

The Book of Numbers, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 10: The Rebellion of Korah

Numbers 16:1–50

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this chapter is about the seriousness of going beyond what God has authorized, both in worship and in leadership. Korah was a Levite with a genuine, honored, God-given ministry, yet he reached for the priesthood that God had not given him, dressed his grasping in the language of holiness, and divided God's people in the process. The 250 men offered incense they had no right to offer, and fire from the LORD consumed them just as it had Nadab and Abihu. The teacher should draw the steady line of Scripture: God defines acceptable worship and God appoints His own servants, and presumption in either area is deadly serious. Hebrews 5:4 makes the same point, that no one takes the honor of the priesthood to himself but is called by God. This is the foundation for the principle that the church today worships and orders itself by the authority of the New Testament, not by human innovation or self-appointment.

The chapter is also a sober warning that the New Testament applies directly to us. Jude 11 names the rebellion of Korah as a pattern of those who perish, and 1 Corinthians 10:10–11 holds up Israel's murmuring as written for our admonition. The teacher should handle this without harshness, never turning the lesson into a club, but also without softening it. Grumbling against and dividing from the order God has established is not a small thing. The aim is to cultivate humility, contentment in the place God has given, and a reluctance to stir division, alongside a healthy reverence for worshiping God as He has authorized.

Finally, the lesson should point the student to Christ and form his heart. Aaron running into the midst of the plague and standing between the dead and the living with incense is one of Scripture's tender foreshadowings of the Mediator. Where Korah grasped at a priesthood not his own, Christ was appointed by God and gave Himself, standing between us and the judgment our sin had earned (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 7:23–25). The goal is a student who lives humbly and gratefully under the authority of the One who saved him, content in his place, slow to divide, and quick to trust the Lord to vindicate what is His.

Question 1

Student Question:

In Numbers 16:1–3 Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and 250 leaders accuse Moses and Aaron of taking too much upon themselves since all the congregation is holy. What was actually wrong with their argument, given who had appointed Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16:11)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The conspiracy is carefully described (16:1–3). Korah is a Levite, a cousin of Moses and Aaron, already set apart for sacred service. With him are Dathan and Abiram of the tribe of Reuben and 250 leaders of the congregation, men of renown. This is not a fringe mob; it is a coalition of the respected. Their charge is wrapped in spiritual language: all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them, so why do you lift yourselves up above the assembly?

The argument is clever precisely because it contains a half-truth. Israel was indeed a holy nation (Exodus 19:6). But Korah twisted a true premise to reach a false and rebellious conclusion: therefore no one should hold a distinct, God-appointed office. The fact that all belong to God does not erase the order God Himself established.

Moses puts his finger on what is really happening when he later tells Korah that he and his company have gathered together against the LORD (16:11). The dispute was never really with Moses and Aaron as men. They had not appointed themselves. God had appointed them. To rebel against God's appointed order was to rebel against God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Korah's challenge was clothed in spiritual, true-sounding language to mask rebellion.
- A half-truth (all the congregation is holy) was twisted to deny God-appointed order.
- Moses and Aaron did not appoint themselves; God had appointed them.
- Rebellion against God's appointed leaders was rebellion against God Himself (16:11).
- The respectability of the rebels did not make their cause right.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is a challenge to God's order more dangerous when it uses the language of holiness?
- How did Korah twist a true statement into a rebellious conclusion?
- What does Moses mean when he says they have gathered against the LORD?

Question 2

Student Question:

Korah's complaint used true words, that the congregation was holy, to serve a rebellious end. Where might you be using true or spiritual-sounding words to justify something God would not approve?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Korah's most subtle weapon was a true statement bent toward a false end. Israel really was a holy people. The words were not a lie. But the use of the words was a lie, because they were marshaled to overturn what God had ordained. This is one of the oldest tricks of the human heart: to borrow heaven's vocabulary to serve our own will.

We are all vulnerable to this. We can quote Scripture to justify what we already want, appeal to fairness or freedom or love while pursuing something God forbids, and call our discontent a matter of principle. The most dangerous self-deception wears spiritual clothes.

The remedy is honesty before God about our motives. It is worth asking whether the spiritual-sounding reasons we give for our positions and our complaints are the real reasons, or whether they are a respectable cover for wanting our own way. The Lord weighs the heart, not just the words (Proverbs 16:2).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- True words can be used to serve a false and rebellious end.
- Borrowing spiritual language to justify our will is an ancient self-deception.
- We are prone to dress our discontent as principle.
- God weighs the motive of the heart, not merely the words we speak.

Discussion Prompts

- Where might you be using true or spiritual-sounding words to justify your own way?
- How can you tell when a principled stand is really a cover for self-will?
- What would honest self-examination of your motives look like this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

In Numbers 16:8–11 Moses tells Korah and the Levites that God had already given them a near and holy service, yet they sought the priesthood as well. What does this reveal about discontent and the desire to go beyond what God assigns?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Moses confronts the heart of Korah's discontent (16:8–11). He reminds him that the God of Israel had already separated the Levites from the congregation to bring them near to Himself, to do the service of the tabernacle and to stand before the assembly to minister. This was no small honor. It was a near and sacred calling. And yet, Moses says, you seek the priesthood also.

There is the wound exposed. Korah had a genuine, God-given, honored place, and it was not enough. He despised the gift in his hand because he wanted the gift in someone else's. Discontent always does this. It cannot see what it has for staring at what it lacks.

This is a searching word for every servant of God. The Lord gives different roles, and every one given by Him is honorable. The temptation is to count our own place small and to reach for one He has not given. Contentment is not laziness; it is trusting that the God who assigns the work knows best where each of us belongs (1 Corinthians 12:18).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Korah already held a near and honored God-given service among the Levites.
- Discontent despises the gift in hand and grasps for the gift God gave to another.
- Every role God assigns is honorable; none is to be counted small.
- Contentment trusts that God knows best where each servant belongs (1 Corinthians 12:18).

Discussion Prompts

- What does Korah's discontent reveal about the danger of wanting another's role?
- How does discontent blind us to the good of the place God has actually given us?
- Why is it an act of trust to be content in the role God has assigned?

Question 4

Student Question:

Korah was not content with the genuine and honored place God had given him. Is there a place of service or a season of life God has given you that you are despising because you want a different role?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The same discontent that drove Korah is a familiar visitor in our own hearts. We look at the place God has given us, the season we are in, the role we play in the church or the home, and instead of seeing a gift we see a limitation. We want the platform someone else has, the influence, the recognition, the different stage of life.

Scripture treats this restlessness honestly. Korah's craving for the priesthood was not a neutral preference; it was a refusal to receive God's assignment as good. When we despise our place, we are, in a quiet way, questioning the wisdom and goodness of the One who placed us there.

The path back is gratitude and faithfulness. To serve fully in the role we actually have, to thank God for the near and holy work in front of us, and to leave the matter of advancement and recognition with Him, is to walk away from Korah's road. The faithful servant is not the one with the biggest role but the one content to do well what God has given (Luke 16:10).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- We are prone to despise our God-given season or role and crave another.
- Despising our place quietly questions God's wisdom in placing us there.
- Gratitude and faithfulness in the present role are the path away from Korah's discontent.
- Faithfulness, not size of role, marks the true servant (Luke 16:10).

Discussion Prompts

- Is there a role or season God has given you that you are despising right now?
- What might change if you received your present place as a gift rather than a limitation?
- How can gratitude and faithfulness guard your heart against discontent?

Question 5

Student Question:

Numbers 16:28–33 shows the ground swallowing Dathan and Abiram so the people would know the LORD had sent Moses and that the rebellion was against the LORD Himself. Why does God so seriously defend the order and leadership He has appointed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The judgment on Dathan and Abiram is staggering (16:28–33). Moses declares that if these men die a natural death, then the LORD has not sent him; but if the earth opens its mouth and swallows them alive, then they have despised the LORD. The words are barely spoken before the ground splits, and the rebels, their households, and their goods go down alive into the pit, and the earth closes over them.

The purpose is stated plainly: that you may know that these men have despised the LORD (16:30) and that the LORD has sent Moses. God was not defending Moses' ego. He was vindicating His own appointment and His own order before a watching nation. The stakes were the integrity of how God leads His people.

Why such severity? Because the rebellion struck at the foundation. If anyone could appoint himself, if God's order could be overturned by a respectable coalition with a spiritual-sounding argument, then the whole covenant community would dissolve into chaos. God defends the structure He establishes because that structure is for the good and the safety of His people.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God dramatically vindicated His appointed leadership so the people would know He had sent Moses.
- The judgment defended God's order, not Moses' personal standing.
- Rebellion against God's appointment is treated as despising the LORD Himself.
- God guards the order He establishes because it protects the whole covenant community.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God respond so seriously to rebellion against the leadership He has appointed?
- What was at stake for the whole nation in this confrontation?
- How does God's defense of order serve the good of His people rather than merely Moses?

Question 6

Student Question:

Moses fell on his face rather than defending himself when accused (Numbers 16:4). When you are unjustly criticized, do you take it to the Lord in humility, or do you rush to vindicate yourself and gather allies?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set against Korah's grasping is Moses' posture. When the accusation comes, Moses falls on his face (16:4). He does not trade insult for insult or rally his own faction. He turns the matter over to God: tomorrow the LORD will show who is His. He even pleads with God not to destroy the whole congregation when judgment looms (16:22).

This is the response of a man who knows the dispute is not finally his to win. Because God had appointed him, Moses did not need to defend himself; he needed only to let God vindicate what God had established. Self-vindication was unnecessary because the LORD would act.

Most of us respond to criticism very differently. We marshal arguments, recruit sympathizers, and rehearse our defense. The discipline Moses models is to take the wound to God first, to humble ourselves rather than exalt ourselves, and to trust God to vindicate us in His time and way (1 Peter 5:6). That posture protects us from becoming, in our self-defense, a divider like Korah.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moses humbled himself and entrusted the dispute to God rather than defending himself.
- Because God had appointed him, Moses did not need to win the argument himself.
- Self-vindication often leads us into the very division we resent.
- Humbling ourselves and trusting God to vindicate us is the godly response to criticism (1 Peter 5:6).

Discussion Prompts

- What does Moses' falling on his face teach about responding to unjust criticism?
- Why could Moses afford not to defend himself?
- When you are criticized, do you take it to the Lord or rush to vindicate yourself?

Question 7**Student Question:**

In Numbers 16:35 fire consumes the 250 men for offering incense they were not authorized to bring, much like Nadab and Abihu. What does this teach about approaching God in worship only as He has authorized, and how does that principle apply to the church today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The 250 men come with censers and incense, and fire goes out from the LORD and consumes them (16:35). The echo of Nadab and Abihu is unmistakable (Leviticus 10:1–3). These men presumed to perform a priestly act God had not authorized for them, and the result was the same. The censers themselves were then hammered into a covering for the altar as a perpetual reminder that no outsider should come near to offer incense (16:40).

The lesson is the consistent witness of Scripture: God defines acceptable worship, and to approach Him in a way He has not authorized is presumption, however sincere. The 250 were not irreligious men; they were zealous men offering worship God had not commanded. Zeal is no substitute for authority.

This principle carries directly into the church. We worship God by the authority of the New Testament, as the apostles taught and the early church practiced, doing all in the name of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:17). The question for every act of worship is not whether it appeals to us or seems reverent, but whether the Lord has authorized it. Korah's 250 are a permanent warning against improving on God's worship.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Fire consumed the 250 for offering worship God had not authorized, echoing Nadab and Abihu.
- God defines acceptable worship; unauthorized worship is presumption even when sincere.
- Zeal and sincerity are no substitute for divine authority in worship.
- The church worships by the authority of the New Testament, doing all in Jesus' name (Colossians 3:17).
- The bronze censer covering stood as a perpetual warning against unauthorized approach.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the fate of the 250 teach about approaching God only as He has authorized?
- Why is sincerity, by itself, not enough to make worship acceptable?
- How should the principle of authorized worship shape the church today?

Question 8

Student Question:

Korah's sin divided God's people and drew many after him. Have you ever been part of stirring up division or taking sides against godly leadership, and what did it do to the unity of God's people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Korah's sin was not only presumption; it was division. He drew many after him, gathering a coalition against God's appointed leaders and splitting the congregation into factions. The

damage rippled outward, and even after the judgment the people murmured and blamed Moses and Aaron, and a plague followed (16:41–49). Division, once unleashed, is hard to contain.

The New Testament treats division among God's people with great seriousness. Those who cause divisions are to be marked and avoided (Romans 16:17), and the Lord prayed that His people would be one (John 17:20–21). To divide what God has joined, to take sides against godly leadership and recruit others to the cause, is to walk in Korah's steps.

Most of us will never lead a rebellion, but many of us have, in small ways, fed division: the critical word repeated, the quiet recruiting of sympathizers, the taking of sides. It is worth asking honestly what our involvement in conflict has done to the unity of God's people, and whether we have been peacemakers or partisans.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Korah's sin divided the congregation and drew many into rebellion.
- Division, once started, spreads and is hard to contain.
- The New Testament treats causing division very seriously (Romans 16:17; John 17:20–21).
- Small acts of criticism and recruiting can feed division as surely as open rebellion.

Discussion Prompts

- Have you ever helped stir up division or take sides against godly leadership?
- What does division do to the unity and witness of God's people?
- What is the difference between a peacemaker and a partisan in a conflict?

Question 9

Student Question:

Reading Numbers 16 alongside Jude 11 and 1 Corinthians 10:10–11, why does the New Testament hold up Korah as a warning, and what does his rebellion teach Christians about presumption, grumbling, and respecting God's authorized order in worship and in the church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The New Testament will not let Korah stay buried in the wilderness. Jude lists those who have perished in the rebellion of Korah (Jude 11) alongside Cain and Balaam as a pattern of ungodliness, men who reject authority and speak evil of what they do not understand. Paul, recounting Israel's wilderness sins, warns the church not to murmur as some of them did, and says these things were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come (1 Corinthians 10:10–11).

So the lesson is for us. Korah teaches Christians the danger of presumption, of reaching for what God has not given and improving on what God has commanded; the danger of grumbling, the corrosive murmuring that poisons a community; and the importance of respecting God's

authorized order in both worship and the life of the church. Hebrews 5:4 underlines it: no one takes the honor to himself but is called by God, as Aaron was.

We must teach this soberly but not harshly. It is not a weapon to silence honest questions or to shield genuine failure in leaders, who are themselves under God's authority. It is a warning against the spirit of Korah: the self-exalting, division-sowing presumption that resents God's order and dresses rebellion in piety. The faithful path is humility, trust in God to vindicate what is His, and reverence for worshiping and ordering the church as He has authorized.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jude 11 holds up Korah as a pattern of those who perish through rebellion and rejecting authority.
- 1 Corinthians 10:10–11 applies Israel's murmuring directly to the church as admonition.
- Korah warns Christians against presumption, grumbling, and despising God's authorized order.
- No one takes spiritual honor to himself but is called by God (Hebrews 5:4).
- The lesson is to be taught soberly, never as a weapon to silence honest concern or shield real failure.
- The faithful path is humility, trust in God's vindication, and reverence for authorized worship.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the New Testament repeatedly hold up Korah as a warning to believers?
- What does his rebellion teach about presumption and grumbling in the church?
- How can we teach this lesson soberly without using it to silence honest questions?

Question 10

Student Question:

Aaron stood between the dead and the living with his censer until the plague was stopped (Numbers 16:47–48), a faint picture of Christ our Mediator. Name one specific way Jesus, standing between you and the judgment you deserved, is teaching you to live humbly and gratefully under His authority this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter ends with a scene of breathtaking mercy in the middle of judgment. A plague breaks out among the murmuring people, and at Moses' urging Aaron takes his censer with incense, runs into the midst of the assembly, and stands between the dead and the living, and the plague is stopped (16:46–48). The same incense that the 250 had presumed to offer in rebellion now becomes, in the hands of God's appointed priest, the means of staying the wrath.

Here is one of the Old Testament's tender foreshadowings of Christ. Aaron stands physically between those already dead and those about to die, and his intercession holds back the judgment. It points us forward to the one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5), who stands between us and the wrath our sin had earned. Where Korah grasped at a priesthood that was not his, Christ was appointed by God and gave Himself for us.

And this is where the whole lesson lands on the heart. We have been the dying ones. We deserved the judgment that fell in this chapter. But there is One who stepped into the midst of it, appointed by God, who stands between the dead and the living for us, and lives always to make intercession (Hebrews 7:25). To grasp that is to be humbled and made grateful, content to live under His authority, slow to divide, quick to trust. The proper response to a Mediator who saved us at such cost is a life of glad, humble submission to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Aaron standing between the dead and the living foreshadows Christ our Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5).
- The incense of authorized priesthood became the means of staying God's wrath.
- Christ, unlike Korah, did not grasp at honor but was appointed by God and gave Himself.
- Christ lives to make intercession, standing between us and the judgment we deserved (Hebrews 7:25).
- The right response to such a Mediator is humble, grateful submission to His authority.

Discussion Prompts

- How does Aaron standing between the dead and the living point us to Christ?
- What is the difference between Korah's grasping and Christ's appointed self-giving?
- Name one specific way Jesus, who stood between you and judgment, is forming you to live humbly under His authority this week.