

REBELLION FROM THE SCRIPTURE VIEWPOINT



Very few civil authorities exist without becoming the target of rebellion. Those who rebel against existing authority seek to overthrow that authority in order to establish their own new authority. This strategy could also be called “self promotion.”

Rebelling, whether successful or not, also occurs in spiritual realms of authority. Revelation 12:7-9 gives a brief account of Satan’s attempt to wage a war of rebellion against God, apparently intending to supplant God’s authority with his own. But Michael and his angels defeated Satan and his angels, resulting in the expulsion of Satan and his angels from heaven to earth.

Even God’s chosen people, Israel, were not immune to rebellion during their desert journey. God had appointed Moses and Aaron as the leaders of the congregation but the people were often rebellious toward them and toward God by their speech, actions and attitude.

This particular study of rebellion will be limited to three incidents recorded about the children of Israel enroute to the Land of Promise. These incidents will be concerned with the entire congregation, an individual, and a faction within the congregation.

CONGREGATIONAL REBELLION

Numbers 13 and 14

When God was preparing the children of Israel to move into the land of Canaan, He first had Moses assign twelve men, each a leader of one of the tribes, to go into Canaan as spies. Their job was to collect information about the land God was about to give them. God had intended that the spies’ findings would prove so encouraging to the congregation that they would be eager to enter the Land of Promise right away.

However, even though all twelve spies agreed that the land and its fruit were both very good, ten of the spies nonetheless dissented from endorsing God’s plan for possessing the land immediately.

The ten spies who rebelled against God’s will in the matter cited the following reasons for their dissent:

1. The people in Canaan are strong;
2. The cities there are fortified and large; and
3. Giants live there.

This report was enough to frighten the people into inaction. Their hearts melted with fear just as the hearts of the people of Jericho would melt with fear much later at the coming of the Israelites (Joshua 2:9-11).

But what of the other two spies who had also gone into Canaan and had also seen the same strong people, large fortified cities and giants living there? Their report to the people was certainly not one of dissension and rebellion. The two spies, Caleb and Joshua, were men of faith, urging the people to go in at once as God had commanded in order to take the land. Joshua said this (doubtless with great passion): “Only **do not rebel against the Lord**, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the Lord is with us. Do not fear them.” (Numbers 14:9)

Despite the efforts of Caleb and Joshua to convince the people that they should obey God and move into the Land of Promise, the people rebelled against God’s voice and did not move forward. As a result of their disobedience and rebellion, God sentenced the entire congregation to 40 extra years in the desert before the next opportunity to enter the Land of Promise. (Numbers 14:33-35)

The 10 spies whose negative report caused the people to rebel against God were killed by a plague from God. (Numbers 14:36-37) Joshua and Caleb were the only spies whom God kept alive. (Numbers 14:38)

When Moses told the congregation of Israel what their sentence would be for rebelling against God’s instructions, “the people mourned greatly.” (Numbers 14:39)

But this rebellion on the part of Israel did not quite end at that point. Having heard the sentence for their rebellion, they suddenly decided to “obey” God after all and avoid the severe penalty that came with the sentence. But they would soon learn that their “obedience” came too late!!

The children of Israel refused to move into Canaan when God gave the order to do so. They did not realize that their window of time to obey God’s command was to move immediately, when God said to move. Therefore, God’s sentence upon them was also immediate and irrevocable when they disregarded that narrow window of time. They thought they could correct their rebellion by “late obedience” and still receive absolution from God.

We of the modern day church tend to do what the children of Israel did. Quite often we blatantly disobey God because it is inconvenient to obey. Then when we learn or experience the consequence of our disobedience, we try to obtain acquittal of God’s displeasure toward us by “late obedience.”

The children of Israel presumptuously moved toward Canaan, now against the will of God but dependent instead on their “late obedience.” Moses tried to warn them that they would be defeated this time by their enemies because “God is not among you.” (Numbers 14:42)

Nonetheless the Israelites willfully left camp in defiance of Moses’ word and were defeated soundly by the Amalekites and Canaanites and driven back to Hormah, which

was located very near Beersheba in the Negev Desert. The Israelites were not just defeated, they were humiliated!! More consequences!!

INDIVIDUAL REBELLION Numbers 15

Verses 1 through 21 are devoted to burnt offerings and sacrifices to the Lord to be made when Israel would later possess the Land of Promise. Those offerings could be given to fulfill a vow, to be freewill offerings and to be given for the various appointed feasts. Specific preparations for each offering – amounts of grain, flour and oil – are listed.

Verses 22 through 29 are devoted to unintentional sin and how atonement for it is made at both the congregational and individual levels. Interestingly, there is only one law for the individual who sins unintentionally, whether a native-born Israelite or a foreigner who lives in the Israelite community.

Verses 30 and 31 are concerned with presumptuous (defiant, intentional) sin, whether committed by a native-born Israelite or a foreigner living among the children of Israel. The penalty for intentional sin is for the guilty person to be “cut off from among his people.” (Verse 30) In this context, being “cut off from among his people” means to be put to death “because he (the guilty person) has despised the word of the Lord, and has broken His commandment.” (Verse 31)

Finally, verses 32 through 36 refer to the “individual rebellion” for which this section was actually created.

A man was found breaking the Sabbath commandment by gathering sticks on the Sabbath. Although it seems a very trivial indictment to us, it was a very serious transgression of the Law at that time in history. The man was brought before Moses, Aaron and the entire congregation for further disposition of the matter.

Since this situation had not taken place before, Moses and Aaron did not know what to do. So they placed the man in custody to wait for “the mind of the Lord” to be shown to them. (See also Leviticus 24:12)

The Lord honored their caution in the matter by telling Moses that the man must be put to death by stoning at the hands of the entire congregation outside of the camp. Moses ordered this penalty to go forward as the Lord had commanded, putting to death the man who simply picked up sticks on the Sabbath – obviously with defiance and intentionally. His personal rebellion was stopped.

God has always been able to bring a rebellion to a halt, even those which involve special complications. Such as the “Factional Rebellion” recorded in Numbers, Chapter 16.

FACTIONAL REBELLION Numbers 16

This rebellion is often referred to as “The Rebellion of Korah” but there were many participants in addition to Korah. Korah was of the lineage of Levi, but conspired with several men of the tribe of Reuben (Dathan, Abiram and On) along with 250 prominent

leaders of Israel. Apparently Korah recruited the 250 leaders of Israel to give his rebellion legitimacy with the people.

The conspirators accused Moses and Aaron of overstepping their authority as the leaders of Israel. Korah and company reasoned inaccurately that everyone in the congregation was holy and equal to Moses and Aaron in rank. Therefore they regarded the leadership of Moses and Aaron as a prideful, ad hoc rule.

Moses met the challenge by his reply to Korah (and those loyal to him) that God would reveal those who are His and are holy. Furthermore, God would cause the one whom He chooses to come near to Him.

Moses ordered Korah and companions to take censers and put fire and incense in them the next day so the Lord would then choose who was really the holy one. Moses' concluding remarks to Korah and the Levites were that they, not he, were the ones overstepping their position as Levites in the Tabernacle. Moses added that God separated them to be Levites but by their rebellion they were now seeking, on their own and not by God's promotion, to be priests.

Dathan and Abiram would not appear before Moses when ordered by Moses to do so, complaining that Moses had brought the congregation to this place to kill everyone in the wilderness so that he might act like a prince over the congregation. This blatant refusal to do as Moses commanded only heightened the tension between the real and would-be leaders of the children of Israel. Moses' final reminder to Korah was for him and his conspirators (including the 250 leaders) to appear before the Lord the next day with censers containing fire and incense. Aaron would also appear with them prepared in the same way.

The next day, everyone gathered before the Tabernacle and God's glory suddenly appeared to everyone. God wanted to "consume them (the congregation) in a moment", but Moses and Aaron prayed earnestly that God would not do so. (verses 21-22) Their prayer included the following: ".....shall one man sin and You be angry with all the congregation?" (verse 22) apparently God agreed with their prayer.

However, that still left the rebellion unresolved; but not for long. Moses told the congregation to stay completely away from the tents and possessions of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram so as not to be identified with their sins.

Moses then told the people how they could know who was really at fault in this matter. If Korah, Dathan and Abiram died natural deaths, the Lord did not send or choose Moses. But if the rebels died in a new way, swallowed into the earth (buried alive), it would be a clear indication that those men rejected the Lord.

Moses was barely finished with this explanation to the people when the earth opened up and swallowed Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and their dwellings, possessions, and in some cases their entire families. The only exception to the death of entire families was that "the children of Korah did not die." (Numbers 26:11)

But there was more! Immediately following the unusual death of the rebels, "...a fire came out from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense." (verse 35) The two hundred and fifty prominent leaders of Israel who joined

Korah's rebellion were now a mere footnote in history. I would like to urge leaders of God's people at any level to make it a point to understand from Scripture and from sound advice the danger of affiliating themselves with those whose rebellion and critical spirit toward top leadership is unchecked and out of control. Although we may not see fire from God consume the affiliates of those in abject rebellion against God's chosen leaders, there will eventually be serious consequences for the unrepentant affiliate.

The censers that had been used in the rebellion were hammered flat and used to cover the altar. This covering of the altar with the flattened censers was done as a constant reminder to the congregation that only descendants of Aaron (men of Levitical priesthood) were authorized by the Lord to come near to God to offer incense.

After the preceding miraculous events in which God caused the earth to swallow the leaders of the rebellion and in which he consumed the companions of the rebels by His fire, you might think there is no more to report. Not so!!

The very next day after these punitive events took place, the entire congregation "complained against Moses and Aaron saying, "You have killed the people of the Lord." (verse 41) This thoughtless accusation caused such anger in the Lord that He immediately wanted to consume (wipe out) the rest of the congregation. The entire congregation was now talking like the rebels whom God put to death only the day before!!

Moses always defended the people when God threatened to totally decimate them. But no intercession for the Israelites in this situation was enough to turn away God's wrath. He caused a plague to break out among the people. It was a plague that caused death to those who were stricken by it.

Moses acted as quickly as he could to stop the plague because many people were already dying. Moses knew that atonement must be made on behalf of the people before God. So he sent Aaron to get a censer, put fire from the altar in it and then put incense on the fire. Then he ordered Aaron to take the censer to the people and thereby make atonement for them.

It is said of Aaron that "he stood between the dead and the living; so the plague was stopped." (verse 48) But not before fourteen thousand seven hundred people of the congregation died, making the grand total of those who died in two days very close to fifteen thousand. This is a true picture of God's intense hatred of rebellion and a critical spirit directed at leaders whom He has chosen.

The only atonement required for those with a rebellious and critical spirit toward spiritual leadership is seeking the place of sincere repentance before God and the place of sincere apology and reconciliation with those leaders (and others) who were offended. For the good of all concerned, if that is a problem for you, humble yourself and make it right quickly! You really will be glad you did!