

Numbers 16

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 July 2018

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Okay, Numbers chapter 16. Number 16, which is on page 124. Have you ever found yourself retelling! a story and saying, I wish the ground would swallow me up. We know that phrase, don't we?

! I wish the ground would swallow me up. You can google a really excellent speech by David Cameron. I don't think I've ever said that before. But David Cameron gave a speech on the King James Version of the Bible. And it is actually a terrific speech. And he talks about how lots of the language of the King James Version has seeped into our ordinary conversation. And it's the same with that phrase, isn't it? I wish the ground would swallow me up. That is from Numbers chapter 16. Although here in the book of Numbers, it's something far more serious, isn't it, than just mild embarrassment. Or something mildly inappropriate that you've said. It is something very serious indeed. In fact, Numbers 16, as Chris read it, you will see that it's a terrifying chapter. And if you go to the end of the chapter, you will see in verse 49 that there's a casualty list of about 15,000 people. And imagine the news on that day would have picked up on this, wouldn't it, all over the world. If such a thing was to happen today, the news would break all around the world. And you would hear these words, wouldn't you, you would hear we interrupt this programme to bring you live pictures of a scene of devastation from the Paran Desert. And you'd see the reporter with the microphone in her hands. We go to our foreign correspondent standing here in the eerie silence of Camp Israel.

And amongst that are people who witness events that are scarcely believable. Eyewitnesses report of the earth opening up and swallowing people, fire consuming others. And if that were not enough, a plague has swept through the entire camp, leaving dead bodies everywhere.

Look at some of the scenes. Some of the scenes are too gruesome for us to show you. The death tower, about 15,000 people, that is Numbers 16. And on a purely human level, it's a picture of carnage and devastation. But we know that with reading the book of Numbers, you can't just look at it on a human level. Because this isn't the work of a terrorist group, it is the natural disaster. Look at verse 20. The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, separate yourselves, get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment. Or look at verse 34 and 35. And all who, and all Israel who were around them, fled at their cry, for they said, lest the earth swallow us up. Fire came out from the Lord and consumed 50 men. Or look at verses 44 to 46. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, get away from the midst of the congregation, that I may consume them in a moment. The Bible leaves us in no doubt, does it, that this is

[3 : 06] God's doing. And this is about the judgment of God and those who claim to be his people. And the New Testament tells us in 1 Corinthians 10 that these things happen, stories like this happened, they are written up as a warning. So if you think that you're standing firm, be careful that you don't fall too. And we need to ask ourselves the question, are we standing firm in the Lord or are we grumbling against the Lord? Because if you remember from chapter 11, these chapters are about grumbling, aren't they? And according to 1 Corinthians 10, again, that is a very serious thing. We don't think it is. In our culture we find grumpy old men, don't we? And grumpy old women amusing and entertaining. And we think that's funny. But there is a grumpiness, there is a spirit of grumbling which is very serious. And so let me read to you from 1 Corinthians 10.

It says this. It says, now these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did.

Do not be idolatrous as some of them were. The people sat down to eat and drink and they rose up to play and we must not indulge. And then he talks about immorality and sexual immorality. And he talks about testing the Lord. And he says those are serious things. And then he talks about grumbling. And he puts it there with these other things. And he says, if you are going to give

yourselves up to the spirit of grumbling, then be very careful that the same thing doesn't happen to you than happened to the people in the wilderness. These things are written as a warning to you and I. And that warning about grumbling goes back a long way. Goes right back, doesn't it, to when God brought them out of Egypt. But now they're complaining about the weather, about the state. They're not complaining about the weather or the state of the economy. What are they complaining about? In number 16 they are complaining about their salvation. And so I want to call it for what it is today. I want to try and call number 16 gospel grumbling. Because all their grumbling is about God saving them from Egypt. It's a remarkable thing. In chapter 11, just flick with me if you can. In chapter 11 the people complained about their hardship in the hearing of the Lord. And then we're told in verse 4 and 5 and said, the rabble was among them with a strong craving. And they said, oh that we had meat to eat. We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt that cost nothing. The cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic. But now our strength is dried up and there's nothing at all but this manna to eat.

We'll just go to chapter 14 and verse 2. And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. And the whole congregation said, would that we had died in the land of Egypt. Or would that we died in this wilderness.

[6 : 17] Why is the Lord bringing us out of this land to fall by the sword? What are they complaining about? They're complaining about, aren't they, the fact that God has rescued them from Egypt.

They're complaining that God is actually feeding them in the wilderness where there is no food. And they are complaining that God is leading them to a land flowing with milk and honey.

That's what they're complaining about. And we want to be back. We want to be back in that state before God rescued us. We want to be back in Egypt. The Egypt from which the Lord rescued us. We want to be back in slavery to our lusts. We want to be back in the world.

We don't want the promised land. And they're grumbling about their salvation. And when you start to do that, that is a very serious thing. Do you ever find yourself doing that?

With the psalmist in Psalms 73, we sang it at the start of the service, comparing your lot with those of the ungodly. Do you remember what he says? He says, as for me, my feet nearly slipped. I nearly lost my footfall because I envied the arrogant. When I saw how prosperous the wicked were, when I saw how ungodly people were getting on in this world and the wonderful things that they were enjoying, I was envious of them. And it nearly cost me my salvation.

[7 : 39] And my feet almost slipped. Verse 13, he says, surely in vain have I kept my heart. What's the point in living a Christian life? In vain, I've washed my hands in innocence.

I knew as a man, he said, he wants to go back to his own life. Before God met him. Back to the slavery of his own lusts. To live his own agenda. Do you remember what stopped him?

Verse 16 of Psalms 73, he says, when I tried to understand all this, it was very oppressive to me. Until I entered the sanctuary of God. And then I understood when I saw their final destiny.

And that's what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 10. If you're tempted to go back, if you're tempted to go back into the world that God has rescued you from, if you envy the ungodly and the wicked in their lifestyle, you fret about that, just remember, remember where these people are going.

Take the blinkers off. How about your work colleagues? Take your blinkers off. This life, three score years and ten, maybe a bit more.

[8 : 46] There is more to who you are as a human being. You are made in the image and the likeness of God. God has put eternity into your heart. You see, there are a number of places in the Bible where this horrifying episode is picked up on.

I'm commenting. Hebrews. And chapter 10. Hebrews chapter 10, verse 26. Let me read it to you. It says this. For if we go on sinning.

He's speaking to these people. He says, if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin. What that means is this.

If you go on deliberately, willfully go back on your salvation. You deliberately go back into the world. What can you look forward to? If you turn your back on Christ, what do you have to look forward to?

Verse 27. Well, about a fearful expectation of judgment. And a fury of fire that will consume his adversaries. Right in Hebrews is deliberately pointing you back to number 16.

[9 : 52] Do you see the logic there? And what did it cost God to save them from Egypt? What does it cost God to save us tonight? And to rescue us?

He did not spare his own son. But gave him up for us all. And if you're going to trash that. If you're going to despise that. And trample on the blood of Christ.

And go back into the world. And live a selfish life for three score years and ten. And you get all the goodies that this life has got to offer. Then the only alternative is a fearful expectation of judgment. To treat Christ's sacrifice in that way. That's the argument here. It goes on, doesn't it? And talks about anyone who rejected Moses. And he's referring back to this episode.

In Numbers, verse 28 of Hebrews 10. Anyone who set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the one who's trampled underfoot the Son of God.

[10 : 54] And has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and has outraged the Spirit of grace. For we know him who said Vengeance is mine, I will repay.

And again the Lord will judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. There's no reason why anyone should fall into the hands of the living God.

In that way. And face such a terrible prospect of judgment. Because God has not spared his Son but given him up for us all. And this grumbling is so serious because it is a gospel issue.

They're not complaining about the weather or about each other but about what God has done to rescue them. Now let's try and look at it closely. And I think we're going to find two different strands. We will find the Levites and the Reubenites and they're quite different.

There is Korah and Co and then there is Dathan and Abiram and Co. And they come together as a group. So let's go to Numbers 16 and look at verse 1 to 3.

[11 : 58] Now Korah son of Issa son of Coath son of Levi and Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab and On son of Pelleth sons of Reuben took men. And they rose up before Moses with a number of people of Israel 250 chiefs of the congregation chosen from the assembly.

They were well known men. And they assembled themselves to gather against Moses and against Aaron and they said to him you've gone too far. For all in the congregation are holy every single one of them and the Lord is among them.

Why then do you exalt yourself above the assembly of the Lord? They came as a group. They came to oppose Moses and Aaron and Dathan and Abiram they kind of piggyback on Korah's complaint.

They have their own grievances which we'll see. People often do that in the Gospels don't they? In the Gospels. The Pharisees and Sadducees normally they can't stand each other but they come together to plot to have Jesus removed.

They're united by their hatred of Jesus. Or you think of Herod and Pontius Pilate unlikely bedfellows and yet they come together to see the Lord Jesus crucified.

[13 : 04] And it's the same year it's one rebellion but it's two strands. And let me give you what the two strands are. There are two Ps pride and pragmatism. And so let's look for the first one pride.

And that's demonstrated by Korah and the gang. When we come to this passage Korah and his gang are already in a really privileged position. They are close to the heart of the camp and the temple.

They are close to the inner sanctum where God dwells among his people. They are the folk that have been given the privilege of carrying the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle through the wilderness.

But look how they come in verses 2 and 3. Their issue is this. Why should Moses have a privilege that's been denied to the rest of us? They rose up against Moses.

And what do they say? They come as a group to oppose him and they say to him you've gone too far. For all in the congregation are holy every single one of them and the Lord is among them.

[14 : 08] Why then do you exalt yourselves above them? The assembly of the Lord. What are they arguing? They are arguing the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

Aren't they? Aren't they? They're saying the whole camp is holy. Who are you to set yourself up as holier than thou Moses? Aaron. We're a kingdom of priests, aren't we?

Isn't that what God told us in Exodus 19? We're a royal priesthood. A kingdom of priests. It's a classic example of how a truth can become an error when it's misapplied.

What is happening here is pride rebelling against God's order. Moses and Aaron haven't exalted themselves at all. They haven't pleased themselves here.

God had put them there as leaders. In fact, Moses didn't want the job. He did everything he could to get out of it. When God called him, he said, here am I, send him. Pointing to his brother Aaron, his cousin Aaron, whoever Aaron was to him.

[15 : 13] And he says, I don't know how to talk to this. I'm a useless public speaker. Why don't you choose someone else for the job? So, God gives Moses Aaron as his mouthpiece. Moses is still at the primary leadership position, but the point was that neither Moses nor Aaron put themselves in a leadership position.

God put them there. And it's a stark contrast to the pride of Koran. Look at verse 4. Look at Moses' humility. When Moses heard it, he fell on his face.

When he heard it, he flew off the handle in a rage. How dare you? No. Three times in this chapter, you find Moses on his face before the Lord. It's something that Koran never did.

But Moses is on his face before the Lord. And that's always the way to handle criticism, isn't it? As difficult as it is. Whether you're a leader or not a leader. Do your friends despise forsake you?

What do you do? Give them as good as you get? Put the knife in? Go and speak to someone else about them. Bide your tongue so you can get back at them. No, you take it to the Lord in prayer.

[16 : 25] You fall on your face before the Lord because vengeance is mine, isn't it? Says the Lord. And I will repay and you leave God to fight your battles. Is that the kind of person you are?

God is much better at fighting your battles than you could ever be. It's good for us as a church, isn't it? We are a fallen people as a church family. We are a broken people and we will rub each other up the wrong way.

And we will offend each other and we do offend each other. And the devil always wants to get into churches like ours and divide us and push people apart but the devil always oversteps the mark, doesn't he?

people. Because if we are godly people and we are handling these things in a godly way, then actually criticism can only be for our good.

And so if someone criticizes you or complains about you, what do you do? You fall on your face before the Lord. And we have to say, don't we, is there some truth in this? Because if there is some truth in this, and it may only be a small truth, help me Lord to change in this.

[17 : 35] Help me Lord to repent. Not, how dare you, who do you think you are? But if there is truth in it, and if there is no truth in it, does it matter?

It doesn't really matter, does it, what people think or say? Because my sense of identity, my identity is hidden in Christ. My sense of who I am, what you have done for me is in the cross.

And that's the way to handle these interpersonal conflicts that come on our way, is to fall on our face before the Lord, and that's what Moses did. And the result, they've come to Moses and Aaron in their pride, and they say, Moses, you've gone too far, you've overstepped the mark, and then what does Moses say in verse 7?

He says, no, you Levites have gone too far. You've overstepped the mark. And God is going to show that to you. And verse 7, he will show you who's who.

Let God fight your battles. Don't try to justify yourself. Let God be God. In verses 4 to 6, he says, in the morning, in the morning, the Lord will show you who he is.

[18 : 49] He'll show you who's who, and what's what. And even when criticism come, when they're clothed in theological arguments, and spiritual language, even scriptural language, even, God will show who's who, and what's what.

And so what's happening in number 16 is pride motivated by envy and jealousy. And worse than that, a dissatisfaction with God. With God's provision of salvation.

It is gospel camp of grumbling. It is against the Lord their grumbling, not Moses and Aaron. Let's come with me there, chapters 27, chapter 27, which we'll probably get there in 2019.

But there's these two ladies of unpronounceable names. And in 27, verse 2, they stand before Moses and before Eliezer, the priests, and before the chiefs and all the congregation at the entrance of the tent and the meeting, and they say, our father died in the wilderness.

And then they say, he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah. He wasn't in Korah's gang, but do you just notice that?

[20 : 06] Do you see what those daughters say? They say, my father, he was not in those who gathered themselves against the Lord. He died for his own sins and had no sons.

He was not a man Korah's followers. And what they do in number 16, when they band together, you've got to understand it's they're rebelling against the Lord. And that is the nature of their grumbling, gospel grumbling.

It's not any old leadership struggle. They've set themselves up against God's leader. You might remember in chapter 12 how God jumps to the defence of Moses and he reminds them.

Chapter 12, verse 6 to 8. He says to them, hear my words, if there's a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make myself known to him. In a vision, I speak with him in a dream, but not so with my servant Moses. He's faithful in all my house.

With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he holds the form of the Lord. Moses is God's leader in a very special sense.

[21 : 13] He is that prophet. He is the one who is revealing the way of salvation. But these people want to speak in the game. They want to say in the matter. You see that today, don't we?

that's your interpretation, not mine. My interpretation is just as good as yours. We say that, we have to submit to God's word.

It's God's word that has the authority. And when we say that, they say that's your interpretation and not mine. And they're not satisfied with the way that God has arranged things, with the way that God is revealing.

Through Moses, no, no, we want to say this. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, but through me. That's a step too far. Don't be extreme. I know people who are religious, they have something to teach us, don't they?

Or the God I believe in is much bigger than that. That's the great line. The Lord is with us as well as with you. How dare you be so arrogant? What about other faiths?

[22 : 23] Are they equally valid? And this is a serious matter because it is the gospel they are grumbling about. It's God's arrangement for the salvation of the world.

And they are complaining about it. They want to put their oar in. They want to have their say in the matter. Well, my God, who cares about your God, if I can say that gently? Your God doesn't exist. He's a figment of your imagination. There is one God and that is the God who reveals himself clearly in his word. It's the difference between religion and Christianity, isn't it?

Religion is my words about God and Christianity is God's word about man. It's in a totally different direction and that is what they're rising up against. Who are you to stand between us and God? We're all equally valid. We're all equally holy. We've got all right to our own. Peter says, no, salvation is found in no one else. For there's no other need given underhand by which we may be saved.

[23 : 25] Does that offend your pride? That's the way it is because there's no other way. And so if we've understood the gospel the one thing it must do is humble us.

It must humble us that these people are proud. And they're fighting the incident. Now let's look at the other side. You're doing very well. There's lots of fans I can hear but you're doing well.

We see pride but we also see pragmatism. We see Dathan and Abiram or whatever you call them and their gang and they're not actually attacking Aaron. They don't want to be priests. They don't want to be something like that.

They're questioning Moses. And they're suggesting that Moses is not a competent leader. They're saying Moses in fact you're far from competent. You're a very ineffective leader and Moses is not working.

Look at verses 12 to 14 where it comes up most clearly. And Moses said to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab and they said we will not come up. Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey?

[24 : 29] Do you see that? They're describing Egypt as the land flowing with milk and honey. They've got very selective memories haven't they? to kill us in the wilderness that you must also make yourself a prince over us.

Moreover you've not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey nor given us inheritance of fields and villiards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up. You've not done it Moses it's not working.

Isn't that incredible? How long should it have taken them to get into the promised land? They think it's about 11 days of walk. It actually took them 40 years walking in over decreasing circles.

And it wasn't because of Moses was it? It was because of their unbelief. We've seen that really clearly in the book of Numbers. They didn't want to go in. They are pragmatists. They are practical atheists.

They say that they believe in God but they don't really believe in God at all. There are giants in the land. Who's going to protect me from the giants? There's a lot of people like that. People who professed to be believers but they've never really left the world.

[25 : 42] They say they believe in God but actually they live as if God didn't exist. And all their decisions are made along those lines. As if God is really an idea or a concept. Not the living God who can actually do things.

Do you know people like that? And sometimes we can be like that, can't we? We can be people who live as if God's words were not true. Isn't that right? Look what they say in verse 14.

They say, listen, it's just not working. You've not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey. You've not given us inheritance of fields and vineyards.

You're not. Are you going to pull out the eyes of these men? Are you going to pull the wall over our eyes like you have with others? We will not allow it. We will not follow you. We will not come up.

We will not blindly follow you like these other dupes. You can't fool us, Moses. You're just following your own agenda for your own sake, so we refuse to come.

[26 : 45] There are none so blind as those who will not see. And they refuse to see and they distort the past. Egypt, there's a land flowing with milk and honey. Of course it wasn't.

Why are they in the wilderness and not in the promised land is because of their own unbelief.

Because they refuse to go in. And now they have the gall and they blame Moses for their unbelief.

There you have it. That's what's happening here. Pride rising up against God's way of salvation, God's ordering of things. And pragmatism, that desire for productivity and results.

And we know, don't we, that the spirit of pragmatism lives healthily and well in the church today.

And so when people ask, not what is biblical, but does it work?

And so churches like ours chase after bandwagons and not what pleases God, but what will bring people in through the show horse. So finally, what's God's response to this?

[27 : 51] It's quite moving when you see it. There is a warning in verses 25 to 26. There is a warning. Moses rose and was Dathan and Abiram and the elders of Israel followed him. And he spoke to the congregation saying, depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins.

The ground is about to open up and swallow them. Don't stand too close. Again, I think that's strikingly relevant, isn't it? Distance yourself. Stay away or you'll be swept along with them.

Isn't that what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 15? On the resurrection, when he's teaching on that, he quotes a Greek philosopher and he says, bad company corrupts good character.

Bad company, if you keep company with the wrong sort of people, if you keep company with the wrong sort of ideas, if you keep company with the wrong sort of theology, it will corrupt your character.

And there's a warning, isn't there? Stay away, keep your distance. It's important to be in a church where you know the minister, where you can challenge him, where you have elders that you know, and you can talk with, not some internet preacher or some preacher on TV that you've got no idea what he's like.

[29 : 13] So there's a warning. But there's also an encouragement too. Look at verses 31 to 34. Verse 31. What on earth is encouraging that?

It's terrifying. It's terrifying. Well, let me tell you why it's encouraging. It's encouraging because you've heard of the band, didn't you, the sons of Korah, didn't you?

You've heard them sing. If you go to the sounds, there's 12 sounds, I think, written by the sons of Korah. And so Korah's family weren't wiped out.

There were seven sons of Korah who didn't want to be part of this rebellion. We're going to separate ourselves from this. And they did. And we have to separate ourselves.

Even if it means endangering relationships like it meant for them. We need to separate ourselves unto Christ. How do you do that? You look to the Lord Jesus, don't you?

[30 : 41] God. We're not going to sing it, but we often sing it when we come to the Lord's table. But I surveyed the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died. My richest gain I count but loss.

And poor contempt on all my pride. So tonight, do you recognise the problem of pride when you look to the cross? And forbid it, Lord, that I should boast save in the death of Christ my God. all the vain things that charm me most. I sacrifice them to his blood. And it's at the cross that pride withers and pragmatism dies.

And Moses and Aaron were great men, weren't they? But Moses in the end didn't bring them into the promised land, which we'll see later. And Moses failed as a leader. He couldn't bring them into the promised land. And Aaron the priest couldn't bring to them the forgiveness of their sins, but there is one greater than Moses.

And a greater than Aaron is called. And that one is Jesus, and that is of course what the book of Hebrews is about. That we need Jesus, that Moses fell on his face as the great intercessor.

[31 : 51] But Jesus on the cross when the ground opens up to swallow him, and the fire of God's anger falls on him, falls on his face and says, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

They don't know what they're doing. Isn't that lovely? Jesus interceding for those who cause his death. Jesus interceding for rabbles, proud rebellious rabbles.

Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. And at that point the ground swallows him up and he is buried for three days till on the third day God raises him again.

and so living he loved me and dying he saved me and buried he carried my sins far away and rising he justified freely forever and one day he's coming for glorious day.

Let's pray. Thank you.