on that day Aaron fulfilled his High Priestly role. He was a mediator between the people and God. He stood in the gap and the plague was checked. God's wrath was turned away!

On the previous day, when Korah and the two hundred and fifty presented an offering, God's wrath was provoked.

But, here, when the rightful High Priest offered a sacrifice, God's anger was turned away!

And this is the second lesson we learn from our ancestors' experience in the wilderness: God's wrath is turned away when the right sacrifice is offered by the right man in the right way.

This is just what Nicodemus has been telling me this past week!

(Third pause...)

Now, for a third lesson from our ancestors' time in the wilderness, we'll consider a third story.

This incident took place some years after Korah's rebellion when our people had come back to the region near the Red Sea, close to the area where they had been delivered at the Exodus.

What great memories must have come to their minds as they looked out at that body of water.

Unfortunately, at this time they focused on things other than God's great deliverance.

THIRD STORY: THE WRATH OF GOD IS AVERTED BY MEANS OF A TRUSTING GAZE (21:4-9)

GOD'S PEOPLE GRUMBLE

At various points in their years in the wilderness, the people complained about manna. Manna was God's provision, but they grew tired of it. And on this occasion, they called manna, *"this miserable food."*

They also lacked water and they complained about that. They even accused Moses of having brought them out to the wilderness to kill them!

God didn't appreciate His people's grumbings and He responded by immediately sending judgment - a kind of judgment you wouldn't ever want to experience!

GOD SENDS JUDGMENT

Scripture tells us that ***the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.***

God's judgment against the people's sin by means of snakes was perfect poetic justice.

From the tragedy of the Garden of Eden forward, we have associated snakes with temptation and with sin.

So, when our people grumbled against the Lord, they were being snaky. God answered their snaky sin with a judgment of snakes.

This punishment had its intended result. The terrible judgment brought the people to repentance. They admitted their guilt before God.

GOD SENDS GRACE

"We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and you."

They begged Moses to ask God that they might be spared. They wanted the Lord to remove the serpents.

So, Moses prayed. And God responded with great grace.

But, God did not take away the serpents. The snakes even continued to bite the people. So where is the grace?

Listen!

God told Moses to make a model of a serpent out of bronze and to set it on a standard.

(Rabbi Zacharias sets up the "standard" - a cross-shaped standard and drapes the serpent/rope over it.)

(Fourth pause...)

The image of that serpent didn't protect people from being bitten. It cured those who had been bitten.

So, what did the suffering snake-bite victim have to do to be cured?

Was there some magical incantation to recite? A sacrifice to be offered?

No!

SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

The one who was bitten simply had to lift their eyes from the desert floor, look away from the serpents slithering on the ground, look away from their own wounds, and look at the bronze serpent high up on the standard.

There was no magical power in the bronze serpent.

Rather, each victim was delivered from the poison of the serpent when he or she placed their trust in the power of God to save from the serpent's bite.

Conclusion:

So, today, we have seen three stories and we learn three lessons.

- FIRST, from the story of the **rebellion** of Korah, we learn the danger of rejecting God's Anointed.
- SECOND, from the story of the **grumbling** following the rebellion, we learn that the possibility of forgiveness only comes when the right person offers the right sacrifice in the right way.

- THIRD, from the story of the **serpents**, we learn that a trusting gaze at the provision of God which is ***“lifted up”*** brings deliverance from the deadly effects of sin.

(Fifth pause...)

My friends.

As I have spoken with you today, at several points, I have recalled the words of my good friend, that most esteemed member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus.

Nicodemus has told me often of the night when he spoke with Jesus, the One we recently put to death.

Jesus had told Nicodemus that the way to life with God and the way to forgiveness of sin was by the way of faith.

He told Nicodemus to believe in Him. He claimed to be God’s Son and said that anyone who believed in Him would not perish forever, but would have eternal life.

Jesus even tied in His own story with the story of the serpents.

He told Nicodemus, ***“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must [I] be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in [Me] have eternal life.”***

Of course, when Jesus was put to death - by crucifixion - He was ***“lifted up.”***

I was there. I saw Jesus lifted up. No, I didn’t “look” to Jesus as Moses told the people to “look” to the bronze serpent.

But I saw Him lifted high. Just like that bronze serpent was lifted high.

And Nicodemus, who knows Torah far better than I, tells me that Jesus played a priestly role, like Aaron did, when he offered the sacrifice for the grumbling sin of the people.

He tells me that Jesus was a priest, and a priest of a higher order than even Aaron. Jesus was God’s Anointed - and greater than Moses.

Nicodemus tells me, too, that Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice.

That just as God’s wrath was turned away by Aaron’s sacrifice - the right sacrifice offered in the right way by the right man - so Jesus’ death turned away the wrath of God from all who trust Him - the right Man offering the right sacrifice - Himself! - in the right way.

If Korah and Dathan and Abiram had been SO CERTAIN that they were doing the right thing in opposing Moses, and yet had been SO COMPLETELY WRONG, is it possible that I was wrong to oppose Jesus?

Could we have all been wrong in putting Jesus to death?

Nicodemus and the other followers of Jesus have been saying for the last week - ever since the crucifixion and the empty tomb that Jesus died as a sacrifice for our sins.

Is it possible? Could it be that I helped put to death the Lord of glory, Messiah - God’s anointed? Have I been as guilty as Korah for rejecting God’s Anointed?

It is true. And I see it so clearly now.

He was lifted up to draw me to God. He is the Lord’s Anointed, sent to cover my sin and to turn God’s wrath away.

Jesus, I look to You now. I see you lifted up, just as Moses lifted up that bronze serpent in the wilderness. I look to You for mercy.

Because of my sin, I have been poisoned, ruined. I am hopeless and helpless. So I turn to You now. I fix my hope on You. I look to You.

And I gratefully accept the cure You offer for the disease of my sin. Hallelujah!!

Friends, I must leave now. I have a story of the amazing grace of God to tell my friends in the Sanhedrin. Shalom!