

LIVING FREE - Week 8

Monday, July 26

One of my kids' favorite movies is Monty Python and the Holy Grail. They have memorized the dialogue of the movie. If you have not seen it, it is a hoot. Of course, it tells the story of knights on a holy quest to find the grail. The best of the moments in the movie are often the side scenes. One of them deals with a community that is trying to figure out if a woman is a witch. They drag her into the village. A few of the people say she is a witch, and they have dressed her up as a witch. Of course, she pleads her innocence. But how can they know whether she is a witch or not? She looks like an ordinary woman. Appearance will not help you. The deeper question below this silly skit is: how can you prove spiritual things are true? That they even exist?

Here's our text for today:

Numbers 16:3-7

They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?"⁴ When Moses heard it, he fell on his face,⁵ and he said to Korah and all his company, "In the morning the LORD will show who is his, and who is holy, and will bring him near to him. The one whom he chooses he will bring near to him."⁶ Do this: take censers, Korah and all his company;⁷ put fire in them and put incense on them before the LORD tomorrow, and the man whom the LORD chooses shall be the holy one. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!"

Now, we pick up from last week. A man named Korah from Moses' tribe has made a claim against Moses. He has said that Moses has no right to his position of authority over the people. Aaron, the brother of Moses, has no rightful claim to the priesthood. Korah has charged Moses with nepotism and an abuse of power. It is true that the Lord made the selection of Moses and Aaron, but how can Moses prove that? How can he prove that he spoke with the Lord, and this plan for leadership was the Lord's choosing and not his? Moses has an immense problem. Here is what he does. First, he tells the men the test will come the next day. It seems to us like he is buying time, and I think he is, not to get out of this bind, but to give these men the opportunity to rethink their position. Second, to demonstrate the seriousness of their rebellion against the Lord, Moses tells Korah and the 250 men with him that the next day they will take censers into their hands and prepare to bring them before the Lord. Yes, he is recreating the scene recorded in the book of Leviticus. Here's what scripture tells us happened at that time. Two of Aaron's sons had the bright idea that they could worship the Lord the way they wanted. They brought their censers, what came to be called unholy fire, before the Lord, and the Lord struck them down. Moses asks these men to prepare censers of their own that they might see what the Lord does to them. You can imagine these men going back to their tents that night and rethinking their strategy. They might be willing to test Moses, but do they want to test the Lord? Now, going back to Monty Python, spiritual truths can be difficult to prove. The villagers finally came up with a completely ludicrous means of determining whether the woman was a witch. I don't want to spoil the movie for you. I will tell you that it is not scientific. Ok. Yes, this is a silly story used to prove an important point. How can you prove God exists? How can we prove the spiritual truths of the faith? We may have a lot of evidence, but that is not the same as proof. Now, back to Moses, this is the challenge he has. He knows that he cannot show the men the truth. The Lord himself must settle this.

And Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi:⁹ is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself, to do service in the tabernacle of the LORD and to stand before the congregation to minister to them,¹⁰ and that he has brought you near him, and all your brothers the sons of Levi with you? And would you seek the priesthood also?"¹¹ Therefore it is against the LORD that you and all your company have gathered together.

-Numbers 16:8-11

It doesn't make sense to Moses that this challenge has come. Why? All the tribe of Levi have a sacred place before God. Why are they wanting more? God will settle the matter. Moses knows that he doesn't have to defend the Lord. How often do we feel we must defend the Lord, to make his

case for him? Now, it is not wrong to tell people about the Lord. We have a story to share, and we want to encourage people to look to God. And, yes, we want to put up a good defense for why we believe what we do. But that which is of the Spirit is spiritually discerned. We look to the Spirit of God to reveal the truth, for God to make himself known. Yes, God alone can reveal the truth to people about himself. People can only know him if the Lord decides to make himself known. How has the Lord done this in your life? How has he revealed himself to you and shown you the truth of the gospel? How has the Spirit of God revealed to you truths that you could not find on your own, so that you could understand the gospel and receive Christ by faith? Of course, there is history, the actions of God behind our faith. Jesus was born into the world. He lived in history. He died, and he rose again and was seen by many people. The story of Jesus is not a myth. In a way, it is an anti-myth, challenging the stories we make up by God entering space and time to speak with us. To be God with us. It is this we rest in every day.

Let's pray:

Faithful Father, your ways are not our ways, nor are our thoughts as your own. Lead us into your truth by your Holy Spirit that we might be set free. Thank you for coming to us in Jesus and revealing yourself in him. In his name we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, July 27

Leaders don't always get it right. I know this personally. Recently, I was reminded of a time when a decision I made was wrong. Time and distance from the moment has made it abundantly clear. Sometimes, we just cannot see the moment and situation clearly enough. Sometimes, our emotions get the best of us. Sometimes, we have conflicting values or desires that make decisions complex and fraught with difficulty. Of course, I would love to backtrack and correct the decision. Our study has reminded us that we are always learning, always growing, and that much of our growth comes through failure. Moses had this experience as well. As strong a leader as he is, sometimes his emotions get the best of him.

Today, we read about such a situation:

Numbers 16:12-15

And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and they said, "We will not come up. ¹³Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also make yourself a prince over us? ¹⁴Moreover, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up." ¹⁵And Moses was very angry and said to the LORD, "Do not respect their offering. I have not taken one donkey from them, and I have not harmed one of them."

Here is where we are in the wilderness. Korah and 250 men have begun a rebellion against Moses and Aaron. Two other men also were not happy with Moses and his leadership. Dathan and Abiram. Though they do not join the other rebels, they are grumbling and dissatisfied. Moses does the right thing by calling them to meet with him. There are five levels of conflict. In the first level, where most conflicts begin, there is a problem that can most often be solved. The parties can come together to find common ground and hopefully a resolution. In the second level, a problem becomes a disagreement. People become more protective in their conversations rather than working together through collaboration. In level three, a contest begins. Gone is the time when the parties are willing to work together. Each wants to win, and now conversations can turn into personal attacks. At level four, it seems like a crusade is under way, and protecting oneself and one's position is far more important than bringing parties together to find a solution. Level 5 is world war. The talking has stopped and all that is left is the desire to win, and to destroy. Now, wise leaders will try to deescalate the conflict, bringing it down to the place where the parties can speak with each other in a productive way. Then hopefully the parties can find common ground. But notice what Dathan and Abiram do. They refuse to meet with Moses. And here is where Moses makes his mistake. Moses asks the Lord to reject them and their offering when they bring it. It seems that nothing more than anger would drive Moses to make this request of the Lord. He should desire anyone to make peace with God, anyone to seek God's face. As a leader, this is one thing I fear more than anything else. I would hate to bring dishonor to the Lord, or to distract anyone from coming to him. When Jesus was ending his earthly ministry, he gave his most harsh sermon. It is sometimes called the Seven Woes

because Jesus pronounced woes on the religious leaders of the Jewish people. His greatest charge against them was that they were making it difficult for people to come to the Lord. People were coming in need of the Lord, and their actions were causing them to be turned away. In human terms, this is what caused the leaders to strike out against Jesus and to demand that he be put to death. You see, the very nature of Jesus' ministry was connecting people with the Father. Indeed, he made himself our sacrifice to bring peace to the conflict between humanity and God. Jesus stepped into our conflict, the real-world war, to bring peace and life. We are told that he himself is our source of peace. Yes, it is his love and his peace that has brought us fellowship with God and the ability to pursue peace. Now, all of us encounter conflict. It can hardly be avoided, but we can learn how to pursue peace and relationship. That doesn't mean that we can guarantee it. We cannot control how others respond, but only learn to apply what we have learned from the Prince of Peace. Of course, we want to encourage people to seek the Lord. He opens the way to peace through the love and truth of the gospel, a way that we could never find ourselves.

Let's pray:

Lord God, you know how quickly our hearts rush to judgment. We may not relish conflict, but we often find ourselves in the middle of it. Sometimes we run. Sometimes, we fight. Teach us your way of peace, how to listen to those that disagree with us, and how to have conversations we may rather avoid. Thank you for your kindness toward us and your patience with us. For we pray in your name. Amen.

Wednesday, July 28

It is a death that never should have happened. It was 20 years ago now that a man named Daniel Dukes jumped the fenced at Seaworld in Orlando. Apparently, he had been to Seaworld before this and had seen the amazing killer whale show. During the special programs, the trainers get in the tank with the whales. Sometimes they throw them toys or ride on their backs. In one show, the whale would lift the trainer on its nose high into the air. Well, Mr. Dukes got the idea that he would like to swim with the whales as well. After he jumped the fence, he took off his clothes and went into the pool. He was found dead in the tank the next morning. One of the whales named Tilikum played with him like a rag doll. There is a reason they are called killer whales.

Here's our text for today:

Numbers 16:28-30

And Moses said, "Hereby you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these works, and that it has not been of my own accord. ²⁹If these men die as all men die, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then the LORD has not sent me. ³⁰But if the LORD creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the LORD."

The end of the story of the men that rebelled against God was not pretty. Do you remember the problem that Moses had? How could he prove that the Lord had spoken to him? How could he defend himself against the charges that he and Aaron had no right to their position? God had to act and to do something to demonstrate his authority and demonstrate that Moses was the man he had chosen. Moses asked God to do something that would make it clear, something new that had no other explanation but that it was the hand of God. Indeed, God caused the ground to open up and swallow these men. Everyone knew the truth. Now, these passages trouble us. They should. How can the Lord deprive these men of their lives? How can he do this? With the killer whales at Seaworld, they sell plush stuffed animals of them, and lead the crowds to believe they are tame. We have removed the fear of killer whales. I have personally seen killer whales in the wild. They are apex predators capable of killing other whales much larger than themselves. They snack on seals and sea lions. They are killing machines. Indeed, that same killer whale one day turned on its trainer taking yet another life. He was never tame. You see, in many ways, we have tamed God, in our way of thinking about him. We've written songs about God that sound sweet and syrupy. By the way, I like many of our modern worship songs. But many people don't take God seriously.

I love the way author Annie Dillard explains:

On the whole, I do not find Christians...sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a

word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

Wow! I remember reading the story of Jewish man that was a butcher. The law commanded that he invoke the name of God whenever he would slaughter an animal. Each day as he went off to work, he kissed his wife and children goodbye like he would never see them again. He did this because he knew that to speak God's name was to encounter the holy and all-powerful Lord. He wondered what day he would utter this prayer in a way that brought offense to the Lord. He would be struck down and never again go home. Do we know the power and glory of which we speak? We are speaking of the Lord of glory here! You see, the scriptures do not first reveal the love of God, but the blazing holiness and mighty power of God. It is later, when we see the wrath of God over sin fall upon Jesus, that we learn the fullness of God's love. It is not a love that blots out God's justice and holiness, but a love that establishes it. It is because of the power of God and the love of God that we can have confidence good will win out in the end. Psalm 128 begins: *How blessed is everyone that fears the Lord, that walks in his ways.*

Let's pray:

Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might. The whole earth is full of your glory. Forgive us for our efforts to tame you, to bring you down to our size, or to think you are like us. Enable us, by your Holy Spirit we pray, to live in light of your glory, and to rejoice in your goodness and love. For we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Thursday, July 29

I often get this question about God. Why does the God of the Old Testament seem to be so different from Jesus and the God of the New Testament? Actually, during the time of the early church, one of the theologians believed that the Lord of the Old Testament was not the same God that Jesus called his Father. This man's name was Marcion, and he believed that the God of the Old Testament Jewish people was a legalistic tribal deity that seems to delight in punishing people. In contrast, the God that Jesus called his Father is the universal God of compassion and love, and he looks upon humanity with grace and mercy, not judgment. Now, before we criticize Marcion, we have to admit the difficulties we find with the God we see in the Old Testament. Our text for today talks about a time when a plague breaks out among the people because of their disobedience and faithlessness. Before the plague ends, 14,700 of the people died.

Here's our text for today:

Numbers 16:46-48

And Moses said to Aaron, "Take your censer, and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone out from the LORD; the plague has begun." ⁴⁷ So Aaron took it as Moses said and ran into the midst of the assembly. And behold, the plague had already begun among the people. And he put on the incense and made atonement for the people. ⁴⁸ And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped.

As the plague got under way, Moses told his brother Aaron to take his censer and go among the people. The censer with incense burning represented the prayers of the people being lifted up to God. Aaron is fulfilling his calling as a priest to stand between the living and the dead. How are we to read this? Well, first, let's deal with Marcion's charge that the God in this story is not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is true that we find words like this in the New Testament:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

-John 3:16-17

How can the Lord love the world, a world so shattered by sin? I think the only way to deal with Marcion's charge is to go back to the cross of Jesus. Remember Aaron, the high priest, and how he stood between the living and the dead. He stopped the plague. This is the calling of Jesus and what he has done at the cross for us and on the Father's behalf. Yes, the Father of Jesus is no less holy than the God we read about in the book of Numbers. The difference is this. The wrath of God has not fallen upon us, as our sins deserve. His wrath and the punishment for sin fell upon Jesus. The horror of the cross, what Jesus bore there, was due to humanity, for our sin and rebellion against God. But it fell upon Jesus. This is how Jesus could tell the woman caught in adultery that he did not judge her. He would be judged for her. Indeed, Jesus has been judged for us. As we have learned, God cannot set aside his holiness or the justice that is wired into our creation. He cannot turn a blind eye when crimes are committed, lives destroyed, or people hurt. I remember hearing a Croatian pastor that had a hard time accepting the wrath and judgment of God against sin. He wasn't sure he could accept or believe in such a God. But then his home country was destroyed by people bent on killing and destruction. He experienced the horrors of war. He saw many people deprived of life and others abused. It was then he realized he couldn't believe in a God that did not bring justice to our world, and who was not filled with anger over injustice and sin. We know that Marcion is wrong because God's justice, his wrath, was fully poured out on Jesus at the cross. This is how we can live in God's love and rest in his forgiveness. This is how Jesus could forgive the woman caught in sin. He would die for her sin, and ours as well. This is the good news of the gospel. We have a high priest greater than Aaron. Jesus stood between us and God and took upon himself what we deserve. God's justice was fulfilled, and now we can live in newness of life. So, as we read passages like this in the book of Numbers, our eyes should grow wide with the wonder of Christ's love for us. We see that he bore the righteous, well-deserved wrath of God over sin. Because of the holiness of God, we can trust that justice will come fully, that the injustice of our world will be resolved. If we didn't believe this, we could not endure the brokenness and sin that we face each day.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we thank you that you do not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. But instead, as far as the east is from the west, so far have you removed our sin from us. Thank you for the peace that you have given to us in Jesus. Help us this day to rest in him. Amen.

Friday, July 30

At the end of WWI, a mother was leading her daughter back into their beloved village in France. This little girl's name was Suzanna, and she was only five years old. The village had been completely demolished. But her mother wanted to show her something. Through the rubble, a bush was growing, and on it was a blooming flower. Her mother told her, "Always remember, Suzanna, my dear, that a rose will grow anywhere." Of course, this was a powerful moment of hope, one that would never be forgotten in the life of that little girl.

Here's our passage for today:

Numbers 17:8-11

On the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony, and behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds. ⁹ Then Moses brought out all the staffs from before the LORD to all the people of Israel. And they looked, and each man took his staff. ¹⁰ And the LORD said to Moses, "Put back the staff of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their grumblings against me, lest they die." ¹¹ Thus did Moses; as the LORD commanded him, so he did.

Here's the backstory. The Lord wanted to show the people that he had selected Aaron to be priest for the people. So, he asked each of the chiefs of the tribes to bring his staff to the tent of meeting, the Lord's dwelling place. Moses brought the staffs into the tent and placed them before the Lord. Now, these tribal staffs were treasured possessions of the tribal leaders. Often, they were passed down from generation to generation, picking up along the way distinctive markings telling the stories of the tribe. The staff of the tribe of Levi was Aaron's, and his was among the twelve. The next day when Moses came back into the tent, all twelve staffs were there, but one was unlike the others. It had sprouted buds and blooms and even ripe almonds. This lifeless staff was producing new life and fruit as well. Now, this was a powerful sign to the people. It revealed the Lord's power over life and death and, the text tells us, struck fear in the people. But it also was a message of

hope. Yes, a rose can bloom anywhere. It was a sign that the Lord is the giver of life, and it was a life sign pointing to the future as well. Of course, the Lord had chosen Aaron to be priest, but his ministry would be a life-giving one, and the Lord had plans for his people. It is amazing how powerful a simple sign can be. I remember reading about a day when Charles Colson was visiting a prison where a prisoner was to receive the death penalty. As he spoke with the prisoner, they looked out the prison window and saw that a bird had built its nest in the razor-barbed wire fence. Here was a message of hope at the prison, reminding this man that came to believe in Jesus, that a rose can bloom anywhere. He knew that, though he would die that day, even there the Lord was with him. He would fear no evil. He would not fear death. Each of us needs signs that remind us of the hope we have in Christ as well. Maybe it is a simple cross that you wear each day reminding you that Christ died for you, and you are loved by God. Maybe your reminder is a verse you have memorized that you call to mind often. Now, here's the thing about this staff. God asked that it be kept right there at the sanctuary. We learn that when the ark of the covenant was taken into the land, the staff was there as well. It was such a powerful sign of the power of God to give life and how we hope in God when all seems lost or when we find ourselves in the wilderness. So, let's not forget, a rose can bloom anywhere by the power and gift of God.

Let's pray:

Faithful and loving God, you constantly give life. We think of those babies born to our church family during the time of COVID. You are always showing growth, your faithful love, and that your plans for us are good and gracious. During this season, O Lord, cause a rose to grow in our midst so that we might not forget you. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Saturday, July 31

Fairness is so important to children and to people in general. If we feel we have been slighted, left out, or overlooked, the pain runs deep. Sadly, I have seen immense family fights over this. One child thinks others are being favored to his or her detriment. We take these slights as attacks on our person, like somehow, we are less important or less worthy.

Here's what the book of Numbers tells us happened to the tribe of Levi:
Numbers 18:21-24

"To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting, ²²so that the people of Israel do not come near the tent of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. ²³But the Levites shall do the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations, and among the people of Israel they shall have no inheritance. ²⁴For the tithe of the people of Israel, which they present as a contribution to the LORD, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance. Therefore I have said of them that they shall have no inheritance among the people of Israel."

Now, here is what this means, the good news and the bad news. Let's start with the bad news first. The Levites will not get any inheritance of land. Unlike each of the other tribes, they receive no allotment. Now, this is a major handicap for them because in Israel, land was a permanent grant. Yes, land could be sold or traded, but it would always be returned to the tribe and people to whom the Lord assigned it. Even if you fell into debt, your land could not be permanently lost. So, land was, in a sense, a guarantee of provision. Now, the various tribes received lands that were often quite different from each other. Some was arable farmland capable of healthy production. Other land was better used for grazing animals and could not be easily cultivated. But the land was forever theirs, and this was an immense benefit. The tribe of Levi got none of that. Instead, they would serve the Lord by leading in worship, carrying and moving the tent of meeting, and serving as guards for the holy places. So, how were they to be provided for? The tithes of the people were used to provide for them. What wasn't burned up in sacrifices and offerings was taken by the Levites for the care and feeding of their families. This meant that they would receive resources from across the land in the form of meats and grains. But here was the problem. As faith declined in Israel, so did the provision made for the Levites. You can imagine how this could mean feast or famine for them. But the point was this. They would fare no better or no worse than was reflected in the spiritual vitality of the people. Their lives were joined to the Lord in this way. As a young college student, I remember reading the autobiography of George Mueller. He went off to study to become a pastor before he

even knew the Lord. The owner of the house where he stayed led him to Christ, and as he entered the ministry, he saw how much money was a driver of ministry. He didn't like this at all. In his day, people had to rent pews to have a place to sit when they came for worship. Of course, the wealthy would get the good pews and many people would be left out. He cancelled practice and instituted a system where the people gave freely and willingly. When the church did this, he decided that he would not ask people for money to support ministry. He would only go to the Lord in prayer. You can imagine there were days when provisions were few and he struggled to feed his own family. But here was the miracle. During this time, he started a number of orphanages to care for children without homes. These also were supported through the voluntary gifts of the people. Miracle after miracle fill his journal because he lived a life of dependence on the Lord. I sometimes wonder if we do not see more miracles because we do not need them. We have kept ministry within reasonable means and have never really taken any risks, never really stepped out in a bog way. It is true that there are times when pastors feel like Levites. We don't have the security of secular jobs with incomes we can count on. Often churches lack resources and pay their staff far too little for the work of ministry. I would certainly love to see our staff better supported. But there is a sweetness and beauty to ministry and a deep God-dependence. Like the tribe of Levi, it is a gift to have our future tied up with the Lord. But in truth, all of us who are in Christ are there. Our future is united with him, made possible by his provision. Our inheritance is in Christ, and our life is hidden in him. As we finish this week of our podcast, do you feel this way? That your life is in Christ? He provides for you and sustains you and has a future for you.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, we cling to everything around us for security: investment accounts, resources we have squirreled away for our future. We want to make ourselves feel secure. But we know we are not in control of our lives. Our lives are in your hands. Thank you for the promise of life in Jesus and for giving us, in him, what can never spoil or fade. Help us to live first for you and your kingdom. In the name of Jesus. Amen.