

The Book of Numbers, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 11: Aaron's Staff and the Duties of the Priests

Numbers 17:1–18:32

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The doctrinal heart of this lesson is the authority of God to determine how sinful people may approach Him. Israel did not get to vote on who would serve as priest, and neither do we get to invent our own way to God. The budding staff settled the matter by an act only God could perform, bringing life from dead wood, and chapter 18 then spells out that this chosen priesthood carried real responsibility before a holy God. The Levitical priesthood, the offerings, and the system of support were given by God for Israel under the Old Covenant. They are shadows now fulfilled in Christ our great High Priest (Hebrews 7–10), and they are not bound on Christians. Aaron's living staff anticipates the resurrection life of Jesus, the One whose priesthood does not pass to another because He always lives.

There is also a vital point about giving. We must be careful not to bind Old Testament tithing on Christians as if it were still law, yet the chapter teaches enduring truths the church needs. God provides for those who serve Him, those who serve at the altar share in the altar (1 Corinthians 9:13–14), and even the Levites gave back to God the best of what they received. Under the New Covenant the principle matures into purposeful, planned, cheerful generosity (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:7). The student should leave not counting percentages but examining the heart behind the gift.

The aim for spiritual formation is twofold. First, lead each learner to lay down resentment and rivalry over who draws near to God, resting instead in the access we have through Christ. Second, lead them to embrace both the privilege and the burden of serving God, giving themselves and their resources gladly. The goal is not information about an ancient priesthood but transformation into people who approach God on His terms, with confidence, gratitude, and open hands.

Question 1

Student Question:

In Numbers 17:1–9, why did God have each tribe submit a staff, and what did the budding of Aaron's staff prove about who had the right to serve as priest?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 17 follows directly on the rebellion of Korah and the plague that killed thousands. The people had challenged whether Aaron's family alone should serve as priests. God's response is striking. Rather than argue, He stages a demonstration the whole nation can witness. Twelve

staffs, one per tribe with the leader's name on it, and Aaron's name on the staff of Levi, are placed before the Lord overnight. The staff of the man God chooses will sprout.

A staff was dead wood, cut from a tree long before, dry and lifeless. For it to bud, blossom, and bear ripe almonds in a single night was no natural event. It was a sign that could not be faked, debated, or repeated by human hands. When Moses brought the staffs out, the answer was visible to all. God had chosen Aaron, and the matter was settled not by Aaron's merit but by God's act.

God then ordered Aaron's staff kept before the testimony as a sign against the rebels, a permanent witness to silence future complaints. The lesson was meant to stick. Drawing near to God is not a privilege people seize for themselves. It is a calling God grants, and He alone decides its terms.

For us the budding staff carries a forward look. A piece of dead wood brought to life by God anticipates the deeper miracle of resurrection. The priesthood of Aaron would one day pass away, but it points to a High Priest whom death could not hold, whose living priesthood needs no successor.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God, not human ambition or majority opinion, determines how people may approach Him in worship and service.
- The miracle of life from dead wood underscores that acceptable service rests on God's choice and power, not human qualification.
- The preserved staff as a lasting sign shows God's patience in giving Israel tangible reasons to trust and obey.
- The budding staff foreshadows resurrection life and points to Christ, whose priesthood is permanent because He always lives (Hebrews 7:24-25).
- Worship and service in every age must follow God's revealed will rather than human invention.

Discussion Prompts

- Why might God have chosen a sign of life and growth rather than another act of judgment to settle the question of the priesthood?
- What does the impossibility of a dead staff budding teach us about the basis on which we are accepted before God?
- How does Aaron's living staff help us understand the kind of High Priest Jesus is for us today?

Question 2

Student Question:

After the people cried out in Numbers 17:12–13 that they were perishing and afraid to come near the tabernacle, how do you handle the fear that you are not good enough to draw near to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter ends not in triumph but in fear. The people cry out that they are perishing, that everyone who even comes near the tabernacle dies, and they ask whether they are all doomed. Having seen God's holiness up close in the plague and the swallowed rebels, they are terrified of His presence.

Their fear is not entirely wrong. God is holy, and sin truly does separate people from Him. Yet their cry also reveals how rebellion had distorted their view. Instead of seeing the priesthood as God's gracious provision for safe approach, they saw only danger. The very arrangement meant to protect them felt like a threat.

This is where many sincere people live. They sense God's holiness and their own unworthiness, and they conclude they cannot come near. That fear is honest, but it is not where God wants us to stay. The whole point of the priesthood, and ultimately of Christ, is to make approach possible.

We do well to feel the weight of God's holiness. We do better to remember that He provided a way to draw near. The fear that drives us from God must give way to the confidence God Himself offers through a Mediator.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A right sense of God's holiness produces reverence, but distorted fear can drive people away from the God who invites them near.
- Personal accountability matters, yet God provides the means of safe approach rather than leaving sinners to despair.
- The priesthood was grace, a protected path to God's presence, not merely a barrier.
- Genuine assurance comes not from feeling worthy but from trusting God's appointed Mediator.
- Christ now gives us confidence to draw near to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16).

Discussion Prompts

- When have you felt that you were not good enough to come near to God, and where did that feeling come from?
- How does the difference between reverent fear and despairing fear show up in a person's walk with God?
- What has God provided so that we can approach Him with confidence rather than dread?

Question 3

Student Question:

In Numbers 18:1–7, God tells Aaron that he and his house shall bear the iniquity of the sanctuary and that the priesthood is a gift of service. What does this teach about how God assigns both privilege and responsibility?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 18 opens by handing Aaron a sobering charge. He and his sons and his father's house shall bear the iniquity connected with the sanctuary and the priesthood. In other words, the responsibility for any failure in handling the holy things falls on the chosen ones. The honor of nearness comes bound to accountability.

God also frames the priesthood as a gift, a service freely given. The Levites are given to Aaron to assist, and the work of the sanctuary is described as a privilege. Notice how privilege and burden arrive together. To be chosen is to be entrusted, and to be entrusted is to be answerable.

The text warns that outsiders who intrude will die, and that the priests must guard the holy things so that wrath does not fall on the people again. This is not arbitrary. It reflects the seriousness of approaching a holy God on anything but His terms.

Whenever God grants us a place of service, the same principle holds. The calling is a gift, but it is never merely ours to enjoy. It is a trust to guard faithfully, with real accountability before the One who gave it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God assigns privilege and responsibility together, never one without the other.
- The priesthood is described as a gift of service, reframing position as stewardship rather than status.
- Handling holy things carelessly carried real consequences, reflecting the seriousness of approaching God on His terms.
- Those entrusted by God are accountable to guard what He has given.
- Every form of service in the Lord's church is a stewardship for which we answer to God.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God so often join privilege and responsibility together rather than granting one without the other?
- What does it mean to treat a position of service as a gift of stewardship rather than a status to enjoy?
- How seriously do we take the trust God places in us when He gives us a work to do?

Question 4**Student Question:**

Where has God placed a responsibility in your hands, in your family, your work, or the church, that you have been treating as a right to enjoy rather than a trust to guard faithfully?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God now turns to the practical question of how the priests will live. They are given portions of the offerings the people bring, the grain, sin, and guilt offerings, and the firstfruits and firstborn. These provisions are their inheritance from the Lord because they have no farmland of their own.

There is a quiet lesson here about treating a calling as a right to enjoy rather than a trust to guard. The portions were real and generous, but they were tied to faithful service. The priest who lived off the offerings was also the priest who bore the iniquity of the sanctuary. Provision and duty were never separated.

It is easy to slide from stewardship into entitlement. We can begin to view what God has placed in our hands, a role, a relationship, an influence, as something owed to us rather than something to be guarded for Him. When that happens, the gift becomes about us instead of about Him.

God's arrangement for the priests guards against that drift by keeping provision and responsibility joined. What we receive from God is meant to fuel our faithfulness, not to replace it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's provision for His servants is real and generous, given as their inheritance from Him.
- Provision is tied to faithful service, not divorced from it.
- Entitlement creeps in when a trust is treated as a personal right rather than a stewardship.
- What God gives is meant to support faithfulness, not to feed self-interest.
- Examining our motives keeps service centered on God rather than on what we get from it.

Discussion Prompts

- Where might you be treating a God-given responsibility as a right to enjoy rather than a trust to guard?
- How does keeping provision and duty joined together protect us from entitlement?
- What does it look like to let what God has given you fuel faithfulness rather than feed self-interest?

Question 5

Student Question:

In Numbers 18:8–19, God gives the priests portions of the offerings as their inheritance and calls it a covenant of salt forever. Why did God arrange for those who served at the altar to be supported from the altar?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God describes the priests' portions as theirs by a perpetual statute, even calling it a covenant of salt forever, an image of permanence and reliability. Those who served at the altar were to be supported from the altar. This was not a tip for services rendered. It was God's deliberate design so that the priests could give themselves fully to His work.

The wisdom is plain. If the priests had to farm and trade like everyone else, they could not devote themselves to the sanctuary. By having the nation support them, God freed them to serve. The principle is that a community supports those who serve it on God's behalf.

Paul reaches back to exactly this principle in 1 Corinthians 9:13–14, noting that those who serve at the altar share in the altar, and concluding that the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should live by the gospel. The Old Covenant arrangement is not binding on the church, but the principle it embodied carries forward.

We should not read this as binding the Levitical system on Christians. We should read it as God's enduring concern that His servants be supported so they can serve, and as a call to value and sustain the work of the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Those who serve at God's altar were to be supported from it by God's own design.
- The covenant of salt language stresses the permanence and reliability of God's provision.
- The arrangement freed the priests to devote themselves fully to God's work.
- Paul applies the underlying principle to gospel preachers (1 Corinthians 9:13–14) without binding the Levitical system on the church.
- The Lord's people rightly value and sustain those who labor in the word.

Discussion Prompts

- Why did God arrange for those who served at the altar to be supported from the altar?
- How does Paul carry this principle forward in 1 Corinthians 9 without binding the Old Covenant on Christians?
- What responsibility do God's people have toward those who give themselves to the work of the gospel?

Question 6

Student Question:

How do you respond when serving God costs you something, when the work asks for your time, your money, or your comfort, and the reward is not immediate?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Serving God in this system was not cheap. The priests carried heavy responsibility, bore the iniquity of the sanctuary, and lived dependent on the faithfulness of others. The rewards were real but often not immediate. The work asked much before it gave back.

This mirrors a tension every believer feels. Serving the Lord can cost time we wanted for ourselves, money we had other plans for, and comfort we would rather keep. The temptation is to serve only when it is convenient and to pull back when it pinches.

Scripture never pretends that following God is free of cost. Jesus told would-be followers to count the cost before building. Yet He also promised that nothing given up for His sake is ever truly lost. The reward is sure, even when it is delayed.

The question for us is whether we will serve faithfully when the reward is not immediate, trusting the God who keeps covenant. The priests had to live by that trust daily, and so do we.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine service to God carries real cost in time, resources, and comfort.
- The temptation is to serve only when convenient and to withdraw when it costs.
- Scripture calls us to count the cost yet promises the reward is sure (Luke 14:28; Mark 10:29–30).
- Faithfulness often means serving before the reward is seen.
- Trust in God's faithfulness sustains service when the return is delayed.

Discussion Prompts

- When has serving God cost you something, and how did you respond in the moment?
- Why is it tempting to serve only when it is convenient, and how do we resist that pull?
- How does trusting God's faithfulness help us keep serving when the reward is not yet visible?

Question 7

Student Question:

In Numbers 18:20–24, the Levites receive no land inheritance because the Lord Himself is their inheritance, and they live on the tithe of Israel. What does it mean to have God as your portion rather than property or security?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Levites are told plainly that they will receive no inheritance of land among the people, for the Lord Himself is their inheritance and portion. While the other tribes would receive territory in Canaan, the Levites would receive God. They would live on the tithe the people brought.

On the surface this might look like deprivation. The Levites got no fields, no permanent property, none of the usual securities. Yet God frames it as the highest privilege. To have the Lord as your portion is to have something no land could rival.

This challenges how we measure security. We instinctively reach for property, savings, and possessions as the ground of our confidence. The Levites were called to find their security in God Himself, depending on His provision through His people rather than on holdings of their own.

The psalmists later took up this very language, declaring the Lord their portion and their cup. It became a confession not just for Levites but for every believer who learns that God Himself, not what He gives, is the true inheritance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Levites' inheritance was the Lord Himself, not land or property.
- What looks like deprivation is reframed by God as the highest privilege.
- True security rests in God rather than in possessions or holdings.
- Dependence on God's provision is portrayed as a blessing, not a burden.
- The believer's deepest inheritance is God Himself (Psalm 16:5; 73:26).

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean in daily life to have the Lord Himself as your portion and inheritance?
- Why do we so often reach for property and savings rather than God as the ground of our security?
- How might your choices change if you truly believed God Himself were your greatest treasure?

Question 8

Student Question:

What are you tempted to treat as your true inheritance and security, and how would your daily choices change if you truly believed the Lord Himself were your portion?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

If the Lord is truly our inheritance, it will show in what we treat as our real security. The Levites had no land to fall back on, which forced the question constantly. We are rarely forced to face it so directly, so we must ask ourselves on purpose.

Most of us quietly trust our jobs, our savings, our homes, or our plans to keep us safe. None of these are evil, and God often provides through them. The danger is in making them our inheritance, the thing we cannot imagine living without, the foundation we actually rest on.

Jesus pressed this point repeatedly, warning that we cannot serve both God and money, and urging us to store up treasure in heaven. Where our treasure is, He said, our heart will be also. The Levites' situation simply makes this vivid.

The honest test is to ask what would shake us most to lose. The answer often reveals where our true inheritance lies. Letting God hold that place changes how we hold everything else.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- What we treat as our true security reveals where our trust really rests.
- Possessions and plans are not evil, but they must not take the place of God as our inheritance.
- Jesus warns that we cannot serve both God and money (Matthew 6:24).
- Where our treasure is, our heart follows (Matthew 6:21).
- Holding God as our inheritance reshapes how we hold everything else.

Discussion Prompts

- What would shake you most to lose, and what might that reveal about your true inheritance?
- How do we keep good things like jobs and savings from quietly becoming our security?
- What would change in your daily choices if God truly held first place as your treasure?

Question 9

Student Question:

In Numbers 18:25–32, even the Levites who received the tithe had to give a tithe of the tithe to the Lord, offering the best of it. Reading this passage in the light of Hebrews 7–10, how does Aaron's God-given priesthood, vindicated by a staff that came to life, point us to Jesus our living High Priest, and how should that shape the way we give and serve under the New Covenant?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter closes with a detail easy to overlook but rich in meaning. Even the Levites, who received the tithe from the people, were commanded to give a tithe of that tithe to the Lord, and to offer the best of it. No one in this system was merely a recipient. Everyone gave back to God, and gave Him the best.

This whole arrangement, the chosen priesthood vindicated by a living staff, the offerings, the support, the giving of the best, was God's provision for Israel under the Old Covenant. The book of Hebrews tells us these things were a shadow. The Levitical priests were many because death

kept removing them, but Jesus holds His priesthood permanently because He always lives (Hebrews 7:23–25).

Aaron's staff, dead wood brought to life overnight, quietly anticipates the resurrection. The priesthood that needed a sign to be vindicated points to the One vindicated by rising from the dead, declared to be the Son of God in power. Jesus is the great High Priest who entered not an earthly tent but heaven itself, by His own blood (Hebrews 9:11–14).

What does this mean for our giving and serving under the New Covenant? We are not bound by Old Testament tithing as law. Yet the spirit endures. We give as we have purposed in our hearts, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7), and we set aside our giving with purpose (1 Corinthians 16:2). Like the Levites, we give back to God the best, not the leftovers, because we serve a living High Priest who gave Himself entirely for us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Even those who received the tithe gave back to God, offering Him the best, not the leftovers.
- The Levitical priesthood and offerings were God-given for Israel and are shadows fulfilled in Christ (Hebrews 7–10), not bound on Christians.
- Aaron's living staff anticipates the resurrection and points to Jesus, our permanent, living High Priest.
- Christ entered the true sanctuary by His own blood, accomplishing what the earthly priesthood only foreshadowed (Hebrews 9:11–14).
- Old Testament tithing is not bound as law on Christians; the New Covenant calls for purposeful, cheerful, generous giving (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:7).
- Giving God our best, not our leftovers, flows from gratitude for the High Priest who gave Himself for us.

Discussion Prompts

- How does Aaron's God-given, staff-vindicated priesthood point us to Jesus our living High Priest?
- Why is it important that we not bind Old Testament tithing on Christians, and what does the New Covenant teach us about giving instead?
- What would it look like for you to give God your best, cheerfully and on purpose, rather than your leftovers?

Question 10

Student Question:

Name one specific way Jesus, our great High Priest who lives forever to make intercession for you, is calling you this week to draw near to God with confidence and to give of yourself cheerfully rather than grudgingly.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

We come finally to ourselves and to Jesus. The whole movement of these chapters, from the living staff to the duties of the priests to the offering of the best, lands on the great truth that we have in Christ a High Priest who lives forever to make intercession for us. He is what Aaron only pictured.

Because of Him, we no longer cry out in fear that we cannot draw near. We approach the throne of grace with confidence, knowing our Mediator always lives. The access Israel longed for is open to all who come to God through Jesus.

And because of Him, our giving and serving change character. We do not give to earn His favor or out of grudging duty. We give and serve as people already loved, already accepted, already given an inheritance better than land. Cheerful generosity is the natural response of a grateful heart.

So the question is personal and concrete. In what specific way is Jesus, your living High Priest, calling you this week, to draw near with confidence where you have been holding back, and to give of yourself gladly where you have been giving grudgingly?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus lives forever to make intercession for those who come to God through Him (Hebrews 7:25).
- Through Christ we draw near to God with confidence rather than fear (Hebrews 4:16).
- Christian giving and service flow from gratitude, not from earning favor or grudging duty.
- Cheerful generosity is the natural fruit of resting in the inheritance God gives in Christ.
- Spiritual formation moves us from holding back and giving grudgingly to drawing near and giving gladly.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean for you personally that Jesus lives forever to intercede for you?
- Where have you been holding back from God in fear, and how does your living High Priest invite you to draw near this week?
- Name one specific way you can give of yourself cheerfully this week as a response to Christ's gift of Himself.