



Reverend Dr. Charles L. McNeil, Sr., Senior Pastor  
15 E. Charleston Avenue Lawnside, New Jersey 08045  
[www.gracetemplebaptist.org](http://www.gracetemplebaptist.org)

## A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

### THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

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#### THE NEED FOR THE RIGHT PRIESTHOOD (16:1–19:22)

##### The Place of the Passage

The book of Numbers has previously highlighted the need for the right ruler (Moses) to lead the people's journey (10:11–12:16). In the present passage, we learn of the people's need for the right priest (Aaron) to intercede for their atonement (13:1–15:41). Sadly, as with many lessons in Numbers, these lessons are taught through the failures of the exodus generation. But against the backdrop of their rebellion against the priesthood of Aaron, God's grace shines brightly in giving us Jesus as the perfect successor to Aaron's priesthood. Despite the people's resistance, God persists in upholding the priesthood that ministers salvation to them—and, through Jesus, to us.

##### The Big Picture

God's people need the priestly intercession he has appointed, which is foreshadowed in Aaron and the Levites and completed by Jesus.

##### Gospel Glimpses

**NEW LIFE.** There is much fearful judgment and death in this section of Numbers. It is no wonder the people cry out to Moses, "Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord, shall die. Are we all to perish?" (17:13). But the danger of sinful men and women approaching the presence of a holy God is only half the story. God also provides a stunning promise of life in his presence through the miraculous sprouting of Aaron's rod (17:1–13). By this miracle, the Lord shows that there is not death but eternal life and joy for those who approach him through his chosen priest.

##### Whole Bible Connections

**KORAH AND DATHAN.** The rebellion of Korah and Dathan became legendary in Israel (Deut. 11:6; Ps. 106:16–17; Jude 11). Korah is the "son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi" (16:1), making him Aaron's first cousin (compare Ex. 6:18, 21). In other words, Korah is about as close to the priestly line as possible without being part of it. Dathan and his collaborators are chiefs in the tribe of Reuben (16:1). Reuben was the firstborn among the 12 patriarchs, and normally leadership would remain in the firstborn's lineage. Dathan, as a natural heir to leadership in Israel, is jealous that Moses possesses that status as Israel's "prince" (16:13). Both Korah and Dathan have natural reasons to be jealous of the roles of Moses and Aaron. Nevertheless, it is God who gives his people the mediator(s) he has chosen. The rebellion of Korah and Dathan serves as an abiding reminder to submit to the Lord's chosen priest and prince for his people, roles filled ultimately by Jesus.

## **Theological Soundings**

**TITHES AND OFFERINGS.** Numbers 18:1–32 is the most extensive passage in the Bible describing the Old Testament system of support for temple officers. The key principle to note in this chapter is its repeated emphasis that God is the one who will support the priests and Levites. It is not the people who will pay their salaries. The people bring their due tithes and offerings as gifts of worship to God, but it is the Lord who pays the priests and Levites from those resources to support their labors. By this method of support, the priests and Levites are to be free to devote their energies to their ministry and are not to become entangled in farming or trade or other economic pursuits. Furthermore, by this method of support it is made clear that God is the one who supports the temple as his gift for the good of the people, not the other way around. Although the kinds of tithes and offerings brought in the New Testament church are different from the altar sacrifices brought in the temple, Paul teaches us that the same principle continues for the support of ministers in the New Testament church: “Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple? . . . In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (I Corinthians 9:13–14).

**PRAYER.** It is truly an awesome thing to have an audience with the holy God! The judgment on Korah and his associates reminds us of how dangerous prayer would be apart from a divinely approved intercessor. This judgment teaches us never to approach God in any other name than that of the intercessor he has given to us. It is now Christ who has undertaken the office of Great High Priest, and it is in his name that we have ready and gracious access to heaven (Hebrews 4:14–5:6).

## **Glossary of Terms**

**ETERNAL LIFE.** For believers, the new life that begins with trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation and that continues after physical death with an eternity in God’s presence in heaven.

**Please answer the following questions:**

**Leviticus Chapter 16**

1. What did Korah, Dathan and Abiram do? (1-11)
2. What happened to Korah and his followers? (28-35)
3. What was the purpose of the memorial made from the incense burners? (37-40)
4. How many people died in the plague in addition to the incident involving Korah? (49)

**Leviticus Chapter 17**

5. How many staffs were laid before the Lord in the tabernacle? (2)
6. What happened to the staff with Aaron's name on it? (8)

**Leviticus Chapter 18**

7. What was the responsibility of Aaron and his sons? (1-2,5,7)
8. What were the duties of the Levites? (2-4,6)
9. Who was to receive a share of the offerings? (8-19)

10. Who was not to receive an inheritance of the land? (20)

11. What was given to the children of Levi for an inheritance? (21-24)

12. What were the Levites to give to Aaron the priest? (25-29)

### **Leviticus Chapter 19**

13. What animal was used for the cleansing of the priests? (2-10)

14. Touching what caused a person to become unclean? (11-22)

15. God's people need a priest who atones for their sins. They also need a priest who provides cleansing from the stains of sin. That is what this final block of laws is about. The book of Leviticus makes a distinction between sins (like stealing, lust, and bitterness) and the stains of sin (like disease and death; Leviticus 10:10). To die is not a sin, but death is a consequence of our sinful condition (Genesis 3:19). In order for God to dwell in a camp filled with both sin and its stains, the people need priests who will atone for their sin and will also provide rituals of cleansing from its stains. The ashes of the red heifer, maintained and applied by the priests, represents such cleansing. When these rituals of cleansing are not observed, what becomes defiled by the lack of cleansing (Numbers 19:13, 20)? What does this teach us about God's grace in the face of human suffering and death?