

## “YOU’VE GONE TOO FAR”

Numbers 16:1-7,28-34

by Rev Alan Jackson

Often it’s the little things that bother us the most. Relatively minor items sometimes give voice to larger frustrations. Something as simple as leaving the cap off the toothpaste will annoy us far beyond what is warranted. Someone will explode over what he or she terms “the last straw” – only to realize that the vexing thing in question really was just that: a straw, something of very little consequence.

When we’re unhappy about something, we’ll often reach for the trivial to vent our feelings. It was the same for Israel. The people had refused to enter the Promised Land and therefore had been consigned to wander in the desert for forty more years. Those were difficult times. But God had not abandoned them. He still provided them with manna every day. He still guided them and directed their lives by delivering advice and commands through Moses.

In fact, Numbers 15 contains a number of regulations designed to help the people lead holy lives. And the chapter concludes with a stipulation that all of the Israelites were to sew tassels with little blue cords onto the corners of their clothing. These tassels were designed to help the people remember God at all times and so keep his ways.

It was a small thing, really – just some simple tassels attached to the bottoms of their coats. Yet it would seem that this little regulation was the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. No sooner did Moses relay this new sartorial requirement to the people and three key leaders, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, marched up to Moses and said, *“You made that up! God doesn’t care what we wear! Little blue cords? Tassels Schmassels! Give us a break, Moses. You’ve gone too far. Do you think you’re the only holy man in Israel? Well you’re not! We think God has declared **all** of us holy. What’s more, we don’t think that tassel idea is from God. For all we know you’re getting kickbacks from the haberdasher’s union. So stop setting yourself up as God’s mouthpiece and accept that God speaks to each of our hearts equally. In fact, maybe God prefers to speak through us and not you.”*

Granted, that’s a bit of conjecture on my part. The text doesn’t specify what prompted Korah and company to bring those charges. But I think it hardly coincidental that the text goes directly from the rule about tassels to this rebellion. That would seem to be confirmed later in verse 28 when Moses says, *“This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things and that it was not*

*my idea.*” Apparently Korah and crew were challenging Moses’ authority to speak for God.

So Moses replied, *“Fine! Since you seem to think that God is speaking reliably to all of our hearts and not just to me, let’s test it out. If in the coming days nothing unusual happens to all of you, then you win and I will henceforth leave it up to each individual person to be his own divine interpreter. But if (lets just say for the sake of argument) if the ground would happen to open up and swallow you all alive, then we’ll know that you are wrong.”*

Imagine how that must have struck Moses’ detractors. Suppose you and I were having a theological disagreement, and I said, *“I’ll tell you what: if in the next 24 hours nothing unusual happens, I’ll concede the point. But if in the next five minutes your nose turns seven different shades of purple and then drops off your face onto the floor, then I win.”* Now, if I were to say such a thing, you would understandably conclude that I was not playing with a full deck. Fair enough. But you’d have to admit that if it did happen, it would be a real clincher!

That’s evidently how it was with Moses and his opponents. No one had ever heard of the earth splitting open to swallow someone alive. So Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were undoubtedly just starting to grin at each other when they felt the first temblor beneath their feet. *“What a nut case!”* they were probably thinking. *“First tassels and now this.”* Then suddenly like a great monster, the earth opened its jaws, and into it these men and every trace of their families and possessions disappeared. Then the mouth snapped shut.

It really is a dreadful story! And what are we to make of it? I suppose this story is open to any number of interpretations. It might be an object lesson on the dire consequences of envy. Or it may be a story given to legitimize the long-standing tradition of having ordained leaders to guide God’s people – first in Israel and later in the church.

But as I thought about it, what struck me was that at stake here was nothing less than the authority of God’s revealed Word. This harsh story may have been given to illustrate just how fiercely God is determined to get his saving Word across to the world. At that point in history, it’s clear that Moses was God’s sovereign choice to communicate with His people. In fact, Moses’ authority as God’s man was such that, if you did not believe what Moses said – if, like Korah, Dathan and Abiram, you decided that any person’s ideas about God’s will were just as valid as anyone else’s, including Moses’ – then you effectively cut yourself off from the true Word of God.

But for Israel to cut herself off from God’s Word would threaten the whole project of salvation. To democratize revelation, to say that the people could decide what they would believe and what they would not believe about God’s will, undercut everything God was up to. And from the time of Abraham forward it had

been clear that what God was up to was a grand salvage project of the whole creation. Small wonder, then, that the creation itself becomes a key player in the punishment of the sin we find in Numbers 16. This is classic biblical imagery.

Go back to the very beginning. Ever since the time of Adam and Eve, The creation has reacted to human sin. As a result of sin, God predicted that the ground would cause hardships for Adam's future agricultural pursuits. Soon after God spoke that word we witnessed the tragic story of Cain murdering his brother Abel. And what happened there? The ground opened its mouth to receive Abel's spilled blood, and then cried out to God. As a result, Cain the farmer was banished forever from growing plants. Try as he may, Cain was told that the ground would no longer cooperate with him – his green thumb had turned red with his brother's blood.

And the creation was also the primary dramatic stage for Moses' confrontations with Pharaoh in Egypt. What were all those plagues if not God's way of fighting the chaos of Pharaoh with the chaos of creation gone berserk? What God was up to in rescuing the Israelites from Egypt was infinitely more than just some isolated political goal of establishing a new little nation for himself. Ultimately God was aiming at the restoration of the whole creation; and so God used the weapons of that same creation to get Israel out of Egypt. That's also why the short-term goal of Israel's redemption was the Promised Land. That good land flowing with milk and honey was only a foretaste of humanity's return to Eden – the redemption of all creation.

But for this big project of redeeming creation to happen, God was going to have to get the truth of his Word and of his intentions and of his plans across to the world. So whenever the revelation of this unfolding redemptive drama got threatened, as it did when Korah and company came to believe that they knew the mind of God as well as Moses did, then the very creation would react accordingly. To put it bluntly: Stand in the way of God's creation renewal and creation will eat you alive.

I suspect there is a prudent warning for our age to be found in this story as well. We, too, live in a democratic era. We live in a time when the popular assumption is that personal experience trumps all other ways of knowing. And within Christian circles one of the first victims of this democratic spirit is none other than the Bible – the book that Christians throughout the ages have regarded as the revelation of God's nature, character, plans, intentions, and salvation history.

Today you'll find the Bible often set aside in favor of new ways of knowing. Sometimes it happens through what is called a "hermeneutic of suspicion." The default setting in the minds of some interpreters is that the Bible, (along with many antiquated documents – including Shakespeare's plays and the philosophies of

some dead white European males) was actually written to sanction various historical abuses – of minorities and slaves and women, for example.

Consequently, some “theologians” have decided that the Bible can never be our primary source of information about God or life. Instead we must begin with our own experience. We then critically assess all of life, including the Bible, only in that experiential light. What’s more, if our experience conflicts with something the Bible tries to teach, it would be simply retrograde and anachronistic to allow the Bible to trump the authority of our own experience.

Some scholars have now altogether dispensed with the idea of the Bible as the authority in matters relating to the faith. The Bible for some has become a conversation partner – a friend. But you know how it is with friends, even good ones: sometimes you agree, sometimes you disagree and go your separate ways. So also with Scripture: it’s not a bad place to begin a conversation, but it will not necessarily be the place where you’ll end up. Sometimes we have to say to our friend the Bible, *“I respect your ideas, but I just can’t live that way myself. So let’s agree to disagree but still try to remain friends, OK?”*

Philosopher Charles Taylor has noted that what we see today is the confluence of a number of streams of thought. The democratic spirit of the age, the Reformation notion that each believer can read the Bible for himself or herself, the particular spin that our individualistic age puts on the idea of “the priesthood of all believers,” the general arrogance of our modern and postmodern era, the information explosion that makes us believe that we now understand everything: all of these various streams have combined into a raging river that threatens to carry out to sea the wisdom of the past – including the Bible.

There was a time not so many years ago in which “home” was wherever you were born and your identity in life was often pretty well determined by whatever it was your parents had done. There are few younger people today who have anything like that. Their world is fluid. A college student today is likely to attend a school far away from wherever it is Mom and Dad are currently living (if Mom and Dad are even still married). From that university in another state, the student may well spend a semester in England in the course of which she may take a weekend away to visit Paris where she’ll grab a cappuccino at an Internet cafe from which she will send an email to her best friend who is spending the semester studying in Brazil. Such freedom of movement, the fluidity in relationships, the great distances across which friendships are spanned would have been unimaginable to people fifty years ago.

Many of this generation believe that their identity isn’t given to them by someone else; identity needs to be discovered. What’s more, the best way to discover identity as well as truth is through experience. So for some of these same folks, handing them a creed or a catechism or even a Bible and saying, *“Here is*

*the truth for your life as it was defined hundreds or thousands of years ago” just doesn’t sit very well (at least not initially). In today’s culture it is easy to join the ranks of Korah and Dathan, and Abiram and say, “Has God spoken only in this old book? Hasn’t he spoken also to us? Aren’t we all spiritual beings who can follow our own consciences into all truth?”*

Of course, we need some balance here. We believe that God does speak to us through the sciences, and culture, through non-Christians, and yes through what we experience in our lives. We believe that all Christians have God-given, Spirit-led insight into life. But we dare not forget that God is at work on a salvation project far bigger and grander than any one of us. To accomplish this goal God has been working for millennia to get his Word across and to get it down reliably as the truth for all generations. There is far too much at stake here to believe that God would ever leave his truth and his plan of salvation merely open-ended and loose.

When Korah first went to Moses, he said, “*Now you’ve gone too far!*” Later Moses told Korah and company, “*No, you’ve gone too far.*” And indeed they had. Sadly, in some quarters these days, going far away from God’s Word has become standard operating procedure. But, as Paul reminds us in Romans 8, the whole creation is holding its breath and standing on tiptoes in eager expectation... of what? Of seeing humanity realize how bright it is? No, the creation is waiting for the children of God to be revealed – it is waiting, in other words, for the truth about God’s Christ to burst forth.

It’s common for people these days to assume that anyone can find eternal life by following some “inner light.” The trouble is that, as often as not, that “inner light” turns out to be nothing more than the reflection of one’s own ego. We Christians do no one any favors if we allow the arrogance of our culture to dump the revelation of God’s Word. It is only that revealed Word that can take us where we so dearly want to go. Jesus said, and he says it still in the inspired Scripture God has given: “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” That is God’s plan. And it is the biblical road anybody can take to the only life that matters – forever.

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