

Sermon: Sons of Korah Give Praise

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles PC, August 29, 2021, inspired by 'gotquestions.org')

Tucked in the pages of the Hebrew Bible, or the more familiar name of which we call the Old Testament, is an easily passed over and almost forgotten story of the 'Sons of Korah'. It is an intriguing story of rebellion, of judgement, and destruction, of grace, of redemption, and restoration. Finally it is a story of praise. Not too many people know of this story because you cannot find it in one neatly contained chapter. One has to really get down and sift through various sections of the Hebrew Bible, in Torah, in history, in genealogy, and in Psalms to piece together a complete picture. Yet the story of the 'Sons to Korah' needs to be remembered, told and marvelled at. So today, let me share with you this wonderful story.

First, let us start with the phrase 'Sons of Korah'. You find them popping up, usually at the opening tag line of a number of Psalms, specifically in Psalms 42, 44-49, 84, 85, 87, and 88. For example, in Psalm 84, in the ESV version of the Bible, the title of the Psalm is: "My Soul Longs for the Courts of the Lord". It is then followed by a tag line stating: "To the choirmaster: according to the Gittith. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah."

Evidently, this tag line is addressed to a music director, while leading a congregation in preparation to offer praise. The praise would follow a musical or a liturgical pattern called 'the Gittith', a pattern that was not preserved in the Bible, and is now regrettably long lost. What we do know is that the Psalm was written by the 'Sons of Korah', or in other English translation of the Bible: 'the Korahites'—using a non-gender specific term to describe really the descendants of Korah. Who were these descendants of Korah? Who was Korah in the first place?

The story really began when God through Moses first led the Israelites out of Egypt, the three sons of Levi—Gershon, Merari, and Kohath—were set-apart for service to the Lord. They and their descendants were to attend to the tabernacle, tents, pegs, crossbars, ropes, the sanctuary, the courtyard, the ark, the table, lamps and so on. The Levites were under the direct supervision of Eleazar, the son of Aaron. Kohath, the youngest son of Levi, and his descendants began to disdain their tasks and to covet the role of priests.

So in Numbers 16, Korah, the grandson of Kohath, began to associate himself with a group of Reubenite malcontents, namely Dathan, Abiram and On. Together they riled up 250 men to challenge the priestly authority of Aaron and of Moses.

They laid this charge in Number 16:3, *"You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?"* In grief and disbelief, Moses said to Korah and the others, *"Is it too little for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to allow you to approach him in order to perform the duties of the Lord's tabernacle, and to stand before the congregation and serve them? He has allowed you to approach him, and all your brother Levites with you; yet you seek the priesthood as well!"* (v.9-10).

Moses then invited this rebellious bunch, along with their associates and families to stand before the Lord, holding censers with incense, so God could choose who is holy, set-apart to perform priestly duties. With more arguments going back and forth, Moses then warned the rest of Israelites to back away from this rebellious group, in case the wrath of God should consume them.

Moses then said in verse 28-30, *"This is how you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works; it has not been of my own accord: If these people die a natural death, or if a natural fate comes on them, then the Lord has not sent me. But 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."*

As soon as Moses finished speaking, the ground did open up and swallowed Korah, along with his entire household, all that belonging to them. The earth then closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. It was a terrifying spectacle of God's judgement, an outpouring of the wrath of God's punishment, and as if that was not enough, a fire came out the earth and consumed the 250 men that stood with Korah, thus ending the ill-conceived rebellion.

It should have marked the end of Korah and his entire household, except years later, when the Israelites were preparing to enter into the land fo Canaan, when God instructed Moses to take a census of the new generation of Israelites. In the section laying out the Rubenites, specifically

mentioning the rebellion of Dathan, Abiram, there was a cryptic verse in Numbers 26:11, stating: "Notwithstanding, the sons of Korah did not die". Somehow Korah's household was not entirely consumed. We are not sure whether they were adult children who did not stand with Korah, or infant children too young at that time. Somehow, God left open a possibility of what was yet to emerge.

Seven generations later, a notable descendant of Korah left a mark. Prophet Samuel arose from the line of Korah. One actually has to piece together this genealogy from two separate sources, in 1 Samuel 1 and 1 Chronicle 6. Samuel presided over the transition of the Israel's governance from that of the Judges to the Kings. In a dual prophetic and priestly role, Samuel anointed and installed first Saul then later David as king.

It was around this time, the sons of Korah regained their status to serve first as doorkeeper, then custodian for the tabernacle. We learn later in 1 Chronicles 12, that a group of Korahites served in David's camp, fought during a time in the wilderness as David was being chased by Saul. Those Korahites distinguished themselves in battle and won a reputation of being expert warriors. However, the sons of Korah really made their mark later in David's royal court and in the tabernacle, as great leaders in choral and orchestral music.

Eleven Psalms were attributed to the sons of Korah. They were beautifully written to express an overwhelming attitude of gratitude to a mighty and awesome God. They also express a deep and profound devotion to the Lord. These Psalms, though the original tune may have been lost, nevertheless have inspired many hymns and songs of praise in later generations.

For example, Psalm 46 begins with, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging." This psalm inspires the hymn we have just sung earlier: (Hymn 315)

***A mighty fortress is our God, a refuge never failing,
Our helper sure amid the flood of mortal ill prevailing.***

One wonders if the psalmist who penned these words was remembering his shameful beginnings, his distant forefather Korah, who perished in an earthquake for his pride and rebellion. Perhaps it was that reflection that prompted the following words of the same psalm: "*He says,*

‘Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth’ (Psalm 46:10)

Be still and know that I am God,

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am God. (Hymn 64)

Here is another example. Psalm 84 begins with: *“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.”*

This psalm inspires another hymn we sang earlier: (Hymn 53)

How lovely, Lord, how lovely is your abiding place;

my soul is longing, fainting, to feast upon your grace.

Further down in the same psalm, in verse 10, wrote the sons of Korah: *“For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.”* These words have inspired this particular chorus by Hillsongs:

Better is one day in Your courts

Better is one day in Your house

Better is one day in Your courts

Than thousands elsewhere, thousands elsewhere...

Or another of my personal favourite, a song that I sang to my children, when they were only infants, usually when I was putting them to sleep. (Hymn 27)

As the deer pants for the water so my soul longs after you;

you alone are my heart’s desire, and I long to worship you.

Beautiful words from Psalm 42:1, words written by sons of Korah to express really, a profound and deep devotion to their God...to our God.

For each of us, our own songs of renewed purpose and redemption should flow out of a heart of humility—as we too have been forgiven by the Lord who is full of compassion and mercy, who is slow to anger and rich in love. We ought to remember the fallen state from which God raised us and the redemption that we experience through God’s grace. This was certainly the case for the sons of Korah. Their story, their songs should not be forgotten, forever be told, retold to later generations.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.