

The passages in today's lesson draw from an account of a time when a group of men, led by the ringleaders Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On, challenged Moses' authority to lead the children of Israel. They believed that Moses' own ego had made him the leader of the people instead of it being the LORD's choice. They thought that they could do a better job than Moses at leading the people but the LORD leaves no doubt that He had chosen Moses to lead the people.

Numbers 16:1-27: We are told that Korah, Dathan and Abiram, who were from the tribe of Levi, and On, who was of the tribe of Reuben, had recruited 250 men from the people who were well known and respected leaders. These men confronted Moses and accused him of placing himself in the position of leader so that he could call the shots. They believed that one of them could do a better job than Moses at leading the people (vs. 1-3). Moses, in humility, fell on his face and set forth a challenge that would prove who the LORD had chosen to lead the people. Each man would bring a censor to the tabernacle and fill it with fire and burn incense before the LORD. Aaron would also bring his censor and do likewise. They would let the LORD show who was His choice to lead (vs. 4-7). Moses recognized the true intentions of Korah and knew that he was not satisfied with his Levitical responsibilities and wanted to replace Aaron as the high priest (vs. 8-11). Moses also called for Dathan and Abiram to come and answer for themselves, but they did not recognize Moses' authority and refused to come. They blamed Moses for taking them out of Egypt, a land they described as "flowing with milk and honey" and bringing them into the wilderness to die. They said he had failed to bring them into a land flowing with milk and honey as he had promised (vs. 12-15). The next day the 250 men, Korah and Aaron brought their censors with fire and incense before the door of the tabernacle as Moses had said (vs. 16-19). The glory of the LORD appeared and the LORD told Moses and Aaron to separate themselves away from the people so that He could destroy them. But Moses again interceded for the people (vs. 20-22) and the LORD changed His mind. Instead, He had Moses command that the people put some distance between them and the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (vs. 23-27).

Numbers 16

28 And Moses said, Hereby ye shall know that the LORD hath sent me to do all these works; for *I have not done them of mine own mind.*

"And Moses said, Hereby ye shall know that the LORD hath sent me to do all these works" – Moses makes the announcement that the people would now see the evidence that everything that he had done was in obedience to the commands of the LORD. From the signs and wonders performed in Egypt to the manna and other provisions that had been provided by the LORD through Moses, they had all been done at the command of the LORD. The giving of the law and the assignment of Aaron and his sons as priests was also commanded by the LORD.

"for I have not done them of mine own mind" – None of these things had been conceived in the mind of Moses, nor were they the desires of his heart. It's possible that Moses would have gladly given the aggravation and stress of leading these stubborn people to another man.

29 If these men die the common death of all men, or if they be visited after the visitation of all men; *then* the LORD hath not sent me.

Moses states what the proof would be to show that the LORD had not sent him to be the leader of Israel.

"If these men die the common death of all men" – If these men die from natural causes: old age or health problems.

"or if they be visited after the visitation of all men" – If these men die from situations that are not unusual (injury, famine or sword). While tragic, such deaths would not be uncommon.

"then the LORD hath not sent me" – Moses sets a high bar to prove that the LORD sent him. If these men die a natural or common death then that would prove that the LORD had not sent Moses to do the things he has done. This criteria places the odds highly in favor of proving that the LORD did not send Moses.

30 But if the LORD make a new thing, and the earth open her mouth, and swallow them up, with all that *appertain* unto them, and they go down quick into the pit; then ye shall understand that these men have provoked the LORD.

"But if the LORD make a new thing" – On the other hand, if the LORD does something new and unique so that these men die in a way that they have never seen before then they can draw a different conclusion about Moses.

"and the earth open her mouth, and swallow them up, with all that appertain unto them" – Moses gets very specific on what kind of death these men will experience. The earth will open up and swallow not only the men but their tent and all their possessions.

"and they go down quick [alive] into the pit" – The men will still be alive when the earth opens up and swallows them.

"then ye shall understand that these men have provoked [to treat with contempt] the LORD" – If the men die in a way that is obviously a supernatural act of the LORD then it will be easy to recognize that they have died because they treated the LORD with contempt. Instead of humbly obeying the LORD, they decided that they did not need to obey His commands because they thought they knew better. That attitude is at the root of our sin nature as human beings. At our core, we don't want to obey God because we want to do things our way or we think our way is better. When we choose to do things our way instead of God's way, we are treating the LORD with contempt because we are ignoring His will. We see this attitude in the Garden of Eden when Eve chose to believe the serpent's lies and disobey God because she thought it would benefit her and her husband. Adam also followed suite and joined his wife in disobeying the clear command of God.

31 And it came to pass, as he had made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground clave asunder that was under them:

The Hebrew word translated “clave asunder” means “to break or split open.” Notice that this did not happen hours or even days after Moses made the declaration. Apparently the words were barely out of his mouth when the LORD responded by splitting open the ground underneath the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. This quick response demonstrated that it was not Moses’ ideas and plans that they were following. It was the LORD who had chosen Moses and it was His law that Moses had been giving the people.

32 And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up, and their houses, and all the men that *appertained* unto Korah, and all *their* goods.

The opening in the ground swallowed up all of the men who had taken part in the challenge to Moses’ authority, along with their “houses” (dwellings). “All the men that appertained unto Korah” likely refers to the men who had joined with Korah: Dathan and Abiram. All their possessions (livestock, household items, etc.) also went down with them into the pit.

33 They, and all that *appertained* to them, went down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them: and they perished from among the congregation.

“They, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit” – They were still alive when they fell into the opening in the earth, just as Moses predicted (v. 30). Everything they owned fell in with them. The way this account reads it sounds like the families of these men died as well, but we get a little more information in a later chapter. In Numbers 26, the LORD commands Moses to take a census of the men of Israel old enough to go to war (age 20 and older). The results are given per tribe and family, and there is brief summary given of the deaths of Korah, Dathan and Abiram to explain their absence from the numbers: **Num. 26:10-11** “*And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up together with Korah, when that company died, what time the fire devoured two hundred and fifty men: and they became a sign. Notwithstanding the children of Korah died not.*” So apparently at least the children of Korah survived. No record of the children of Dathan and Abiram is given.

“and the earth closed upon them” – This opening was no mere sinkhole. The fact that the earth immediately closed back up indicates that this was a supernatural event performed by the LORD.

“and they perished from among the congregation” – The LORD removed the sinful, rebellious influence of these men from the congregation. The LORD knew that their presence would have influenced others to rebel against His commands. Verse 34 tells us that the people nearby ran for fear that this opening in the earth might swallow them as well.

Verses 35-50: The 250 men (the leaders from various tribes) also did not escape judgment. Although they were not with Korah, Dathan and Abiram when the earth opened up, fire went out from the LORD and burned up these 250 men (v. 35). The fire and incense from the censors of the men who challenged Moses was still considered holy despite being used in a rebellious act, so the LORD instructs Moses to collect them to be disposed of properly. However, the metal of the censors was repurposed to make “broad plates” to be used on the brazen altar (vs. 36-40). The next day the children of Israel began to protest the deaths that had occurred, blaming Moses. The LORD threatens to destroy them all, but Moses and Aaron fall on their faces to intercede (vs. 41-45). Moses realizes that the LORD had begun sending a plague through the congregation, so he instructs Aaron to take his censor filled with fire and incense and begin making atonement for the people. Aaron took a position between the dead and the living and made atonement until the plague was stopped. However, by then the plague had already claimed the lives of 14,700 people (vs. 46-50).

Numbers 17:1-6: The LORD instructs the children of Israel to perform an exercise that would forever establish who He had chosen to head the priestly line in Israel. Each tribe would provide a wooden rod with the name of the head of that tribe written upon it. Aaron would represent the tribe of Levi. The twelve rods would be placed in front of the ark inside the tabernacle and the next day the rod belonging to the man who was the LORD’s choice to be priest will have blossomed.

Numbers 17

7 And Moses laid up the rods before the LORD in the tabernacle of witness. 8 And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds.

The people bring their rods and Moses lays them before the LORD (at the ark) in the tabernacle. When Moses went to retrieve the rods the next day, only the rod of Aaron had shown the signs of life. The other rods remained dead sticks of wood, but Aaron’s rod showed life by budding, blossoming and even yielding almonds. The LORD went beyond what He had said to prove that Aaron and his descendants were to be priests of the LORD.

Verses 9-13: Moses returned each of the rods to their owners and then showed them Aaron’s rod in order to make it obvious whose rod that the LORD had chosen. Aaron’s rod was kept with the ark as a sign to forever silence those who would rebel against the LORD’s choice for the priesthood.