**HEADING FOR THE PROMISED LAND - Numbers 16 -  EXIT RAMP 6**

**Statue topping** has become popular over recent times by people passionate about wanting to right the wrongs of history.  These statues are of people who were considered worthy of being immortalised in stone or bronze. So we pull down the memorials to our history and in doing so try to obliterate its memory. In our rush to defame them, we forget that we need to own our history, because it happened and it was true, despite how repulsive it might have been.  This would be one of the stories in the Old Testament, which I would prefer, was omitted. But that’s the thing, God writes the truth about history, not because it is popular, nor because it is easy or pleasant to read, but because it speaks to the human condition and bears a comment on his great purpose of redemption. So we are going to try and understand this story in light of redemptive history. What was in God's mind when he wanted to include this in his book called the Bible?

**The kinds of questions this passage evokes are questions like:**

*Can we defy God and expect him to remain silent?*

*Is sin cumulative? Does a time come when God says that is enough?*

*Is biblical leadership a popularity contest or something more?*

*What is it that casts such a chasm between God? When we are said to be made in his image?*

We have looked at five exit ramps now, and today is the sixth, based on the 16th chapter of Numbers.  **Exit Ramp 6** “*I don’t like what my leader is doing.  If I get enough people who agree with me, we can change things to a way I like them to be.”*

The core issue of the rebellion of Korah was that the people had grown tired of Moses being the person through whom the Lord spoke. They wanted to bring Moses down a peg or two. The clan of Korah from the tribe of Levi had been chosen to serve in the Tabernacle. They carried special privileges of access, but in verse 9, Moses implies that they wanted more say in the decision making.

In addition, to Korah were two other men, Dathan and Abiram from the tribe of Reuben, who joined with the troublemakers. They held Moses responsible for becoming becalmed in the desert. Moses had singularly failed to bring them into this new land of promise and led them south, away from Kadesh Barnea. When the Rebels refused to meet with Moses, he asks them to attend a gathering, and for each to bring a metal censor pole used for carrying the burning coals to and from the altar in the Tabernacle. Along with them came another 250 prominent leaders who supported this leadership contest.

Stand clear God says to Moses so that I can deal with them. Moses prays, why should all these people suffer because of one man's sins? So the people separated from Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and the 250 leaders and their families. And Moses puts it on the line, if these people die a natural death, then I am not your leader.  Suddenly the ground opened up and swallowed them, and those standing around were burned by fire.

Moses is then instructed to rescue the metal censors and scatter the burning coals and hammer them into a thin metal sheet to overlay the altar in the Tabernacle. You would have thought this would have dealt with the issue!

The next morning, the same people who have seen the demise of those who opposed Moses accuse him of causing the death of these people. Hot coals are taken from the altar and carried among the people, to save them from a plague that breaks out among them.  Somehow they are saved from an overwhelming plague, but not before 14,700 perished. It was said of Aaron that he stood between the dead and the living.

There are some passages of the Bible that are best left alone! Passages like this are just too hard to get our heads around because they present us with an angry God of fire, earthquake, and plague. And we go, this is not the God I really want to get to know nor love. Nor do I feel very comfortable around Him. In fact, some theologians go as far as closing the book on passages like this from the Old Testament, saying they are inconsistent with the God of love and mercy portrayed in the New Testament. But we need to get underneath these stories to understand them. What is really going on here, and why does God deal so ruthlessly with these people?

**To understand this story, we need to set in place some boundary pegs:**

1. Moses has been selected by God for an assignment to lead the people. He has been prepared and tested like no one else for this role and carries a humility and a maturity that sets him apart.
2. Various tribes and clans had special responsibilities. The Korah people were part of the Levite tribe who served in the Tabernacle. They carried special access into Tabernacle, but with this also came special expectations and consequences. Their leadership role came with harsher and higher standards of accountability.
3. The Tabernacle was the dwelling place of God in the wilderness. An elaborate process had been set in place for approaching our holy God. Failure to precisely follow the laws resulted in death. It had to do with who God is, his holiness, and raw power that could not mix with a fallen and broken people. Only those whom God selected could stand in the gap between himself and the people. When Korah challenged Moses' leadership, they misread the situation. They were really challenging God. Moses knew this and realised it was not going to end well.

The story is graphic, ugly, and seems to lack any kind of compassion. But our failure to face this kind of story in the Bible says more about us than we would like. It says we **don’t really understand the holiness of God** **and the fallen-ness of our lives.** We don’t understand that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of God. He is not like us. The only person in the whole Bible who got anywhere close to God's presence was, in fact, Moses, and he got burned in the process. It was God on that occasion who said, Moses, you cannot see me and live.  Something must occur for us to have a relationship with this God of earthquake, fire, and destruction. So why do we have so much of a problem with these stories? It’s because we are trying to put ourselves at the centre of the universe and God. We are elevating ourselves as judge and jury of our creator and forgetting we are made of dust!

Now I want you to look again at this story from a redemptive perspective. There is something here that God wants to say to us.  There is a reason this story is in the Bible

1. **This story reminds us about ACCESS to God.**

Those who perished held a ministry role in the nation.  There were no ‘let-offs’, or blind eyes turned for their treachery. Their incense poles were saved and made into a covering for the altar as a reminder to the people. Whenever the people worshipped and entered again into this holy place they would be reminded of the holiness of God and their dependency upon him for cleansing from their brokenness and propensity to sin.

Friends, we have something even better. There is no Tabernacle altar here overlain with pulverised metal from those who perished. When Jesus died on the cross, what happened to the curtain in the temple? It was torn apart, so “whoever will, may come” boldly before God the Father because Jesus himself is cleansing them. He stood in the gap between the holiness of God and the fallen-ness of our lives. Put more frankly, you and I have no hope of knowing God nor approaching Him without Jesus bridging the moral chasm between us. This story is about the demise of those who should have known better, but who wanted to test God's choice. They felt entitled to lead and stepped over the line God had put in place.

1. **The story reminds us about ACCOUNTABILITY**

Aaron is commanded to take the holy coals from the fire incense in the Tabernacle and run them among the people to stop the plague. And it was said of him - *he stood between the living and the dead*. I think this is a picture of the church today as we take the message of the gospel out among people. We can save some who hear and respond to the offer of being put right with God. Who is Aaron? He is the High Priest.  Who are we?  A kingdom of priests to our God! Somehow, I think we have lost confidence in the gospel, that it is the power of God to save people. These coals that come from the altar are to be carried out among the people, and they are cleansed from their sin by being recipients of God’s grace.

1. **The story reminds us about the ANOINTING and calling to leadership**

That familiarity with the things of God is a dangerous path to tread. These Levites who were given special access in the Tabernacle for the purposes of leading worship and presenting the offerings of the people had become too familiar with their role and wanted more.  More attention, more leadership, more say in the decisions, they wanted to be among those who heard from God and delivered His messages to the people. They aspired the limelight for the wrong reasons. Disgruntled from the role they had, they sought the opportunity to challenge and topple Moses’ leadership. He was easy to murmur against because what he was doing did not make sense. His leadership decision to turn south and head back into the desert instead of going into the land was an easy target for disgruntled people. The more they scrutinised Moses’ leadership, the more they found fault with it, until there was nowhere else to go but a full-on contest.  Can I say this?  If you want to find fault with leadership, there is always plenty of material. The more you look the more you see when you’re looking for fault or failing. But the real question is, were the leaders truly following God, or were they appeasing the demands of the people?

And their **familiarity** with the things of God cost them dearly. Moses did not crave the limelight; he called their bluff and asked God to show up and sort it out. When God anoints a person to lead, He stands by them. Stay within the bounds of what God has called and equipped you to do. But when you venture outside that, you are in danger territory. Korah perished when the ground opened up but here’s the irony of the story. His lineage lived on, and his descendants were skilled musicians. We read Numbers 26.11; they survived and went on to serve God. In fact, several Psalms are attributed to them; Psalm 42-29, 84, 85, 87, and 88.  This reminds us that we don’t have to follow in the sins of our parents. You can break the chain of rebellion by doing the opposite, choosing to dedicate yourself to God.

1. **Lastly, the story reminds us about the AWESOME** power of God

Underneath this story which has a destructive thread to it, runs an equally powerful truth about the holiness of God and the human condition that wants to test that. We sing about God's holiness as though it’s something we experience on a daily basis, but most times, people experience it if they are face down on the ground in shock. For we are people of sin, it behoves us to test what God says, to be independent of him, to try to topple or sidestep his pronouncements, and to act in ways putting ourselves centre stage.

How quickly we forget that God is the creator of the universe.  He speaks, and the heavens are created, oceans are formed, he deals in thunder and mountains tremble before Him. We want to topple this kind of God and cut him down to our size so we can feel more comfortable with him. We want to strip the Bible of the stories which are unpalatable or difficult so we can cosy up to him with ease. We want to emasculate this powerful God of earthquake and fire because we are so unlike him, when all along it is He who wants to break down the wall that separates us. He who makes a way possible for our sin to be dealt with. He who offers mercy and commands the coals from the altar be run out among the people to purify them. He who asked that the poles of those who opposed him be hammered into flat metal and cover the altar so we would not forget. He who ripped the curtain in two when Jesus died at Calvary for us and in doing so said: I’ve bridged the gap between us forever and the bridge is Jesus. Call upon His name, and his purity becomes yours, he stands in your place’. It is He who offers an exchange whereby you take upon yourself Jesus’ purity and favour and give to God your brokenness and independence.

So is this the same God of the New Testament? Yes! Does mercy flow from this story? Yes! But also know this, God still thunders from the heavens! No part of his awesome power, purity, and holiness has been compromised. Yes, it’s a difficult story, but remember, this same God who sent an earthquake to swallow up those who challenged his ways, sent his Son, who deserved no punishment, to stand in the gap between life and death for us. He is utterly consistent, completely reliable, and irrevocably committed to bridging the moral gap and bringing you home.