

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**DHW BIBLE CLASS**

**LESSON 9**

**THE BOOK OF NUMBERS**

**CHAPTER 16**

**INTRODUCTION**

Rebellion against church leadership among its members is a familiar occurrence. The history of churches is replete with these incidents. In some cases, they are justified when the issue is doctrinal, but in many cases, the hidden issues border on jealousy and greed. This chapter tells of the rebellion against Aaron and Moses involving two groups of the children of Israel in their camp in the wilderness of Zin. One was an ecclesiastical challenge against the authority of Aaron and the priesthood. The other was a political attack against Moses.

The reason why these events are chronicled is given by the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the Romans, he wrote, "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (15:4). This chapter offers valuable theological and anthropological insights to church members who care and are concerned for their community.

Moses first reported generally the opposition against him and his brother Aaron, and then he related the challenge of Korah, a Levite, followed by the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram who

were from the tribe of Reuben, and ended the chapter with the rebellion of the whole congregation of Israel against him. In the midst of all these evil happenings, he faithfully narrated God's intervention.

**OUTLINE**

**A. Rebellion Against Moses and Aaron (16:1-11).**

1. Korah, Dathan, Abiram led two hundred and fifty princes against Moses and Aaron (vv.1-4).
  - a. They charged Moses and Aaron for self-exalting and lording over them (3).
  - b. Moses bowed before the LORD (4).
2. Moses then spoke to Korah (vv.5-11).
  - a. Moses remarked that the LORD would show who was His and holy (5).
  - b. Moses instructed Korah and those with him to burn incense before the LORD (6-7).
  - c. Moses expressed their belittling of the privilege given to them by the LORD to do the service of the tabernacle (8-9).
  - d. Moses questioned them for their intention to be priests too (10).
  - e. Moses said that Aaron was after all insignificant (11).

**B. Moses Summoned Dathan and Abiram (16:12-19).**

1. Dathan and Abiram disobeyed Moses (v.12).
2. Dathan and Abiram complained against Moses for leading them

- out of Egypt, a land of plenty, to die in the wilderness (vv.13-14).
3. Moses became angry and called upon the LORD to judge (v.15).
  4. Moses turned to Korah and instructed him and all his supporters to appear before the LORD with their incense (vv.16-17).
  5. Korah and his supporters agreed and gathered together before the LORD (vv.18-19).
  6. The glory of the LORD appeared before them (v.19b).

### **C. The LORD Judged the Rebels (16:20-40).**

1. The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron (vv.20-22)
  - a. The LORD expressed His intention to destroy the rebels (v.20-21).
  - b. Moses and Aaron pleaded for the lives of the rebels (v.22).
2. The LORD instructed Moses to segregate the camps of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram from the congregation (v.23-24).
3. Moses spoke to Dathan and Abiram (vv.25-30).
  - a. Moses went to Dathan and Abiram (25).
  - b. Moses told the people to separate themselves from Dathan and Abiram (26).
  - c. The people obeyed Moses' instructions, while Dathan and Abiram stood at the entrance of their tents (27).
  - d. Moses said the LORD would vindicate him if only an unnatural death happened to the rebels (28-30).
4. The LORD judged immediately (vv.31-35).

- a. As soon as Moses ended his speech, the ground opened and swallowed all the rebels and their homes (31-33).
- b. All Israel fled for fear (34).
- c. The LORD sent fire to burn the two hundred and fifty who offered incense (35).
5. The LORD gave specific instructions concerning the censers (vv.36-40).
  - a. Aaron's son, Eleazar, to collect the censers used by the rebels (36-37).
  - b. The censers must be beaten flat and used as a covering on the brazen altar (38).
  - c. These beaten sheets would serve as a memorial to the children of Israel and the resident foreigners (39-40).

### **D. All the Children of Israel Rebelled Against Moses and Aaron (16:41-50).**

1. The whole congregation accused Moses and Aaron for killing the people of the LORD (v.41).
2. The glory of the LORD appeared before the people (v.42).
3. Moses and Aaron went to the tabernacle (v.43).
4. The LORD told Moses that He would destroy the people (vv.44-45).
5. Moses instructed Aaron what to do to save the people (vv.46-50).
  - a. Aaron to take a censer and fill it with fire from the altar to make an atonement for the congregation (46a).
  - b. The plague already broke out and the people were dying (46b).
  - c. Aaron followed Moses' instructions and stood between the living and the

- dead and the plague stayed (47-48).
- d. The number who died were 14,700, excluding Korah and company (49).
  - e. Aaron returned to Moses who was in the tabernacle (50).

## COMMENTARY

### The Ecclesiastical Challenge

The chapter opens with the introduction of Korah and Dathan and Abiram and On. Korah was a son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi. Tracing the family tree, Korah was a cousin of Moses and Aaron. Izhar, the father of Korah, was the brother of the father of Moses and Aaron (appendix refer, the genealogy chart of Levi). As for Dathan and Abiram and their cousin On, their fathers Eliab and Peleth respectively were sons of Reuben.

These two groups of people together with two hundred and fifty prominent leaders of the congregation rose up against Moses and Aaron. One can understand why Korah and the Reubenite brothers colluded and joined forces to attack Moses and Aaron. They were neighbours. The site of their tents was on the south side of the Tabernacle. Their open complaint to Moses and Aaron was that they had given to themselves too much power. They pointed out that the whole congregation was holy, every one of them, and that the LORD was in the midst of them. By a rhetorical question, they charged Moses and Aaron for exalting themselves. The grounds of their complaints were not baseless. Their first ground that the whole nation

was holy was based on Exodus 19:6.<sup>1</sup> The second ground that God dwelt in the midst of them was also true as in Exodus 29:45.<sup>2</sup> Since these statements were true, Korah and those with him questioned Moses' and Aaron's position and authority.

### The Attacked Leader's Response

Moses, having heard their complaint and challenge, fell facedown on the ground. This is a posture of humility and an attitude of prayer and total surrender to God. How long did Moses stay prostrate on the ground is not mentioned. But one thing known is that when he got up, he had the answer to reply to Korah and his cohorts. Moses told them that on the morrow the LORD (Yahweh) would demonstrate who really were called and chosen by Him. The test was that Korah and all his followers would take each take a censer, fill it with the coal of fire from the altar, and burn incense on it before the LORD. And the LORD would show whom He had called and chosen. Moses used the same words and charge Korah for going too far in their present rebellion. Moses further pointed out they had thought very small concerning their privileged service in the Tabernacle. The Kohathites were assigned to take care of the most sacred furniture of the Tabernacle. So when Moses charged them whether they were clamouring for the priesthood, he, in fact, correctly discerned the real hidden motive of Korah's rebellion. He wanted to be a

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 19:6 And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 29:45 And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God.

high priest too on par with Aaron. Moses added that they were actually challenging the LORD and not Aaron and him. After all what was Aaron that they murmured against him.

The test would be an ordeal for the Korah and his two hundred and fifty followers, in all probability most of them were Kohathites and some other Levites. When Moses posed this test to them, they might have recalled the death of Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu, who were consumed by fire by offering incense improperly (Leviticus 10:1-2). They would be under great emotional and mental stress. Moses' reasoning that Aaron's office as high priest was the LORD'S calling and choice. It was not their own doing nor had they appointed themselves to the position of power and authority. It was all the LORD'S calling. Hence, Moses was right in charging them for going against God. Korah and his followers were spiritually discerned (1Corinthians 2:14). They were blinded by their own pride, self-importance and jealousy.

### **The Political Challenge**

Moses then summoned Dathan and Abiram to come to him. They refused to come. They charged Moses for luring them from "out of a land that floweth with milk and honey" to kill them in the wilderness of Sinai. They accused Moses of making himself a "prince" over them. They added that Moses had failed in his leadership in bringing them into the promised land that flowed with milk and honey and the promised gift of fields and vineyards. They remarked that they had enough of Moses whom they charged had "put out their eyes", meaning "hookwinked" them for too long. They would not come to meet him. This was clearly an act of insubordination on their part. Moses

was very angry as can be seen that he immediately spoke to the LORD. He defended himself by admitting that if he had been charged for being a "prince" over them, he had not taken anything from one of them. Even the most humble can lose his patience and cool! However, this is the only time it is said of Moses that he was very angry.

Dathan and Abiram had described the land of Egypt as a land that flowed with milk and honey. In a way, they were right. Egypt was prosperous and there were plenty to eat and enjoy. But that is half of the picture. They conveniently omitted the fact that they were slaves and had suffered much deprivation and hardship under the Egyptian taskmasters. That tells a lot about the character of Dathan and Abiram. They were not being completely honest and fair. They did not tell the whole story but chose what supported them. Once again, they couched their real motive with these complaints. Their real motive was their pride and cravings for a greater role in the leadership of the community. Their dissatisfaction can be understood in that they were sons of Reuben, who was the firstborn. They felt that they had been cheated of their firstborn rights. Now they wanted to reclaim that.

### **The Judgement of the Rebels**

When Korah and company were ready with the test, each of the two hundred and fifty with his censer, and Moses and Aaron too had their censers. Korah gathered all the congregation with him. The glory of the LORD appeared to the entire congregation. God's visible presence was there in the form of the bright and brilliant light of His *Shekinah Glory*. The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, instructing them to separate themselves from the rebellious Korah

and the whole congregation because God intended to consume them in a moment. Moses and Aaron once again fell facedown to their ground and interceded on behalf of the congregation. Observe that Moses addressed the LORD as “God” (Hebrew, *Elohim*) the name of the Almighty God, the Creator of all man. Moses asked God to spare the congregation and punish only Korah who had sinned. The LORD continued and told Moses to instruct the people to separate themselves from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. Moses went to the tents of Dathan and Abiram. Observe that there were some elders of Israel that went with him. This indicates that there were some who were on the side of Moses. Dathan and Abiram came out of their tents and stood at the entrance together with their families. Moses obeyed God and told the congregation to separate themselves from them.

Moses then said to them that the LORD would soon judge and show them it was the LORD who had sent him to do all this, and it was not by his own hand. The rebels would die not in the natural way but in a supernatural way so that the judgement would be unmistakably from the LORD. The earth would split open and “swallow them up” – their families and all their belongings, everything that was connected with them. The LORD would judge against them. Note that Moses did not mention that the LORD would vindicate him personally. They had sinned against the LORD by provoking (literally: spurning) Him. As soon as Moses finished speaking, the ground opened and swallowed all the rebels including Korah. The rest of Israel who had gathered round fled from the scene screaming. Then fire descended and

consumed the two hundred and fifty men that offered incense.

Two hundred and fifty censers were left on the ground. The LORD personally instructed Moses to tell Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, to collect all the censers, scatter the fire for they were sanctified, and to beat the censers into metal sheets for a covering of the brazen altar. This covering of the brazen altar with the metal sheets of the censers was to serve as a memorial sign to the children of Israel that a person not of the seed of Aaron could not draw near to offer incense before the LORD so that he would not face the same fate as Korah. The LORD had judged.

### **The Lack of Spiritual Discernment**

The revolt against Moses was not over yet. The next day, the whole community murmured against Moses and Aaron. They blamed Moses and Aaron for causing the death of “the people of the LORD” (v.41)! They were forgetting that it had been the LORD Himself who had judged and punished the rebels. They failed to realize that their survival as a congregation together was due to the intercession of these very two men who they blamed for the deaths of the rebels whom they called “the people of the LORD” (Yahweh’s people). How completely wrong and unjust they were! They acted like spiritual infants and not as matured adults. One would have thought that they would have reacted in awe and fear, and repent and thank Moses and Aaron for interceding on their behalf.

The glory of the LORD appeared again. The LORD saw and heard. His anger was kindled against the children of Israel. The LORD made known to Moses and Aaron to get away from them for in a moment He would

consume them. Once again, and this was the third time, Moses and Aaron fell facedown to pray for the people. But the judgement had gone. A plague had inflicted the people and they were dying one by one. Moses quickly told Aaron to take a censer and filled it with fire from the brazen altar and make atonement for the people by going into the midst of the people. Aaron obeyed instantly and stood between the dead the living. The plague stopped, but fourteen thousand and seven hundred people had died. Aaron and Moses then returned to the Tabernacle. This is the first instance that atonement was made without any blood sacrifice. There is no explanation. Moses' instruction must have been from the LORD Himself when he fell facedown before the LORD.

### SUMMARY

There are many lessons that we can learn from this chapter. God is holy and He means business concerning His plan and purpose. He does not tolerate those who rise up against His called and chosen servants who do His will. Such attacks against His chosen servant are an attack against Him. Judgement will eventually come unless the rebels repent. Insubordination within the community of the LORD is a serious act. Where there is no respect for authority, and discipline and order is undermined, the result will be unrest and disruption. There will not be progress. Such a Christian community will not grow. God will not give the increase. The people are devouring one another. Thank God for many who love Him and are interceding that God would intervene and judge righteously. Like Moses who remarked, "What is Aaron that you murmur against him?" Aaron was called

by God to do His work. Let him who intends to oppose the leadership of the church, think carefully first before he carries out his intent, lest he be found in the same fate as Korah, Dathan and Abiram.

On the positive side, we learn of the character of Moses and Aaron. They understood clearly why they were in that position. They knew that their position of authority and power was by God's appointment and choice. Not their own. Moses said so. They did what they had to do because the work was the LORD'S. Moses did not ask for it. Initially, he refused to accept God's appointment. Aaron was also chosen by God. In spite of the fact that the people were against him, Moses prayed for their salvation. God acceded to his request. But the ring leaders of the rebels had to be punished. Once again Moses proved himself as a humble and meek person who tried his best to do the will of the LORD.

In contrast, we learn the truth of the proverb that says (16:18), "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." Korah, Dathan and Abiram were consumed in their own pride and self-importance. They fell and they were destroyed. Their way of escape is to repent—to apologize to those whom we hurt, and retract all false accusations, and seek God's forgiveness. God has promised that He is just and righteous to forgive all those who would confess their sins and repent. The chapter teaches us how serious it is to sin against one another and especially against God's anointed righteous servant.  
AMEN

**DAILY READINGS &  
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

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**Daily Readings**

**Monday: Numbers 16:1-11;  
Leviticus 10:1-2; Corinthians 12:14-18; Luke 22:24.**

**Tuesday: Numbers 16:12-22;  
3 John 9-10; Proverbs 16:18.**

**Wednesday: Numbers 16:23-30;  
Hebrews 10:31; Romans 6:23.**

**Thursday: Numbers 16:31-40;  
Deuteronomy 9:3; Hebrews 12:29.**

**Friday: Numbers 16:41-50;  
1 Corinthians 3:1-9.**

3. Who were these two groups of people who rebelled against Moses and Aaron?

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4. What were Korah's grounds for his rebellion against Moses and Aaron?

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**Discussion Questions**

1. Who were the two groups rebelling against Aaron and Moses?

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2. Which part of the encampment did they set up their tents? Does this explain why these two dissident groups support each other?

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5. What were the real issue of Korah's rebellion?

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6. In the face of attacks by his own people, how did Moses respond? What do you think he was doing?

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7. What was Moses answer to Korah and all his followers?

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10. What kind of congregation that called the rebels "the people of the LORD"?

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8. What were the grounds and charges brought against Moses by Dathan and Abiram?

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11. Besides the desire for money and possessions, what forms of greed do you think are the strongest temptations for people?

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9. Why was the judgement so severe upon the two groups?

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12. From this chapter what conclusions would do you make about the character of Moses?

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13. How would you summarize what people learn most about God in this chapter?

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## THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

### SUPPLEMENTARY READINGS

#### MONDAY

1 Corinthians 12:14 For the body is not one member, but many. 15 If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? 16 And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? 17 If the whole body *were* an eye, where *were* the hearing? If the whole *were* hearing, where *were* the smelling? 18 But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.

Luke 22:24 And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest.

#### TUESDAY

3 John 1:9 I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. 10 Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth *them* out of the church.

Proverbs 16:18 Pride *goeth* before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.

#### WEDNESDAY

Hebrews 10:31 *It is* a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin *is* death; but the gift of God *is* eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

#### THURSDAY

Deuteronomy 9:3 Understand therefore this day, that the LORD thy God *is* he which goeth over before thee; as a consuming fire he shall destroy them, and he shall bring them down before thy face: so shalt thou drive them out, and destroy them quickly, as the LORD hath said unto thee.

Hebrews 12:29 For our God *is* a consuming fire.

#### FRIDAY

1 Corinthians 3:1 And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, *even* as unto babes in Christ. 2 I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able *to bear it*, neither yet now are ye able. 3 For ye are yet carnal: for whereas *there is* among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? 4 For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I *am* of Apollos; are ye not carnal? 5 Who then is Paul, and who *is* Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? 6 I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. 7 So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. 8 Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. 9 For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, *ye are* God's building.