

Saga of Surprising Grace

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[0:00] For our scripture reading, we turn to Numbers chapter 16, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers. And we're going to be reading a very sobering story that should cause us to tremble.

From Numbers 16, we'll read 1 through 35. Korah, son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites, Dan, Dathan, and Abiram, sons of Iliad, and On, son of Peleth, became insolent and rose up against Moses.

With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council. They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, You have gone too far. The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them.

Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly? When Moses heard this, he fell face down. Then he said to Korah and to all his followers, In the morning the Lord will show who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will have that person come near him.

The man he chooses, he will cause to come near him. You, Korah, and all of your followers are to do this. Take censers, and tomorrow put fire and incense in them before the Lord.

[1:33] The man the Lord chooses will be the one who is holy. You Levites have gone too far. Moses also said to Korah, Now listen, you Levites, isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the Lord's tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them?

Has he brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself? But now you are trying to get the priesthood too. It is against the Lord that you and all of your followers have banded together.

Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him? Then Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab. But they said, We will not come.

Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of the land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert? And now you also want to lord it over us. Moreover, you haven't brought us into the land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of the fields and vineyards.

Will you gouge out the eyes of these men? No, we will not come. Then Moses became very angry and said to the Lord, Do not accept their offering.

[3:00] I have not taken so much as a donkey from them, nor have I wronged any of them. Moses said to Korah, You and your followers are to appear before the Lord tomorrow, you and they and Aaron.

Each man is to take his censer and put incense in it, 250 censers in all, and present it before the Lord. You and Aaron are to present your censers also.

So each man took his censer, put fire and incense in it, and stood with Moses and Aaron at the entrance to the tent of meeting. When Korah had gathered all his followers in opposition to them at the entrance to the tent of meeting, the glory of the Lord appeared to the entire assembly.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, Separate yourselves from this assembly so that I can put an end to them at once. But Moses and Aaron fell face down 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?

Then the Lord said to Moses, Say to the assembly, Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him.

[4 : 21] He warned the assembly, Move back from the tents of these wicked men. Do not touch anything belonging to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins.

So they moved away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Dathan and Abiram had come out and were standing with their wives, children, and little ones at the entrance to their tents.

Then Moses said, This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things, and that it was not my idea. If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the Lord has not sent me.

But if the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens up 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.

As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them with their households and all Korah's men and all their possessions.

[5 : 31] They went down alive into the grave with everything they owned. The earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community. At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, The earth is going to swallow us too!

And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense. Does your family have an interesting history?

I think everyone finds their own genealogies interesting, for the most part. We might not find other people's genealogies so interesting, but we certainly find our own.

And talking with people, as you just listen to them talk about these things, as much as they know about it, it seems like a number of things are always true. Everyone has ancestors that came over on the Mayflower.

We had no idea how big that boat was, how many people were on it. Everyone seems to have something exotic, an Indian princess, and who knew that such royalty flowed in all of our veins.

[6 : 49] Maybe you have someone really cool, a notorious villain, or Ben Franklin, or something like that. But it's funny, for all the great things about our ancestry, we don't talk about some of it, some of them.

No one says with pride, my ancestors kept slaves, and then we fought in a civil war to keep them. Conveniently forgotten.

So we wear the scraps of our family pride with honor. We take pride in the thinnest connection to someone who is something, and yet we'll hide anything, or we'll forget about anything that we're truly ashamed of.

The Jews in Jesus' day were no different than that. Remember, he said, if the Son sets you free, you'll be free indeed. And the Jews' response was, we've never been slaves at all.

conveniently forgetting certain truth. And they said, Abraham is our father. Well, to the Jews in the Old Testament, that was true too.

[8 : 02] God had to say to them, how soon you forget. Remember the rock that I dug you from? I didn't reach out up into the stars to find you guys.

I had to reach down into the mud and into the dirt to find you. When I called your father Abraham, the father that you're so proud of, he was worshiping gods in Ur of the Chaldees.

And so, the Bible is full of family stories and family histories. And today I want to tell you one of those family stories.

It's a family saga. And a saga is something that happens over generations. And so, it's not just your immediate family. It's generations of a family. And so, this is a family saga.

And best of all, it's a story of grace. It's a story of surprising grace. And so, what do I mean by grace?

[9 : 05] I mean, it's God being unexpectedly kind to people who don't deserve it. Who actually deserve the exact opposite. And so, grace is like that.

It's always free. And by that, I don't mean you have to pay, you don't have to pay for it. That's true as well. What I mean is, it's free.

You can't put reins on it. Some of you have horses. And maybe at first, you have to teach that horse to ride with a saddle and ride with reins and ride with a rider on it.

But God's grace is not something that anyone can ever tame. You can't put reins on it and then decide where you want it to go. Sometimes, because it is free, God's grace goes into places where we don't think it should, even.

It goes into surprising places. One of the highlights of my childhood was when the neighbor's cows got free.

[10 : 10] And, what a morning, I'll tell you what. They ran up and down, and they ran up the road, they ran down the road, they're free, they're having a great time.

Apparently, they got all tired out and then they decided that our yard was perfect. And so, there they were a herd of cows in our front yard. That was a surprising way to spend a morning, I'll tell you that.

Well, that's a picture of grace. It's free. And because it's free, it can't be earned, because earning and meriting is just another way of controlling something. So, men, you, men, women, whoever, you go to work, your employer is constrained to give you your paycheck.

To not give you the paycheck is to steal from you. They're not, he isn't, or she isn't free to not give you what you've earned. Now, grace is something that can't be earned.

It can't be merited. And that is good news for sinners like us, because when you're broke and you have no way of earning something, then what you are looking for is something free.

[11 : 18] And that's exactly what we need. And so, this morning, I want to tell you this surprising story of God's grace to one family, to the sons of Korah.

The sons of Korah. Now, we just read about Korah and his rebellion. And that's where our story starts, begins this morning.

Chapter one is, we would call, a very bad beginning. Very bad beginning. When our story begins, the Israelites are in the desert.

They left Egypt some months ago. They had gone through the Red Sea. They had been to Mount Sinai. And now, at this point, they are in the desert organizing themselves into a nation.

And now, Korah, who's our main character in chapter one, he has already lived a very interesting life. Much more interesting than any of us have ever lived.

[12:15] So, think about what he's seen. He's seen the ten plagues. So, children, you've read about the ten plagues. Korah saw them.

Number one, number two, number three, number four, gnats and frogs and blood and darkness and all the rest. He had seen that with his own eyes. He had walked through the Red Sea with the water standing up on both sides.

He had been to the foot of Mount Sinai and he had seen thunder and lightning in the mountain like it was on fire. And he had heard the very voice of God.

So, Korah hadn't read about it. He had seen it. He had heard it. And, you know what happened? Moses was too long on the mountain.

The people decided that they were going to build a golden calf and so, he'd seen the golden calf and what happened next was at the word of Moses, Korah had strapped on his sword, drew it out, and started killing his own brothers, his fellow Israelites because it was the Levites who did that.

[13:29] And so, he was a Levite and he, along with his brothers, stood with God and stood against idolatry. And then you remember because they did that, the Levites had a special place given to them, a special task given to them.

They weren't like everyone else. The Levites were holy to the Lord and the particular group of Levites that Korah belonged to, they were given a special job.

So, Korah was given this job. The Lord had set them apart to serve in a very special way and it was a humble job. Just because the Lord gives you a job doesn't mean it's a fancy, great job.

But it was from the Lord. It was a humble job and it was probably a little distasteful. because they were in charge of carrying the tabernacle.

They were in charge of carrying everything. But they weren't allowed to touch any of it. They weren't even allowed to look into some of the things.

[14:36] They just got to carry it. And maybe that's when the rebellion started in Korah's heart. Korah didn't like that he and his people, his family, had to do this.

The other Levites, especially Aaron and his family, they got better jobs. They got the prestigious jobs. They got to be priests. And so, they were the ones everyone looked up to.

And in his heart, Korah began to think. He began to think. He said to himself, aren't we all holy? Didn't we all go through the Red Sea?

Didn't we all hear the Lord's voice? Who do Moses and Aaron think they are? You can read about that in verse 3. Korah said to Moses and Aaron, you have gone too far.

The whole community is holy. It's not just you guys, you and Moses, Aaron. It's not just you. Everyone's holy, and the Lord is with them. Why do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?

[15:40] Now, if you smell closely, you can smell something very satanic about all of this. Because how did Satan's rebellion begin?

Well, it began with great privilege. It began with great honor. Jude says the demons weren't satisfied in their place. They weren't happy with where God had put them.

They weren't happy with the rule God gave them. Satan wanted more. And so how did Satan's rebellion start? Well, it started with the same things that Korah's rebellion started with.

Pride, jealousy, and he says, I will ascend to heaven. I will raise my throne above the stars. I will sit enthroned on the mount of the assembly.

I will ascend. I will make myself like the most high. I will. I will. I will. And it's the same thing in Korah's.

[16:43] And actually, Jude makes the connection. He says the false teachers in his day, they are like the demons who weren't satisfied with their place. And then he says, and they are like Korah, who was destroyed in the rebellion.

They're all peas in the pod. They're all coming from the same place. And so this is Korah's family very bad beginning. God had redeemed Korah out of Egypt.

Korah had walked through the Red Sea. He had been blessed. He had heard the voice of God. He had received special honor from him. God had brought him near, verse 10 says.

In comparison to the other Israelites, the Levites were the ones who got to be near the Lord. Great spiritual privilege. But in his heart, nothing had changed.

Jealousy reigned, pride ruled, and he rebelled against God and against Moses. But we can't miss it.

[17:54] His real problem was with God. Moses and Aaron, they were just the face of the problem, but his real problem is with God.

God, he didn't like what God had done. He didn't like that God had picked Moses and Aaron and not him. He didn't like that they had the better jobs and not him. He didn't like that they were set apart and they weren't, relatively speaking.

And so his real problem was with God. Who has the right to rule in Korah's heart? Well, Korah doesn't think God does. He thought it should be his way. He thought it should be what he wanted.

He didn't like what God had done in his life. And I'd say shame on Korah if the same thing didn't go on in my own heart, in my life.

If Korah was different, then we could say shame on Korah. But his beginning is no different than our beginning, my beginning.

[19:03] Because his story is just a replay. It's just another version of that first story. And Adam, we rose up against God.

And Adam, we said, we don't like what you've done. Yeah, you've given us all this, but we want that. You've given us every treaty, but no, you haven't given us that one, and that's where the problem is.

And I'm not happy with what you've decided, and I'm not happy with your authority, and I'm going to have it my way. And so we all had this very bad beginning in Adam, of a rebellion against God.

And maybe you say, well, what's that to me? What is that to me? Maybe that's what you're saying. What did Adam's a long time ago? What does Adam's rebellion have to do with me? Well, it's because you are a son of Adam.

And in you, the rebellion goes on. ratify Adam's rebellion. Every day you perpetuate Adam's rebellion.

[20:02] You don't disagree with it, you carry on with it. So he's dead, but Adam's great rebellion is still going on. It's going on in every sinner's heart.

It's the same, I will, I will, I will, it's going to be my way, this is what I want, and I don't care what you say. And maybe say, it's not so drastic as that.

And I would agree with you, we don't ever verbalize something like that. But in your heart, is it not, I will not let this man rule over me.

I hear what you're saying, but that's just not for me. I'll go this far, but I'm not going to go too far, you can't expect that.

And in a hundred quiet words, we say, no God, I will do it the way I want to do it.

[21 : 08] I'm going to do it my way. It's Korah's rebellion all over again. It's the very bad beginning. That's chapter one. Now chapter two is God's wrath, just wrath against rebellious Korah.

Korah. Well, we read it. What happened next? What happened next after Korah rebels against the Lord? Well, we read it.

It's a showdown. It's a showdown. And they confront Moses and Aaron, and it's a showdown that ends with a test.

Just as much as there was that test on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. We're going to decide who's right, who is wrong, who has the Lord accepted, and who has the Lord not accepted.

So let's see who answers. Moses said at the end of this passage, if these men die a natural death, if they just die like everyone else does, then you can know that God hasn't sent me.

[22 : 17] But if these men die a natural death, then the Lord has not sent me. But if God does something new, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt. So there it is.

It's the test. And what does it say? Well, just like when Elijah prayed one time, how long did it take the Lord to answer?

As soon as Moses had finished talking, the ground split open and swallowed Korah and the people with him.

And they perished, gone from the community. And the other 250 men who joined the rebellion, fire came out and consumed them.

Now, we didn't read the next few verses, but what you see in those next few verses are just piles of ash with the censors that Moses had told them to make, the bronze censors in the middle of piles of ash.

[23 : 28] That's what the Lord did to the 250 men. And what is all that? It's God's justice.

It's God's wrath. vengeance against the rebellion. And so, sin has hands.

Sin has powerful hands that can bring down God's justice on your very head. And so, the devil's lie goes on. Doesn't he whisper into every heart, you're surely not going to die.

It's not going to be as bad as all that. I know the Lord said that, but come on. It's not going to be that bad. But in hell, Korah knows the truth.

Because when the earth swallowed him up, it didn't swallow him up just to stay in the ground. It was the very jaws of hell opening up and swallowing him.

[24 : 36] and in hell, the terrible lie that you shall not surely die, it's uncovered. The wages of sin is death and it's not just physical death.

It's eternal death where the earth opens up and it's hell swallowing you. And so, think about that.

Korah is there to this day. And from that day to this day, he is not finished regretting what he's done.

He's thinking, how could I have been so stupid? How could I have been so brash? How could I have been so arrogant? How could I have been so insolent? But you know what?

None of his sorrow does him any good. And all of his agony from that day to this doesn't do him any good. The end of rebellion is destruction.

[25 : 42] So Korah swallowed up. And now his family is left without a father. They're cursed by God, perished from the community.

So once they had a place of honor, once they were set apart for God, and now what? There's just a scar on the ground. just a scar on the ground to mark their father's rebellion.

And we say, was that unfair? Was that too much? Was that unkind? And the answer is no. If we understood the weight and the glory of God, we would not protest instant justice like what we see here.

The angels in heaven do not protest hell. hell. And the spirits of just men made perfect now in heaven, they don't have a problem with hell. Because could it be that God is so glorious and so exalted and so pure that hell is fair?

And so don't miss the lesson. This is the danger of sin. And this is why everyone needs Jesus Christ. Only Jesus can save us from the penalty of our sins.

[27 : 01] Only Jesus can save us from the death that we deserve. And if you have been saved from this, how thankful you should be. See, the blood of the Passover lamb that saved Egypt, that night, that dark, scary night when the angel of death walked through Egypt, the blood had to be over the doors.

that Passover lamb, Jesus is our Passover lamb. You have to get into him, under him, or you'll be lost. That's the end of chapter 2.

But remember, this is a story of grace. This is a story of grace. And it's not going well so far. But no story of grace does go well at the very beginning.

And I think you're going to like what the last two chapters have to say. They're better. Chapter 3, we're going to call flickers of mercy. It's a dark night, imagine that.

And there are the glowing bugs, you know, and they're flickering their lights. There's flickers of light. There's flickers of mercy in this darkness.

[28 : 16] So Korah is no more. His family is devastated. The family's ashamed. They're rejected by God. They're gone from the community. They're cast away. And so it's now it's night time for Korah's family.

It's night. And yet in the darkness there's still these flickers of light. Because in the middle of all this wrath and in the middle of this devastation and this immediate judgment for their rebellion, God remembers mercy.

mercy. So you're in Numbers 16. Turn over to Numbers chapter 26. Turn over to Numbers chapter 26 and then look at verse, look at verse, we'll go with verse 8.

Now what's going on here is this is in the middle of the second census. This is now the second generation, second census. it is talking about the Reubenites because remember Abiram and Dathan are Reubenites and in connection with them this is what it says in verse 8.

The son of Palu was Eliab. We've heard about him. The son of Eliab were Nemeul, Dathan, and Abiram. The same Dathan and Abiram were the community officials who rebelled against Moses and Aaron and were among Korah's followers when they rebelled against the Lord.

[29 : 45] The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them along with Korah whose followers died when the fire devoured the 250 men and they served as a warning sign.

But look at verse 11. The line of Korah however did not die out. The line of Korah however did not die out.

Just a little sentence. Just a little sentence but that's a sentence of grace. It's a sentence of mercy. Dathan of Iram's family destroyed. The family tree went so far and then it was clean cut off.

Chopped down. Burnt. Wiped off the face of the earth. The family went so far and then no more. But it says here the line of Korah did not die out. And so it went for seven generations.

Remember I told you this is a family saga. It crosses generations. Seven generations later Korah's family is limping along in obscurity. They're buried for generations and from the looks of things they're forgotten, rejected by God, done with.

[30 : 59] You don't hear about them working at the temple or the tabernacle. You don't hear about them doing anything. They're just a family, a forgotten family, a family that is a warning sign.

This is what happens when you fall in the hands of a holy God. A hollow echo of what used to be a family with a terrible past. And then seven generations go by.

But quietly God begins to do something. One of those seventh generation, a son of Korah named Elkanah marries two women, Peninnah and Hannah.

Peninnah has children, and poor shamed Hannah has none. She's a shamed woman from a shamed family, but she wants a son.

She goes down to the tabernacle to pray, and she prays with tears, remember me, give me a son, and I will give him to you for all the days of his life. So here's this poor, broken, shamed woman from a shamed family saying, remember me.

[32 : 15] And it says, the Lord remembered her and gave her a son, Samuel. And we say, Samuel? Yeah, Samuel was a son of Korah.

That's grace in action. That's surprising. God said, God is going to use. God is going to use. God is going to use.

That's who I'll pick. That's who I'll bless. And so in the middle of the years of darkness, God remembers mercy. And so generations came and generations went, but the whole time they're buried in obscurity.

The Lord is guarding this family. He has plans for this family. He's watching over them. And in the fullness of time, he begins to bring righteousness out of unrighteousness.

And he begins to bring honor out of shame and usefulness out of uselessness. Now, do they deserve it? No. But it's God's grace and it's free and it's surprising.

[33 : 15] It's surprising. And doesn't that fill you with hope and joy that God's grace can get into any kind of family and do this sort of thing with them? And this is our God, because in the middle of wrath, he remembers mercy and he stores it up.

And it's surprising. So there's grace, there's beauty for our ashes. Now we get to chapter 4. Brought home. They're brought home.

Now with Samuel's life and ministry, the family's history takes on a whole new turn. It goes in a different direction. It takes on a new life. And they're finally brought home, brought back to where the Lord had originally put them with David.

Remember when David became king. And now remember what David's great dream and hope was. He wanted to build the Lord a temple. He said, it's not right for me that I should be living in a palace and the Lord living in a tent.

And so he sets about with his heart, I'm going to build the temple. And remember what happened. The Lord came to him in a dream and he said, you're not going to build me a house.

[34 : 28] I'm going to build you a house. And one of your sons is going to sit on your throne forever. And as for the temple, your son Solomon will build it. And from that point on, David's mission changed.

Instead of now building the temple, he's going to do everything to help Solomon do that, to build it. And he stores up silver and gold. And he hires stone cutters. And it says he provided iron for nails.

And he stacked up bronze. And he provided more cedar logs than could be counted. But then he did something else. Because it's not just the building that needs to be prepared for.

It's the worship. It's what's going to happen. And so he called the Levites. And he organized them. And he gave each group a different job. And then he called three Levites in particular.

one from each of the branches of the Levites. One, Asaph. You've heard of him. Juduthan is the second. And the third is Heman.

[35 : 30] And they are going to lead the singing. They're going to lead the worship. And they're going to play on all kinds of instruments and they're going to write music and the people are going to sing it in praise to the Lord.

Now the third, Heman, he's nobody else but Samuel's grandson and a son of Korah. And according to 1 Chronicles 25, Heman had 14 sons and three daughters.

And it says they were given him through the promises of God to exalt him. So there he is with his sons, his 14 sons, and they are going to sing at the temple.

They're going to write music at the temple. The Lord says, I promise you, Heman, I'm going to exalt you. People are going to remember you forever.

And though we don't remember very much about him, the sons of Korah, we do remember. We remember their words to this very day. Maybe you've heard some of them. As the deer pants for the water, so my soul pants for you, O God.

[36 : 43] My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. My heart is stirred by a noble theme as I recite my verses for the king. My tongue is the pen of a skillful writer.

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.

Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion city of our God.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord almighty! My soul yearns, it even faints for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. 13 psalms bear the inscription of the sons of Korah.

And each one of them is saying loud and clear that our God is a God of grace, a God of mercy. And he takes the rebellious, and he takes the broken, and the forgotten, and the despised, and then he brings them home.

[37 : 58] because the sons of Korah, they lost their place through their father's rebellion. But King David brought them back in, and he gave them a place, and a place to worship God.

And in the same way, and you know what, when they were brought in, they sang. They sang loud praises to their God all their days. Now their story is our story, because if you're here, you're a son of Adam.

Not just a son of Korah, you're a son of the first rebel. And we lost our place through our father's rebellion, and King Jesus brought us in, and gave us a place at God's feet in the father's house.

And so, if we've been brought home, if we who were far away, and rebellious, and forgotten, and scattered, if we have been brought home, what else can we do except sing in the same way that the sons of Korah sang for joy, for the grace that sought us, the grace that brought us home, the grace that found us, the grace that loved us, the grace that forgave us, and when you taste that grace, you can't help but say with the sons of Korah, as the deer pants for the water, so my soul yearns and pants for you, oh God.

Has God been doing that in your life? Is that your story? Then you ought to sing just like the sons of Korah. Well, let's pray, and then we'll sing from the overhead as the deer pants for the water.

[39 : 34] Let's pray. Our heavenly father, we thank you that this story, this family story of grace is in the Bible for us to read and to know, a story to encourage us, a story to teach us about the kind of God that you are, that redeems the lost, that makes a mournful heart to sing.

We pray that you would do that today, that you would save and powerfully work in some sinner's heart here. Find them. your grace is free.

No heart can oppose you, and no one can turn your hand away. So here we are, we need your grace. There are sinners here who need saved. Do it for them.

And set our hearts rejoicing, that though we were once far away and forgotten and ashamed, we have been brought near, we have been given a place in the Father's house.

grace. Now teach us to sing of your grace and sing your praises. And help us to never, never lose our heart's desire for you, to long for you, and to seek you, and to find you, and to pursue you all the days of our lives.

[41 : 04] You are the real joy giver. So help us to pursue you this week. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.