

## **Numbers 16:1-40**

### **The battle for your heart is only won by Jesus.**

“Lord keep us humble and curious...” This is my coaching prayer.

I have the privilege to coach church planters (just a few so far) and this is how I pray when we begin a session. To be humble and curious as we follow Jesus and lead his people.

I have never met a pastor that relayed that life and ministry had gone according to their plan. Every leader quickly learns that things in the Kingdom always unfold in ways we don't expect, sometimes by the work of those we don't expect.

So given that reality, being humble and curious is the best posture. Humble to know we are not God, not even that great! And curious to look for what God is up to in our midst - so we don't miss it, don't ignore the truth and the signs he gives us along the way.

This, surprisingly, is not just for pastors. It's for all of us. Our stories usually don't go as planned and with eyes healthy enough to see and years to think it through, often better than planned. Training us to trust the Lord. To trust his truth and the signs he gives as reminders along the way.

How we see the story of our lives unfolding tells the health of our heart.

When I say heart, I mean more than the organ that pumps blood throughout your body. I mean the soul, the center of who you are. It is the place of battle.

Given inclinations and desires, regularly leading away from God, war rages for territory, for us. Hearts made healthy pursue truth and life... hearts ruled by idols stumble toward death.

We see some of this battle playing out beyond the chest, in the wilderness among God's people.

In our text, this piece of the story of God's people journeying toward promise, we have an uprising, a coup against God's plan and purpose. The fruit or result of hearts that are neither humble nor curious.

Poison and Hope... both signs calling us to something better.

**Numbers 15:39** "And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to where after." (ESV)

### **Poison of the Heart**

As we have studied Numbers, I keep reading these stories and wondering when they will catch on! Over and over again, Israel is invited, commanded essentially, to trust God, and not rebel against his way. He has redeemed them out of slavery and yet they forget it and act as if they haven't been listening and paying attention.

We are in the thick of a section on rebellion, through chapter 19, rebellion against timing, against leaders, against the way of worship. Each time there is correction and a call to live differently.

All of the reminders, yet they still sip poison that kills.

Characters: Korah, a Kohathite, part of a Levitical clan responsible for moving the sacred objects of the tabernacle.

Dathan, Abiram, and On. Reubenites that partner with Korah in rebellion.

All on the south side of the camp. Proximity shares poison!

There is seemingly dissatisfaction with their roles and with the authority of the camp. Leads to rebellion and "goes too far."

These guys "took men" and rose up before Moses with a number of people of Israel and 250 chiefs of the congregation - influential men.

**Numbers 16:3** “They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, “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?” (ESV)

Up to now, the challenges have either been to Moses’s leadership or to the sovereign rule of the LORD (still some of that here). As Korah tells it, perhaps unsurprisingly, the focus switches to that other great institution, the priesthood.

The section is best understood as containing two interlinked rebellions: the first is clearly about the priesthood and concerns Korah (to whom 16:4–11 is addressed). The second is more generally about leadership and concerns Dathan and Abiram.

Priestly and Political, both clinging to half-truths as reason for rebellion.

“all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them.”

Korah would like to be the priest. Where Aaron and his sons were set aside for priestly ministry, worship before the altar in the tent of meeting - sacrifices, other levites had the responsibilities of moving and caring for the tabernacle and its contents. Seemingly not as important or glamorous.

There is some truth here in the argument - Israel is meant to be a holy nation, all of them, but that being true doesn’t override the order God has established.

And yes, Yahweh is among the people, but he is the one that calls the shots!

“Their argument here is a classic case of a false conclusion constructed on a true premise. It was certainly true that the whole community of Israel was holy: God had called them to be “a kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6). It was also true that the Lord was with the Israelites: he had promised to dwell in the midst of them and be their God (Exodus 29:45)” But their conclusion leads them to reject God’s way.

From a place of privilege too. Korah is subverting authority (how long did he stir up this kind of thinking among his camp and that of Reuben?), and he is challenging the order of the camp, but he is not “the little guy.”

**Numbers 16:7b–10** “You have gone too far, sons of Levi!” [8] And Moses said to Korah, “Hear now, you sons of Levi: [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, [10] 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?” (ESV)

Like the pigs in George Orwell’s novel *Animal Farm* (do we still read that?), the rebels wanted a society in which everyone was equal, with some people (themselves) being “more equal” than others.

But it is not really a challenge to Moses as leader or Aaron as priest...

**Numbers 16:11** “Therefore it is against the LORD that you and all your company have gathered together. What is Aaron that you grumble against him?” (ESV)

The Reubenites wouldn’t even face Moses as they too fall for half-truths that poison their hearts.

**Numbers 16:12–14** “And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and they said, “We will not come up. [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? [14] Moreover, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up.” (ESV)

Moses isn’t the type of leader they want... being pragmatic!

Sure there was abundance in Egypt but it wasn’t theirs, it was their slavery. And yeah, you haven’t been brought into the Promised Land yet because of your disobedience! It’s still coming.

Where Korah wants to rewrite the script on how to worship, Dathan and the boys reject authority. Both swallowing half-truths as poison, inciting the people to despise Yahweh.

The way it's always been.

**Genesis 3:1–4** “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” [2] And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” [4] But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die.” (ESV)

The woman saw the fruit of the tree and it was a delight to her eyes... that which the people are warned not to whore after, disobeyed.

Not only an old story, it is our experience.

**2 Timothy 4:3–4** “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, [4] and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” (ESV)

Novel takes on Scripture that prompt following after selfish hearts, eyes, passions, are usually wrong.

“I am created by God... so God wants me to follow these desires...” ignores the falls and God’s call to something better, truer.

“Jesus was a man that lived as a good example for us...” ignores that he is God, King of the universe who will judge the living and the dead.

“God wants me to be happy...” ignoring that he wants us to be holy to and happy in him.

Here Israel, God's blessed people, are called to live in his way, under his rule, and they will be blessed. Sacrifice self for his purpose, where real life is found... but they prefer poison.

Moses says "let God decide." Korah and the 250 burn incense before the Lord along with Aaron, see who God chooses.

Then God says - watch out! Get away from the dwellings of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.

**Numbers 16:26** "And he [Moses] spoke to the congregation, saying, "Depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins." (ESV)

Sin spreads, infects.

**Numbers 16:27** "So they got away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. And Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, together with their wives, their sons, and their little ones." (ESV) Here are the Mothers...

Moses says that if these guys live and die a natural death they are right, but if God does something new, then their rebellion is wrong. And as soon as he says it, the ground opens up and swallows them and they "went down alive into Sheol." Fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men and Korah... only Aaron is left.

The conclusion of the passage shows us clearly the falsehood of the charges against Moses and Aaron.

Despising the LORD leads to rebellion, which leads to death. Half-truths used as poison.

### **Hope for the Heart**

I know this doesn't seem like a hopeful text but as usual there are hints at God's redeeming love here.

There is a mediator that intercedes for the people.

**Numbers 16:20–22** “And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, [21] “Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.” [22] And they fell on their faces and said, “O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and will you be angry with all the congregation?” (ESV)

Wrath falls on those that rebelled and because Moses intervenes he can warn away the people - saving them.

‘Don’t get caught up in the sin of others, stick with the whole truth, the Creator of truth.’

The people hear it because of this mediator. And they are given a sign to remember (the bronze censers made plates on the altar). Even some descendants of Korah were freed from the hooks of half-truths and they Sons of Korah lead worship.

So how is this hope for us? When we have itching ears, when we are dissatisfied with the story of our lives and how it is playing out, when we want a different role...

How does this give us hope on Mother’s day... when we are tired from taking care of kids and putting up with husbands... when the world’s song of ‘follow your heart’ sounds so sweet?

There is a mediator that is greater than Moses.

**John 14:1–7** “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. [2] In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? [3] And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. [4] And you know the way to where I am going.” [5] Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” [6] Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except

through me. [7] If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (ESV)

There is no other plan, one way through the wilderness and into promise. One truth to cling to.

**Matthew 16:24** “Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (ESV)

As Israel is called to set aside the inclinations of the poisoned heart, so we are called to deny self, deny half-truths, live in his way and do so now with his power.

Every other way is loss.

Because Jesus takes on our eyes, our hearts, our souls and says by my finished work on the cross and through my Spirit in you I am changing them. I am writing your story and working it all out for my glory. New longings, new rest, something worth living for.

And Jesus is our sign, there is forgiveness for those who once despised the Lord. There is life to be found in him. Let him win your heart.

When things don't go as expected, when our plans miss the mark, when we are not sure we are walking in the right direction through the wilderness... we have an answer to hold on to.

“The cross is also the answer to our doubts about the Lord's presence and effectiveness in our lives. Like Dathan and Abiram, we may sometimes question the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We perhaps expected greater successes or more comfortable circumstances, and so we ask, “What is life doing with me? Why is my situation so much worse than it used to be or than I think it ought to be?”

These questions are not wrong in themselves, but they can easily spill over into an angry resentment toward God and those he has set in authority over us. The reality is that in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, God is neither dead nor absent. Life is not doing anything with us; it is the sovereign God who is doing something with us. The cross reminds us that whatever the difficulties of



our present situation, God does care about us. Whatever people may have done to us, God is still in control.” ID

In the light of the cross we may be confident that in the end he will indeed bring us to the place he has prepared for us, where all of our disappointments will be over, transformed by the joy of his presence.

**The battle for your heart is only won by Jesus.**

**Cling to the truth.** See Jesus in his word. Don't settle for half-truths.

**Run to Jesus.** For forgiveness. Purpose. Passion. Ask him to help you see.

### **Psalm 106:43–48**

[43] Many times he delivered them,  
but they were rebellious in their purposes  
and were brought low through their iniquity.

[44] Nevertheless, he looked upon their distress,  
when he heard their cry.

[45] For their sake he remembered his covenant,  
and relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

[46] He caused them to be pitied  
by all those who held them captive.

[47] Save us, O LORD our God,  
and gather us from among the nations,  
that we may give thanks to your holy name  
and glory in your praise.

[48] Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,  
from everlasting to everlasting!  
And let all the people say, “Amen!”  
Praise the LORD! (ESV)