

The Book of Numbers

Lesson 10: The Rebellion of Korah -- Numbers 16:1–50

Some rebellions arrive with swords drawn. This one arrived dressed in piety. Korah, a Levite, gathers Dathan and Abiram and two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, men of renown, princes of the assembly, and they stand together before Moses and Aaron with a complaint that sounds almost spiritual. You take too much upon yourselves, they say, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you lift yourselves above the assembly of the LORD? It is the kind of accusation that is hard to answer because it borrows the language of heaven. They are not asking to abandon God. They are asking to redraw the lines God Himself had drawn.

When Moses hears it, he falls on his face. He does not argue or defend himself. He puts the matter back where it belongs, in the hands of God. Tomorrow, he says, the LORD will show who is His and who is holy. Bring your censers and your incense and come near, and let the LORD choose. It is the response of a man who knows the dispute is not really with him. Korah was not finally rebelling against Moses; he was rebelling against the God who had appointed Moses and Aaron. And there is a deep mercy even in the delay until morning, a whole night offered for repentance before the verdict falls.

But morning comes, and the verdict is terrible. The ground splits open beneath Dathan and Abiram, and the earth swallows them and their households alive, and they go down into the pit while the camp flees screaming. Fire goes out from the LORD and consumes the two hundred and fifty men who dared to offer incense they were never authorized to bring. And then, as if the lesson were not severe enough, the people turn the next morning and blame Moses and Aaron for the deaths, a plague breaks out, and Aaron runs into the midst of the dying with his censer of incense and stands between the dead and the living until the plague is stopped. It is one of the most sobering chapters in all of Scripture.

We are tempted to keep this story safely in the past, a strange and violent tale from a harsh age. But the New Testament will not let us. Jude warns of those who perish in the rebellion of Korah. Paul says these things were written for our admonition. The chapter asks uncomfortable questions of us. Do we respect the order and the worship God has actually authorized, or do we, like Korah, improve on it with arguments that sound holy? Do we grumble and divide, or do we trust the Lord to vindicate what is His? And when judgment falls all around, do we see in Aaron, standing between the dead and the living with incense in his hands, a faint and beautiful picture of the Mediator who would one day stand between us and the wrath we had earned?

Group Discussion: Korah's rebellion sounded spiritual: all the congregation is holy, so why do you lift yourselves up? Why is it so dangerous when a challenge to God's order borrows the language of holiness, and how can we recognize that in ourselves or in a congregation today?

Personal Reflection: When you have disagreed with those God has placed in spiritual leadership, has your instinct been to grumble and gather others, like Korah, or to take the matter humbly to the Lord, like Moses falling on his face? What does your instinct reveal?

Read Numbers 16:1–50

Study Questions

1. 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)?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Jude 10–13, the warning against those who perished in the rebellion of Korah and speak evil of authority; 1 Corinthians 10:6–11, Israel’s wilderness sins, including murmuring, written as examples and admonition for us; Hebrews 5:1–6, no one takes the honor of the priesthood to himself but is called by God, as Aaron was and as Christ was appointed High Priest; 1 Timothy 2:5, there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, foreshadowed by Aaron standing between the dead and the living; Leviticus 10:1–3, Nadab and Abihu and the unauthorized fire, the parallel to the 250 censer-bearers

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