

### **“Where Do We Find Deliverance?”**

Why? It's a question that comes so naturally to us. Kids from very early on are curious to know, and eager to ask, “Why?” But it's not just kids, is it? People of all ages ask the same question about a great many things.

One of the times that we often ask “Why?” is when tragedy strikes, when bad things happen. Sometimes we ask why these things happen to us, or why they happen to those who are close to us. Sometimes tragedies strike far away and have no direct impact on us, and still we can't help but wonder and maybe even ask why they happen.

Jesus' followers often wanted to know why. On several occasions Jesus addressed their “why” questions. We heard one example in today's Gospel. Why would Galileans have been slaughtered by Pilate as they offered sacrifices? Why would God allow a tower to fall on and to kill 18 people right there in Siloam, within the holy city of Jerusalem? Jesus answered these questions by explaining that sometimes the reason why is not as direct as we tend to think or as we might expect. There was no single sin that the Galileans had committed that God punished through the hands of Pilate. There was no particular wickedness that infected the 18 on whom the tower fell compared to all the rest in Jerusalem. Instead of asking “Why?” Jesus wanted his followers to ask what they should do when they see such things.

Our sermon text this morning asks and invites us to do the same thing. The answer to the question “Why?” is very clear in this case. A better question is this: where do we find deliverance?

Our text, though fairly lengthy, is really only the second half of the account regarding Korah's rebellion. This event took place in the wilderness before the Israelites entered into the Promised Land. On several occasions the people had grumbled and complained about what they were going through. Some took issue with Moses, who was God's appointed leader over the people. They had even refused to go into and to take possession of the Promised Land when they first arrived there, which is why God forced them back into the wilderness for 40 years.

In this case, Korah and those with him decided that there was nothing special about Moses to set him apart from the rest of the people. They believed that as God's chosen nation, they were all set apart for God and therefore had a right to make their own decisions for the people. They blamed Moses for the tough conditions that they faced in the wilderness, and they were finally fed up. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, along with 250 leaders among the tribes of Israel, went to Moses to publically oppose him.

The answer that Moses offered was to seek God's answer. All who were suggesting that they had a right to be the priests and leaders of the people were to fill their censers with incense and to present it before the Lord. You should remember that this was a responsibility that God had given only to his priests. He was very clear that others were not supposed to take it on themselves to do the work the priests were called to do.

The aftermath of this rebellion is what is presented to us in our sermon text this morning. The Lord through Moses gave all the people a chance to align themselves. Either with Moses, who commanded them to separate themselves from Korah and the others, or with the rebellion. And Moses announced, **“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 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.”**

Sometimes the why is very clear. Just as Moses had warned, the ground opened up and swallowed these wicked men along with their entire households and all their possessions. And just as it had opened up it closed over them, sealing them into their graves. You can imagine what a horrible sight that must have

been. You can understand why even those watching would have been frightened, concerned that the ground might open up and swallow them, too.

But it did not. God dealt with the leaders of the rebellion, and he dealt with those who had gone along with it as well. **“And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.”** The message was unmistakable. Rebellion against God deserved his punishment. God, who dealt patiently with so many sins, so much grumbling, and so many complaints from his people at times allowed his righteous anger to be put on display. There was no mistaking the fact that the victims of his holy fire were in rebellion against him, and there was no mistaking the fact that he was responsible for delivering punishment.

It is useful for us to consider these unmistakable situations because we so often misread the situations we face and deny or avoid the wrongs for which we are responsible. Whether we want to admit it or not, we far too often have much in common with Korah and the other rebels. How many times do we deny that God is right with all of his judgments and decisions? How many times do we question why he would limit our activities or expect obedience from us? How many times do we rebel against the authorities he has placed over us, essentially rebelling against God himself?

In other words, any time we see tragedy, our reaction should not be a surprised, “Why?” It should be, as Jesus says, a realization of our need for repentance. We should be asking ourselves, “Where do we find deliverance?” Whether the direct cause is clearly seen or known, and it is more likely that in our present situations it is not, deep down the cause of all suffering and all evil is sin. And we are as responsible for sin as anyone else around us. Where do we find deliverance?

We find our deliverance in the same place that the Israelites did. They found deliverance as they heeded God’s warning, and as they separated themselves from those who were acting in open rebellion. They found deliverance in the fact that God was patient and long-suffering. God didn’t react with the same sort of burning anger in every case of grumbling and complaining, sinful though such actions were. And they found deliverance at the Lord’s altar.

Don’t miss the rich symbolism in what God commanded in the aftermath of his consuming fire. The bronze censers with which the rebels burnt their incense were hammered into sheets and overlaid on the altar. There, where sacrifices were offered to God, they would stand as a reminder of this event. The people would remember that only the priests were authorized by God to officiate at that altar and to burn incense. And there at the same altar the people would be reminded that a greater priest and a greater sacrifice were still to come.

So much of the Old Testament worship life was rich with this same symbolism. It pointed to the Messiah as the fulfillment of all the sacrifices offered on the Lord’s altar. It pointed to the Great High Priest who would come to offer the ultimate sacrifice. It taught that the Lord would deal with sin through the sacrifice of an innocent victim and that he would choose the way such a sacrifice would be carried out.

Where do we go for deliverance? Only to Christ. He is the Messiah who has fulfilled all of the sacrifices. He is the Great High Priest who offered himself for the sins of the world. He is the one that God himself chose and anointed and appointed for this gracious work, the one victim whose innocent blood paid the price for the sins of the whole world.

We have no other place to go. There is nothing we as sinful people can do to make up for our sins. There is nothing that we can do to escape the effects of sin and evil in our world. So we repent of our sins. We admit our failure, our weakness, and our helplessness. We turn to God and to his Son Jesus Christ.

The why is easy. The why is sin, and with it disease and destruction, hostility and hatred. Sin explains every evil that we face and every pain that we suffer. But the more important question is “Where do we go for deliverance?” The answer is we go to God in faithful trust, not to ourselves. To find deliverance we turn from sin in repentance and put our confidence in our Savior. And the ultimate answer to where we find deliverance is in the heavenly home he has prepared for us, where our deliverance will be complete.

The Text: Numbers 16:23–40 (NIV84)

<sup>23</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, <sup>24</sup> “Say to the assembly, ‘Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’ ”

<sup>25</sup> Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. <sup>26</sup> 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.” <sup>27</sup> 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 entrances to their tents.

<sup>28</sup> 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: <sup>29</sup> If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the Lord has not sent me. <sup>30</sup> But if the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens 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.”

<sup>31</sup> As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart <sup>32</sup> and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah’s men and all their possessions. <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, “The earth is going to swallow us too!”

<sup>35</sup> And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.

<sup>36</sup> The Lord said to Moses, <sup>37</sup> “Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to take the censers out of the smoldering remains and scatter the coals some distance away, for the censers are holy— <sup>38</sup> the censers of the men who sinned at the cost of their lives. Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar, for they were presented before the Lord and have become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites.”

<sup>39</sup> So Eleazar the priest collected the bronze censers brought by those who had been burned up, and he had them hammered out to overlay the altar, <sup>40</sup> as the Lord directed him through Moses. This was to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the Lord, or he would become like Korah and his followers.