

Adult Bible Class
The Book of Numbers
Lesson #11, Chapter 17-18

A Brief Review

In our last lesson we studied chapter 16 about the rebellion of Korah. We saw that the Israelites had a pattern of complaining that had led up to this:

The people complained of thirst (Exodus 15:24, 17:1).

The people complained of hunger (Exodus 16:3).

The people were impatient (Exodus 32:1).

The people complained of hardship (Numbers 11:1).

The foreigners among them craved “the good things of Egypt” (Numb. 11:4).

The people craved “the good things of Egypt” (Numbers 11:4b-6).

Moses’ relatives challenged Moses’ authority (Numbers 12:1).

The people complained and were fearful of having to fight their enemies.

They exaggerated the challenges before them.

(Numbers 14:1-4).

When Korah rose up to organize the people in their rebellion, they had already had a lot of practice complaining, speaking out against Moses and Aaron, and being unbelieving and unthankful. The pattern was present among the people in general; and now with Korah, the people had a leader to guide them.

Korah zeroed in on Moses and Aaron. He rejected Aaron as being the High Priest or the *only* High Priest. He said to Moses and Aaron, “*The whole community of Israel has been set apart by the Lord, and he is with all of us. What right do you have to act as though you are greater than the rest of the Lord’s people?*”

Regarding Aaron, God had chosen him to be High Priest - the *only* High Priest. Korah and those united with him had witnessed his ordination ceremony (Lev. 8). However, when the Word of the Lord came to the people through Moses, apparently it wasn’t enough for them. In Korah’s rebellion, they refused God’s word when they refused Moses and Aaron. But no one wins when they refuse the Word of God. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram - plus their families and their belongings - were swallowed up by the earth in a fearful example from God (Numbers 16:31-35). Fire then blazed upon the 250 elders who brazenly offered incense as only the priest should do. God let it be known in no uncertain terms that there was a distinction between the priesthood and the Levite, between the priesthood and the congregation.

In the New Testament, Jude warns the church about people like this - and he mentions rebellious Korah:

Jude 8 (NKJV) ...these dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries... **10** ... these speak evil of whatever they do not know; and whatever they know naturally, like brute beasts, in these things they corrupt themselves. **11** Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have

run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah ...**16** These are grumblers, complainers, walking according to their own lusts; and they mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage. **17** But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: **18** how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts. **19** These are sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit.

20 But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, **21** keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

So now we come to the next chapter in Numbers - chapter 17 - where God plans to confirm His choice of Aaron as High Priest - with a miraculous sign. He does this to save lives. Understand that *God's holiness will be shown one way or another*. God's holiness will be shown through redemption and then the obedience of God's people, or it will be shown in God's wrath upon those who rebel against Him. God protects His holiness.

In a previous incident involving Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's two oldest sons, God's wrath came down to protect His holiness when they offered incense with "*strange fire*" or unauthorized fire that was not from the altar:

Leviticus 10:1 (NKJV) Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. **2** So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. **3** And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke, saying:

*'By those who come near Me
I must be regarded as holy;
And before all the people
I must be glorified.'*"

In chapter 17, God says concerning the miracle with Aaron's rod, "*This should put an end to their complaints against me and prevent any further deaths.*"

Numbers Chapter 17 - The Budding of Aaron's Staff

Numbers 17:1 (NLT) Then the Lord said to Moses, **2** "Tell the people of Israel to bring you twelve wooden staffs, one from each leader of Israel's ancestral tribes, and inscribe each leader's name on his staff. **3** Inscribe Aaron's name on the staff of the tribe of Levi, for there must be one staff for the leader of each ancestral tribe. **4** Place these staffs in the Tabernacle in front of the Ark containing the tablets of the Covenant, where I meet with you. **5** Buds will sprout on the staff belonging to the man I choose. Then I will finally put an end to the people's murmuring and complaining against you."

6 So Moses gave the instructions to the people of Israel, and each of the twelve tribal leaders, including Aaron, brought Moses a staff. **7** Moses placed the staffs in the Lord's presence in the Tabernacle of the Covenant. **8** When he went into the Tabernacle of the Covenant the next day, he found that Aaron's staff, representing the tribe of Levi, had sprouted, budded, blossomed, and produced ripe almonds!

The rods that were used in this miracle from God were simple sticks - like walking sticks. They were not recently cut but were dry and lifeless.

God wanted to prove to His people once for all that He had truly chosen Aaron to be the High Priest of Israel (and his descendants after him). He prepared this

teaching miracle, telling the people in advance what would happen. Aaron's rod, which must have been made out of almond wood, not only sprouted buds, but it blossomed, and produced ripe almonds, too - and all at the same time! This was doubly miraculous. Not only did life spring from a dead stick, but all three of these processes of nature (which never occur all at the same time) did indeed occur all at once in Aaron's rod! God did more than He promised!

Aaron was not High Priest because of his personal holiness. We have read of his disgraceful conduct in the golden calf incident while Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the Law. We have read how he stood by Miriam as she challenged her brother Moses' authority. In spite of all this, Aaron was God's choice for High Priest in Israel.

Aaron's rod was from the almond tree. The almond tree is native to the Middle East. Genesis 43:11 calls almonds one of the best products of the land. The almond tree is the first tree in that region to bud and come out of its winter's sleep in the spring. Because of this, we can see a picture of Jesus Christ, the first man to rise bodily from the grave. Jesus was truly dead, but through the miracle of the resurrection He rose from the dead and lives forevermore. That is why - in this New Testament age - He is a better High Priest than Aaron. He is our High Priest forever.

1 Corinthians 15:17 (NIV) And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. **18** Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. **19** If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. **21** For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. **22** For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. **23** But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

Jesus is many things to us. Among them, He is our sacrifice for sins (the lamb). He is the God to whom the sacrifice is given. But He is also our High Priest who brings the sacrifice to God and mediates between God and sinful man. He is our perfect High Priest because He conquered death and lives forever.

Now let's continue in Numbers chapter 17:

Numbers 17:9 When Moses brought all the staffs out from the Lord's presence, he showed them to the people. Each man claimed his own staff. **10** And the Lord said to Moses: "Place Aaron's staff permanently before the Ark of the Covenant to serve as a warning to rebels. This should put an end to their complaints against me and prevent any further deaths." **11** So Moses did as the Lord commanded him.

God did this teaching miracle to show with finality that Aaron was His choice for High Priest. Aaron did not choose Himself. Just as Aaron's rod was one of the many rods placed together, our Lord Jesus Christ became one of us, living like us for many years until He began His ministry.

These rods started out lifeless and ordinary, but Aaron's rod budded, blossomed, and produced fruit! The second life of the rod was greater than the first life of the rod! Likewise, when Jesus rose from the dead, He had a glorified body. When we are born again, we have a spiritual life that is far superior to the old life.

When we receive our glorified bodies in the rapture, we will experience a far greater life than we have ever known.

Let's finish Numbers chapter 17:

Numbers 17:12 Then the people of Israel said to Moses, "Look, we are doomed! We are dead! We are ruined! **13** Everyone who even comes close to the Tabernacle of the Lord dies. Are we all doomed to die?"

The people of Israel were a rebellious people. God had done so much for them. He brought ten plagues upon Egypt and then He delivered them by bringing them miraculously through the Red Sea, destroying Pharaoh's armies in the process. He tested them by allowing them to experience thirst and hunger but they failed the test and complained bitterly. God did not receive fruits of righteousness from His people - fruits like faith, patience, obedience, calling upon God. Instead He got complaining, unbelief, and disobedience. This people were truly a rebellious people. They may have been delivered from Egypt, but they still had a lot of Egypt in them!

Verses 12 and 13 above show plainly that this people had not repented and had a change of heart. People who are beaten and don't like it will act like this. Instead of having a fear of God from what had happened to Korah and the 250 elders, they whined and said that they were ruined and were going to die! They had a terrible attitude, and they did not really learn the lesson.

Remember the Scripture that we read at the beginning of our lesson from the New Testament book of Jude:

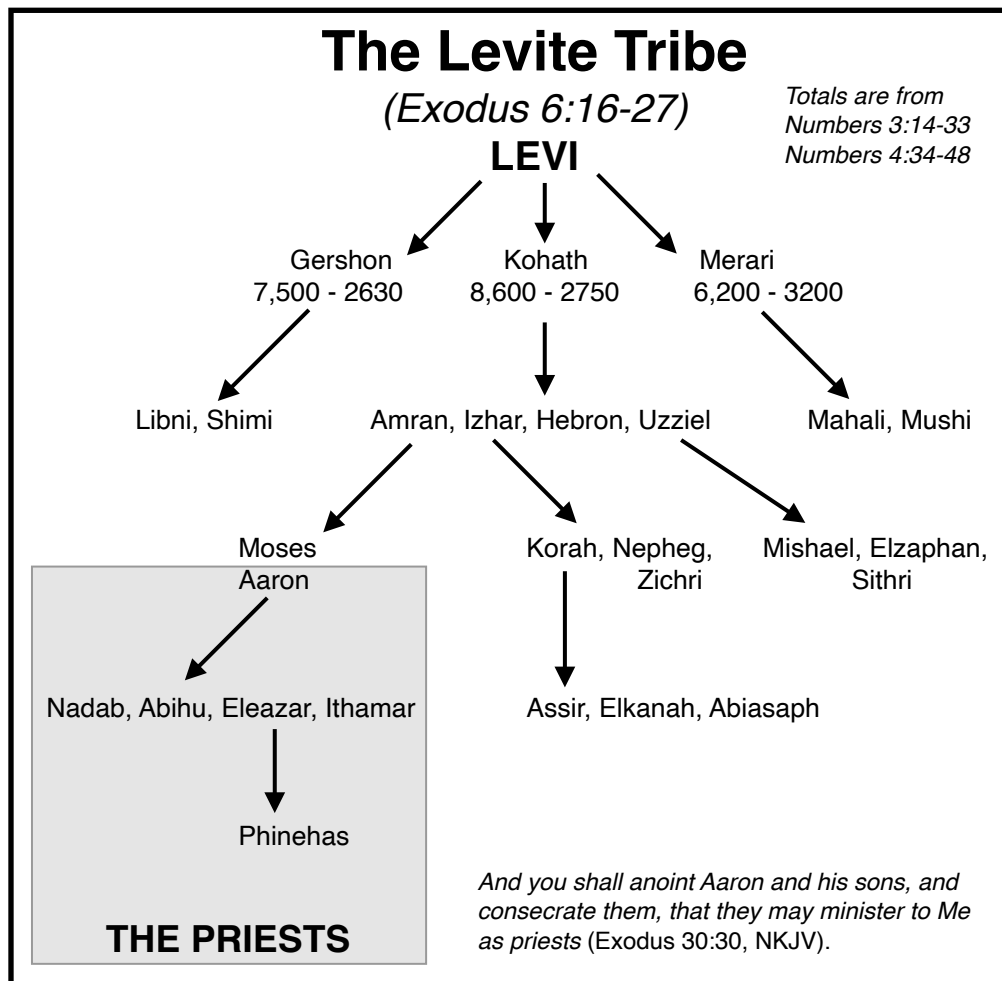
Jude 11 (NKJV) Woe to them! For they have...perished in the rebellion of Korah ...**16** These are grumblers, complainers, walking according to their own lusts; and they mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage...**20** But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, **21** keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

Two Types of Almond Trees

The almond tree occurs in two varieties. The wild almond produces bitter nuts - that when crushed, chewed, or bruised - produce hydrogen cyanide poison, and when eaten in a small quantity (a handful) are fatal. The domesticated almond tree, as we know, produces delicious, sweet nuts. These two trees look very much alike.

It is critical that we know the wild almond from the sweet almond. The difference between them is the difference between death and life, poison and sweetness! They may look alike, but they are not the same. There is real, spiritual truth that will save, nourish, and strengthen. There is error that, if ingested in a large enough quantity, will kill.

Below is a chart that shows the three sons of Levi and their descendants.



Numbers Chapter 18 - Duties of Priests and Levites

In the previous chapter, God showed through a beautiful miracle that He had indeed chosen Aaron to be the High Priest of Israel. Now in this chapter, God tempers what He showed in the budding of Aaron's rod with a serious charge.

Numbers 18:1 (NLT) Then the Lord said to Aaron: "You, your sons, and your relatives from the tribe of Levi will be held responsible for any offenses related to the sanctuary [KJV: "shall bear the iniquity of" the sanctuary]. But you and your sons alone will be held responsible for violations connected with the priesthood [KJV: "shall bear the iniquity of" the priesthood].

Privilege and Responsibility

God said that the priests and the Levites would be held responsible for any offenses related to the sanctuary, and the priests would be held responsible for offenses connected with the priesthood. With their great honor to serve in the Tabernacle came great responsibility.

In the New Testament we read that pastors must give an account to God for those in their charge. Beyond this, each one of us must give an account to God for our lives:

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God...

Romans 14:10 ...Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God...**12** Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God.

Each one of us is responsible for the realm in which we are placed. For instance, parents are responsible for children. Pastors are responsible for saints. The list goes on, and God will require an account of us for the area of responsibility that He has given us.

Numbers 18:2 “Bring your relatives of the tribe of Levi—your ancestral tribe—to assist you and your sons as you perform the sacred duties in front of the Tabernacle of the Covenant. **3** But as the Levites go about all their assigned duties at the Tabernacle, they must be careful not to go near any of the sacred objects or the altar. If they do, both you and they will die. **4** The Levites must join you in fulfilling their responsibilities for the care and maintenance of the Tabernacle, but no unauthorized person may assist you.

Authorization comes from God. In the case of the Tabernacle, to approach the Tabernacle or touch the sacred furniture would bring death to an unauthorized person. This type of action was presumptuous. Each group of Levites had their own duties given by God, and they were not to cross over the line of their responsibilities.

Numbers 18:5 “You yourselves must perform the sacred duties inside the sanctuary and at the altar. If you follow these instructions, the Lord’s anger will never again blaze against the people of Israel. **6** I myself have chosen your fellow Levites from among the Israelites to be your special assistants. They are a gift to you, dedicated to the Lord for service in the Tabernacle. **7** But you and your sons, the priests, must personally handle all the priestly rituals associated with the altar and with everything behind the inner curtain. I am giving you the priesthood as your special privilege of service. Any unauthorized person who comes too near the sanctuary will be put to death.”

God gave Israel the tribe of Levi to assist the priests. Remember that the firstborn of Israel belongs to the Lord (both people and animals). God allowed the tribe of Levi to represent or take the place of the firstborn of Israel as assistants to the priests. If you think about it, this was a kindness to Israel for God to do this.

Numbers 3:11 And the Lord said to Moses, **12** “Look, I have chosen the Levites from among the Israelites to serve as substitutes for all the firstborn sons of the people of Israel. The Levites belong to me, **13** for all the firstborn males are mine. On the day I struck down all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians, I set apart for myself all the firstborn in Israel, both of people and of animals. They are mine; I am the Lord.”

Support for the Priests and Levites

Numbers 18:8 The Lord gave these further instructions to Aaron: “I myself have put you in charge of all the holy offerings that are brought to me by the people of Israel. I have given all these consecrated offerings to you and your sons as your permanent share. **9** You are allotted the portion of the most holy offerings that is not burned on the fire. This portion of all the most holy offerings—including the grain offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings—will be most holy, and it belongs to you and your sons. **10** You must eat it as a most holy offering. All the males may eat of it, and you must treat it as most holy.

Numbers 18:11 "All the sacred offerings and special offerings presented to me when the Israelites lift them up before the altar also belong to you. I have given them to you and to your sons and daughters as your permanent share. Any member of your family who is ceremonially clean may eat of these offerings.

12 "I also give you the harvest gifts brought by the people as offerings to the Lord—the best of the olive oil, new wine, and grain. **13** All the first crops of their land that the people present to the Lord belong to you. Any member of your family who is ceremonially clean may eat this food.

As we studied the different offerings in the first five books of Leviticus we read that not all offerings were like the whole burnt offerings where the entire animal was burned on the altar. The peace offerings and the grain offerings were made where only a portion was burned on the altar and certain parts were reserved for the priests (and the offerer). Even the sin offerings and guilt offerings were given in certain circumstances where the priests were commanded to eat the offering.

14 "Everything in Israel that is specially set apart for the Lord also belongs to you.

15 "The firstborn of every mother, whether human or animal, that is offered to the Lord will be yours. But you must always redeem your firstborn sons and the firstborn of ceremonially unclean animals. **16** Redeem them when they are one month old. The redemption price is five pieces of silver...

17 "However, you may not redeem the firstborn of cattle, sheep, or goats. They are holy and have been set apart for the Lord. Sprinkle their blood on the altar, and burn their fat as a special gift, a pleasing aroma to the Lord. **18** The meat of these animals will be yours, just like the breast and right thigh that are presented by lifting them up as a special offering before the altar. **19** Yes, I am giving you all these holy offerings that the people of Israel bring to the Lord. They are for you and your sons and daughters, to be eaten as your permanent share. This is an eternal and unbreakable covenant [KJV: a covenant of salt] between the Lord and you, and it also applies to your descendants."

Salt was a symbol of preservation - a symbol of that which is incorruptible. In the ancient Middle East, alliances between people were made with the symbols of bread and salt. In the Old Testament, salt was always added to the sacrifices. It symbolized a sure, enduring covenant between God and man.

In the New Testament, Jesus told His disciples that they were the "*salt of the earth.*" Colossians 4:6 says, "*Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt...*" (ESV).

Numbers 18:20 And the Lord said to Aaron, "You priests will receive no allotment of land or share of property among the people of Israel. I am your share and your allotment. **21** As for the tribe of Levi, your relatives, I will compensate them for their service in the Tabernacle. Instead of an allotment of land, I will give them the tithes from the entire land of Israel.

22 "From now on, no Israelites except priests or Levites may approach the Tabernacle. If they come too near, they will be judged guilty and will die. **23** Only the Levites may serve at the Tabernacle, and they will be held responsible for any offenses against it. This is a permanent law for you, to be observed from generation to generation. The Levites will receive no allotment of land among the Israelites, **24** because I have given them the Israelites' tithes, which have been presented as sacred offerings to the Lord. This will be the Levites' share. That is why I said they would receive no allotment of land among the Israelites."

The priests were supported by receiving a share of the sacrifices and offerings. Jesus Christ depended on the hospitality of others when He began His

ministry. The son of man had nowhere to lay his head. It is amazing that there were real needs of his humanity that He looked to sinful man to supply. Even now, Jesus receives satisfaction from us as living sacrifices to God when we honor Him, worship Him, and live for Him.

The Levites were not to receive land when the Israelites finally entered into the Promised Land. The tribes in Israel were to set aside houses and cities for them with a certain amount of land outside each city for grazing their flocks and herds. In addition, the Israelites were commanded to bring the tithes to the Tabernacle, as this was God's portion. God was going to give His portion - the tithes - to the Levites to compensate them for their service.

The livelihood of the Levites was directly tied to their ministry. God assured them that He would take care of them in this way. While the people did not bring their tithes to the Tabernacle with the direct intention of supporting the Levites, that was one of the end results. The Levites were separated from the ordinary business of life by the way they were supported by God's plan. The Levites were also tied together with the people in this way.

Numbers 18:25 The Lord also told Moses, **26** "Give these instructions to the Levites: When you receive from the people of Israel the tithes I have assigned as your allotment, give a tenth of the tithes you receive—a tithe of the tithe—to the Lord as a sacred offering. **27** The Lord will consider this offering to be your harvest offering, as though it were the first grain from your own threshing floor or wine from your own winepress. **28** You must present one-tenth of the tithe received from the Israelites as a sacred offering to the Lord. This is the Lord's sacred portion, and you must present it to Aaron the priest. **29** Be sure to give to the Lord the best portions of the gifts given to you.

30 "Also, give these instructions to the Levites: When you present the best part as your offering, it will be considered as though it came from your own threshing floor or winepress. **31** You Levites and your families may eat this food anywhere you wish, for it is your compensation for serving in the Tabernacle. **32** You will not be considered guilty for accepting the Lord's tithes if you give the best portion to the priests. But be careful not to treat the holy gifts of the people of Israel as though they were common. If you do, you will die."

Not only were the people of the congregation to tithe, but the Levites who received the tithe were also to tithe. From this we gather that everyone needs to tithe - the people and the ministry. Tithing is a blessing to those giving it and a blessing to those receiving it.

1 Corinthians 9:13 Don't you realize that those who work in the temple get their meals from the offerings brought to the temple? And those who serve at the altar get a share of the sacrificial offerings. **14** In the same way, the Lord ordered that those who preach the Good News should be supported by those who benefit from it.