



God Judges Rebellion

Lesson Focus

Three men rebelled against Moses and Aaron's God-given leadership. God judged them by supernaturally opening the earth and swallowing them up. The people blamed Moses and Aaron and continued to complain. God sent fiery serpents that killed some. Only those who looked to the bronze serpent were saved from God's judgment.

Key Passages

Numbers 16, 21:4–9; John 3:14–15

What You Will Learn

- How God judged Korah for his rebellion against Moses.
- How God showed mercy to the Israelites through the bronze serpent.

Memory Verse

Deuteronomy 7:9 Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.

Prepare to Learn

Scriptural Background

After hearing the report of the 10 spies about giants in the land, the Israelites refused to enter the promised land. For their rebellion, God decreed that all the people would wander in the wilderness for 40 years until the adults perished. Only Joshua and Caleb, the spies who gave a positive report and urged the people to trust God for victory, would get to take possession of the promised land along with the Israelites under age 20 (Numbers 14:28–32).

During the wilderness wanderings, several men instigated a rebellion against the leadership of Moses, Aaron, and ultimately, God. Korah was from the tribe of Levi and a cousin of Moses and Aaron. He desired leadership and authority. Korah gathered 250 Israelite leaders, including Dathan and Abiram who were leaders from the tribe of Reuben. They assembled against Moses and Aaron, claiming that all the Israelites were holy because God dwelt among them. Then they accused Moses and Aaron of exalting themselves to positions of authority (Numbers 16:1–3). Moses proposed a test where God would show whom he wanted to be priests. Moses recognized that pride and jealousy were behind the men's actions. They were not only challenging his and Aaron's authority but also God's since he appointed them (Numbers 16:11). Dathan and Abiram refused to even answer

Moses' summons to talk. They falsely accused him of making himself a prince, trying to kill them in the wilderness, and not leading them into the promised land. These lies made Moses angry, and he asked the Lord to justify him (Numbers 16:12–15).

The next day, the rebels and the leaders assembled at the entrance of the tent of meeting. This rebellious gathering incurred the wrath of the Lord, who was ready to destroy the whole congregation of Israel if Moses and Aaron had not interceded for them. Instead, God in his mercy told Moses to warn the Israelites to move away from Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and their dwellings (Numbers 16:23–26). Moses said that if God miraculously opened the earth and swallowed up the rebels, then the people would know that these men “despised the LORD” (Numbers 16:30). When he finished speaking, God did exactly that—an earthquake split the ground open, and those men, their families, and their belongings fell into the chasm—and the earth closed over them. The Israelites panicked and fled. Then fire from the Lord consumed the 250 leaders who were vying for the priesthood (Numbers 16:31–35).

In spite of these judgments, the Israelites continued to complain. The next day, they accused Moses of killing the rebels and leaders. God

responded by sending a plague that was only halted by Aaron making atonement for them (Numbers 16:47–50). Later in their travels, the people became desperate and grumbled for water. Moses and Aaron did not follow God’s instructions for providing water from a rock, and for their disobedience, God said they would not enter the promised land either (Numbers 20:8–12). The complaining continued when the people griped about food and water, even saying they hated the manna God provided (Numbers 21:5). This time, God judged them with fiery

serpents that bit the people, causing many to die. The people recognized their sin and came to Moses and asked him to pray on their behalf. God answered with an amazing picture of the coming Savior. He had Moses make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole in the camp. Anyone who was bitten by the snakes could look to the serpent and be healed (Numbers 21:6–9). Just as the bronze serpent saved the people from physical death, Christ was raised on a cross so that all who look to him for salvation may be saved from eternal death (John 3:14–15).

Historical/Apologetics Background

People may wonder why God instructed Moses to make the bronze serpent for the people to look to for healing. But there are several lessons God wanted to teach his people. First, God was teaching them about faith. There was nothing supernatural in the bronze serpent that could heal them; only God could do that. But he wanted the people to have faith in his Word that they would be healed if they looked to it. Second, the serpent on the pole was also a reminder of their sin, which brought the judgment of the poisonous snakes. Finally, God was giving a picture of the coming Savior. Just as the serpent was raised up on a pole, so Jesus was raised up on the cross to suffer. The people had to believe God would save them when they looked to the serpent, and we must believe in Christ’s sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection to be saved from eternal death (John

3:14–15). Unfortunately, even this great picture of salvation was twisted for pagan worship. Years later in the promised land, the Israelites worshipped the bronze serpent until King Hezekiah destroyed it (2 Kings 18:4). How easy it was for them to slip into pagan practices instead of worshipping God alone.

One question that arises from Korah’s rebellion and God’s judgment is why the families of the rebels were destroyed along with the men. Numbers 16:27 records that Dathan and Abiram came out of their tents and stood with their wives, sons, and little ones. When the earth opened up, Korah and these men, along with their households and possessions, fell alive into the pit, and the earth closed over them (Numbers 16:32–33). This may seem like a harsh punishment for the families of those men, but there are several things to keep in mind. First, all people, no matter

their age, are sinners by nature deserving of God’s wrath. It is only by his great mercy that we are not all consumed (Lamentations 3:22–23 KJV). Second, God emphasized the seriousness of rebellion by including the families in the punishment. Rebellion spreads and affects others. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram involved the 250 leaders from other tribes. The Bible even lists rebellion with the sin of witchcraft (1 Samuel 15:23). God knew that the Israelites would not survive as a fledgling nation if they rebelled against his authority and his appointed leaders. They had to be unified in their obedience to God and his laws. This lesson had to be memorable for the people, and it was. Over 1,000 years later, Jude warns against false teachers who reject God’s authority and follow in the footsteps of Korah’s rebellion (Jude 1:8, 1:11). Finally, God still demonstrated mercy in this account. Moses told the men to return the next day, which gave them time to repent, but they didn’t. He also showed mercy to the people by warning them to remove themselves from the rebellious men. Korah’s sons heeded this warning and were spared (Numbers 26:11), and their descendants would include the prophet Samuel, musicians in the service of King David (1 Chronicles 6:31–38), and warriors in David’s

army (1 Chronicles 12:6). God would have been just to punish all the people for assembling against him, but they were spared. Although the people didn’t heed the warning—even in the miracle of an earthquake—and spoke against Moses the following day, God mercifully allowed Aaron to stand in the gap for them to stop the ensuing plague (Numbers 16:41–48).

These accounts of rebellion and judgment should be warnings to us. In fact, the Apostle Paul said that they were written down for our instruction (1 Corinthians 10:1–13). The apostle warns us not to desire evil, not to indulge in sexual immorality, and not to put Christ to the test or grumble as some of them did. Like they were, we, too, are weak and prone to sin. But thankfully, God gives us this promise: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). May we take the way of escape that God provides. And when we don’t, may we have soft hearts to recognize our sin and confess it quickly, looking to Jesus for forgiveness and cleansing!

Studying God’s Word

How can staring at a bronze serpent heal a snake bite?

Take notes as you study the following passages.

Korah's Rebellion

Numbers 16

Numbers 26:9–11

Fiery Serpents

Numbers 21:4–9

The Serpent and the Son Activity

In the early days of Jesus' ministry, he had a late-night encounter with Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. You have probably read the account, and maybe you have wondered what the serpent being lifted up was all about. Read John 3:9–12 and answer the following questions.

1. What does the phrase "lifted up" mean (also see John 8:28, 12:30–34)?
2. Who is the Son of Man?
3. What is the purpose of the Son of Man being lifted up?
4. What parallels can you draw between the bronze serpent passage and what Jesus describes in this passage?

5. What ever happened to the bronze serpent? (See 2 Kings 18:4.)

Application

1. We know that God has instituted authority structures in our lives. Parents are to lead children (Ephesians 6:1–3). Husbands are to lead their wives (Colossians 3:18). Elders are to lead the local church (Hebrews 13:17). Why has God provided this structure, and how does this relate to the account of Korah’s rebellion?
2. Some people claim that there is no physical evidence for the existence of the Israelites in Sinai for 40 years. How does Jesus refute this claim in John 3?
3. As you consider the provision God made for the Israelites amid their constant grumbling, in what ways do you act the same way? Is there an area of God’s provision that you find yourself unsatisfied with?
4. If you find yourself being discontent with the situation you are in, how can you confess that as sin and direct your thinking toward being content?
5. How does seeing the provision of the serpent in the wilderness and Jesus connecting that account to himself help you understand or trust God more?
6. What do the two accounts we have looked at today remind you about the character of man and the character of God?



Prayer Requests
