

INTRODUCTION

In our last message, Korah the Levite and three people from the tribe of Reuben gathered 250 leaders to accuse Moses and Aaron. They felt that the two leaders put themselves above the other Israelites. The fact was that Korah did not want to serve in the sanctuary only. He had an ambition to become a priest. Korah challenged the authority of God, even when God had made it clear that only Aaron and his descendants were chosen to be priests. We shall see the consequences of the rebellion in the second half of chapter 16. Even in these negative events, there are some positive lessons we can learn from. Moses and Aaron were victims of malicious attack. When we are falsely accused, we may feel sad or angry. We may pray that God will exercise justice. Those are natural reactions. But we see in the passage that Moses and Aaron prayed for those who accused them. They asked God to show mercy to the sinners. That is something we should learn. God can bestow His grace to sinners through our prayer. We will take some time to understand the stories first, then we will leave the applications to the very end of our discussion. We can roughly divide the passage into two scenes like a movie. We see in scene 1 that God judged the insurgents. Then in scene 2 God judged the recalcitrant people.

EXPLANATION

1. 第一幕：神審判奪權份子 Scene 1: God Judged the Insurgents (v. 19-24, 28-38)

First, God judged the insurgents. Korah stirred up everyone to accuse Moses and Aaron. Once again, God revealed Himself in His glory to protect the two servants. He spoke to them in **verse 21**: “Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once.” God asked Moses and Aaron to leave so that He could destroy the rest of the people. God had the same intent in chapter 14. The Israelites sided with the 10 spies. They grumbled against God and wanted to go back to Egypt. God appeared in His glory. He told Moses that He would wipe out the whole assembly, then raised up Moses’ descendants to occupy Canaan. In that incident, God listened to Moses’ intercession for his people. God did not take the lives of His people in an instant. This time when the Israelites followed Korah to rebel against God, the Lord decided to annihilate all His people too. Just like the previous occasion, Moses and Aaron interceded for their rebellious peers. Look at **verse 22**: But Moses and Aaron fell facedown and cried out, “O God, God of the spirits of all mankind, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?” The “one man” could be referred to Korah, since he was the main insurgent. It could also be an analogy. It is like we Chinese say: the sole offender should be responsible for all his fault. Moses and Aaron were merciful to their fellow Israelites. They knew better that no one was innocent in their repeated sins toward God. Here we see the heart of a godly leader. Moses and Aaron faced malicious attack over and over again. Just like any human, Moses showed his weakness when he complained to God, and he wanted to quit. But yet, Moses and Aaron begged God to spare the lives of the Israelites. We see a similar example in **Genesis 18:25** when Abraham interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah: “Far be it from you to do such a thing - to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Abraham pleaded that God would not destroy the two

cities completely if He could find a few righteous people there. Abraham might have the family of his nephew Lot in mind. They lived in Sodom. As for the rest of the citizens in general, they committed grave immoral sins. They were guilty as charged. However, Abraham showed compassion to the sinful people. I often display self-righteousness. For example, I can easily be irritated by drivers who tail-gate me. I thought: “How I wish a police car is waiting down the road to catch that reckless man!” Then if I do not see any police car, I feel even worse, wondering if there is any justice in the society. Lord, have mercy on my wicked heart! God listened to the intercession of Moses and Aaron just like He did before. He changed His mind and decided to wipe out the main culprits only. God ordered people to stay away from the tents of the insurgents before He exercised His judgment. Then Moses told his people in **verse 30**: “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 into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt.” God would use a supernatural way to discipline the sinners. It was a proof of their contempt toward God. Right after Moses finished his statement, things happened just as he said. It could have been an earthquake or some form of natural disaster God used to declare His penalty. Here the word “grave” can mean a pit. At this point in the history of Israel, God had yet to reveal the truth about heaven and hell. The Hebrews had a vague concept that there was a “grave” under the earth where dead people would go to wait for God’s judgment. In Moses’ reply, he cared more about God’s glory than his own reputation. The rebellious people attacked Moses. But ultimately, they showed contempt to God. After judging the “gang leaders,” God dealt with the 250 followers. Look at **verse 35**: And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense. After those men perished, God asked Moses to hammer the 250 censers into sheets to cover the altar. Some Bible scholars thought that it should be the altar for incense, not for burnt offering. God cited two reasons for doing that. First, since incense was presented to God in the censers, those vessels had become sacred items. Therefore, they now belonged to God and should not be reused for another purpose. Second, the overlay would serve as a constant reminder of the incident to the Israelites. The lesson is spelled out in **verse 40**: ...This was to remind the Israelites 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. God reiterated whom He had chosen to serve in priesthood.

2. 第二幕：神審判頑固份子 Scene 2: God Judged the Recalcitrant (v. 41-50)

God judged the insurgents. More than 250 died. We may think that God’s discipline should keep the rest silent. The passage tells us that on the very next day the whole assembly came out to protest again! God had no other choice but to judge the recalcitrant people. Look at **verse 41**: The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. “You have killed the Lord’s people,” they said. We may wonder: how can people be so dumb and stubborn? We can go check the mirror. We are like them too when we fail to admit our sins! God may use some severe means to warn us. In this case, God chose to declare His punishment. If you compare the two scenes, it is not hard to find a few similar details: some people gathered to oppose Moses and Aaron, the glory of God appeared, God announced that He would kill everyone, and Moses and Aaron fell face-down to plead for their people. A major difference in scene two is that God administered His judgment without waiting for Moses to make an appeal. It was unthinkable that people grumbled again on the next day after they saw God’s discipline. God is patient toward our sins. But we should not abuse His grace as a license to indulge in sin. Paul said in **Romans 2:4-5**

– 4 Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance? 5 But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. Paul was warning non-believers. One day Jesus will come back and judge the world. People should come to repentance before it is too late. The Christians among us need to take note too. Sin will not cut off our relationship with the Lord after we are saved. However, sin will impact our fellowship with God. It is like when you offended your spouse or good friend, you feel embarrassed to face that person. Harmony will only be restored when you apologize and forgiveness is granted. Our sins grieve God’s heart. He patiently waits for us to turn back from sin. But we should never take God’s grace for granted. In this incident, God dealt with the Israelites as they deserved. When Moses saw that God’s judgment had begun, he quickly asked Aaron to take action to minimize the casualty. Read [verse 46](#): Then Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer and put incense in it, along with fire from the altar, and hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them. Wrath has come out from the Lord; the plague has started.” The phrase “make atonement” means to cover. Here it has a sense of curbing the wrath of God over sins, so that He would stop punishing His people. It sounds unusual to burn incense to atone for people’s sin. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, an animal had to be offered to God for Him to pardon sin. There are a few possible reasons for this ritual of burning incense. First, the plague had been activated and there was no time to kill an animal and burn it on the altar. Also, previously 250 plus men presented “unauthorized” incense in their own censers. The result was God’s discipline. Therefore, the remedy would be to offer incense in the proper way God had ordained. Moreover, in the Bible, burning of incense has a symbolic meaning for prayer. For example, we can refer to [Revelation 5:8](#) - And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. The apostle John saw a vision of heaven. There were 24 elders worshipping before the Lord. As part of their worship, they presented bowls of incense. The verse elaborates that the incense was the prayer of Christians. In our story, the incense represents the prayer of Moses and Aaron. The ceremony did work. We see a dramatic effect in [verse 48](#): He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped. Aaron ceased God’s punishment. I can picture a plot in a sci-fi movie where some bad guys are attacking people. The latter group is unable to withstand the evil force. Some are killed and others injured. Then a hero appears. He holds a mystical gizmo in his hand. The super-power from the gadget forms a shield to protect his peers so that the bad company can no longer hurt anyone. This is how I understand the effect of Aaron’s incense. Take notice that as Aaron performed this ritual, he would be polluted by the dead bodies. Hence, he suffered ceremonial uncleanness when he saved his people. Even when Aaron was able to end the plague, 14,700 Israelites had perished as a result.

CONCLUSION

Moses and Aaron interceded for the people who offended them. But the two leaders understood that the Israelites did not only sin against them, most importantly, they sinned against God. They challenged God’s authority. God showed His grace by answering the two servants’ prayer. Today, God also gives Christians the same privilege to intercede for others. For example, you may be praying for your non-believing family members and friends. So far, they do not have any interest in the gospel. However, God continues to show patience toward them because of your

prayer. Do not give up yet. Keep on praying that someday God will open their hearts to receive Him. When we look at our world, we see the rampant of sins. One tragedy of gun violence after another. Innocent people are oppressed by those who have power. Individuals and even governments act immorally. We cry out for God's justice. We wonder why Jesus does not come back immediately and deal with sins. One reason is because God is patience toward those who do not know Him. **2 Peter 3:9** reads: The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. He listens to His faithful children who intercede for sinners, saying: "Lord, have mercy on those who sin against you." God is being patient to His children too when they sin. Many people like the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." The inspiration of the song came from **Lamentations 3:22-23** – 22 Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. 23 They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. Prophet Jeremiah was devastated that Israel was defeated by Babylon. His people were sent into exile. Jeremiah clearly understood that it was a means of God's discipline to His people. They breached God's covenant. The kings led people to idolatry. There was injustice in the society. But there was hope. God is always faithful to those who repent. When Jeremiah focused on God's unchanging character, he found joy. God encouraged His people through the prophet in **Jeremiah 29:12-13** – 12 "Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." God prophesied that one day His rebellious people would turn back to Him. He promised that after 70 years of exile His people would return to their homeland. God was willing to listen to the prayer of His children. God gave them opportunity to turn back even when they were in their stubbornness of sins. Jeremiah interceded for his people. Between God and us, there is a perfect mediator. He is our Lord, Jesus Christ. Paul asked a rhetorical question in **Romans 8:34** – Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Paul argued that there is nothing that can separate those who are in Christ from God's love. Think about it: Jesus intercedes for us! He has direct access to the Heavenly Father. Jesus intercedes for us even when we have burdens in our hearts and do not know how to pray. He intercedes for us when we are low in faith. He intercedes for us even when we wander in sins and do not want to seek God's face. Jesus has all the authority in His hand to get rid of sinners. But He taught us in **Matthew 5:44** to "...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven..." Think about that: sons and daughters of the Heavenly Father. Who are your enemies today? It may be a colleague or your supervisor who steal credit for your work. It may be a good friend who betrayed you in the past. Or it could be a neighbor who show prejudice toward people of a different race. You are offended by their attitudes and actions. You cry "unfair" and you pray to God. You ask God to pay back to them for how they hurt you. We learn from our story today that there is another way to pray for those who are unkind to you. You can intercede for them. Instead of asking for God to show justice, you ask God to show mercy. You ask God to change their hearts so that they know ultimately, they sin against God. If God can save your soul when you were disobedient and ignorant, He can save their souls too. When you intercede for a sinner like that, it proves that you are a child of the Heavenly Father.