

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker; for personal study only)
Numbers 16:12–22

Peace be with you, brothers and sisters; this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it is time for our Bible reading once again. Today, we continue in Numbers 16, reading verses 12 through 22.

Following their failure at Kadesh, the Israelites came under God's discipline and wandered in the wilderness of Paran for thirty-eight years. While God promised that the new generation of Israelites would enter Canaan—a land flowing with milk and honey—every person from the first generation who was numbered at twenty years old and above was destined to die in the wilderness, except for Joshua and Caleb.

Under such severe discipline, feelings of discontent naturally began to simmer among the people—a very human reaction. A leader after God's own heart would remind the people that this tragic outcome stemmed directly from their unbelief in God's promises. Such a leader would also encourage them to trust that God, in His mercy, remained steadfast in His covenant and would eventually bring the rising generation into the Good Land. Therefore, the proper path forward was to faithfully nurture a godly generation right there in the wilderness.

Satan, God's adversary, seized upon this opportunity. He stirred up ambitious men to exploit this popular unrest, aiming to unseat Moses and Aaron from their leadership over the people. Korah, a descendant of the Kohathites, grew dissatisfied with his Levite duties and coveted the priesthood; thus, he became a willing instrument in Satan's hands. Because the Kohathites camped adjacent to the Reubenites, Korah took the chance to conspire with Dathan, Abiram, and On from the tribe of Reuben. It so happened that the Reubenites also wanted to seize administrative authority that they felt was rightfully theirs, since Reuben was Jacob's firstborn. On top of that, Korah won over 250 prominent leaders of the congregation, men of high renown. Korah may very well have weaponized God's word spoken through Moses when they first arrived at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:4—

6—specifically the promise, “And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests”. Using this word, he enticed these 250 leaders into believing that they, too, had the right to burn incense as priests.

We must recognize that while God’s ultimate will remains unchanged, His provisional dealings with mankind adapt when human beings fall and fail. During the golden calf incident, God set apart the Levites to minister before Him in place of all the firstborn of Israel. Korah, being a Levite himself, should have understood this. Yet blinded by his personal ambition to secure the priesthood, he incited 250 leaders to join him in openly defying Moses and Aaron. In this insurrection, Korah and the Reubenites likely divided their labor: Korah challenged Moses and Aaron publicly before the assembly, while the Reubenites worked behind the scenes to turn the congregation against Moses. With one operating out in the open and the other scheming in the shadows, a premeditated, coordinated rebellion was set in motion.

As we discussed yesterday, when Moses faced their public challenge, he fell on his face and then spoke directly to Korah in private. As a son of Levi, serving God in the tabernacle was already an immense grace—why grasp for the priesthood as well? Moses sought to urge Korah to stop before it was too late, rather than provoke the wrath of God.

Verse 12: “And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, but they said, ‘We will not come up!’”

Having reasoned with Korah, Moses turned his attention to the Reubenites. Moses possessed sharp spiritual discernment: he knew Korah was the instigator driven by priestly ambition, while the Reubenites were second in command, eager to unseat Moses from civil governance. Moses hoped that by speaking with them face-to-face, he might persuade them to abandon their mutiny; therefore, he sent a summons for Dathan and Abiram.

There is a striking detail here. At the outset, three Reubenites joined this revolt, yet now only two remain—On, the son of Peleth, has vanished from the scene. Some commentators suggest that On was convicted during the initial encounter. Moses had instructed them all to take their censers and put burning coals in them before the Lord. That command likely brought to mind what happened in Leviticus 10, where Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, offered profane fire before the Lord with their censers and were consumed by fire that broke out from His presence. If Nadab and Abihu—ordained priests of God—faced such severe judgment simply for offering unauthorized fire, how much worse would it be for rebels who were not priests at all? Stricken with terror, On seemingly withdrew, perhaps officially notifying Moses, which is why Moses only summoned Dathan and Abiram in this verse. Yet their response was outright insolence: “We will not come up!” They refused to even enter into a dialogue with Moses.

Moses may have hoped that seeing On back down would open a window to dissuade Dathan and Abiram as well. Instead, they utterly rejected his authority and defied his summons. What came out of their mouths next was even more scandalous.

Verse 13: “Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you should keep acting like a prince over us?”

They spoke with biting sarcasm: “you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey”. They dared to describe Egypt as a land flowing with milk and honey! They completely brushed aside their brutal enslavement there, where there was neither milk nor honey, and where Pharaoh even refused to provide straw for brickmaking, forcing them to gather it themselves. Yet here they were, applying the very phrase reserved for the promised land of Canaan to Egypt. In doing so, they revealed their secret craving to return to Egypt, mirroring the faithless heart of the ten spies who brought back the bad report.

Their impending death in the wilderness was God's righteous punishment, yet they accused Moses of plotting to murder them in the desert. They went so far as to accuse him of crowning himself king to dominate them. Completely blind to what God was doing, they utterly rejected Moses' leadership.

Verse 14: "Moreover you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up!"

Keep in mind that they were not speaking to Moses in person. When Moses summoned them, they remained in their tents and shouted their reply at his messengers, undoubtedly at the top of their lungs. Their actual target audience was the wider congregation, which is why their speech was filled with specious reasoning. It was factually true that Moses had not brought them into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor secured for them an inheritance of fields and vineyards. But this was not Moses' failure; it was Israel's own persistent unbelief that barred them from claiming the land, an inheritance accessible only through faith.

They cited real outcomes while twisting the true cause, pinning the entire blame onto Moses. To cap it off, they added: "Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up!" This was an ancient idiom meaning to blind someone so they cannot see failure.

Dathan and Abiram had planned this carefully. Refusing to meet Moses in person, they seized the opportunity before his messengers to twist the truth before the whole assembly—calling Egypt a land of milk and honey and holding Moses responsible for their wilderness doom. By then, the Israelites had wandered in the wilderness for some time, exhausted and despairing. Consequently, these exaggerated accusations carried devastating toxic weight, just like the slander of the ten spies before them.

Verse 15: “Then Moses was very angry, and said to the Lord, ‘Do not respect their offering. I have not taken one donkey from them, nor have I hurt one of them.’”

As meek as Moses was, hearing these groundless, toxic accusations sparked deep righteous anger within him. Moses was human, after all. Yet when he grew angry, he did not vent his wrath upon men; he poured out his heart to the Lord, asking Him not to respect their offering. God, of course, already knew that Moses had never taken a single donkey or harmed a single soul. Were it any of us, we might have immediately pleaded with God to strike them down. Yet Moses maintained remarkable restraint, simply asking God not to accept their offerings.

Everyone knew that Israel belonged to the Lord. To serve as a legitimate leader in Israel, one had to present offerings to God on behalf of the assembly. Moses therefore went straight to the heart of the matter, asking God to withhold acceptance of any sacrifice they brought.

Verses 16–17: “And Moses said to Korah, ‘Tomorrow, you and all your company be present before the Lord—you and they, as well as Aaron. Let each take his censer and put incense on it, and each of you bring his censer before the Lord, two hundred and fifty censers; both you and Aaron, each with his censer.’”

With Dathan and Abiram refusing to appear, Moses had few direct avenues left to reach them. They were clearly determined to stay behind in the camp to continue stirring up the crowd, leaving Moses to confront Korah, who led the open challenge. Moses told Korah: tomorrow, you and your entire faction—all 250 leaders—must bring your censers, put incense upon them, and stand before the Lord and Moses. Both Korah and Aaron were likewise to bring their censers and present themselves before the Lord, letting God make the choice evident. Notably, Moses did not tell them to light the censers with fire; he instructed them only to put incense on their censers and stand before the Lord together with Aaron.

We can infer that Moses expected everyone to stand before the Lord so that God Himself might consume Aaron’s incense with divine fire, validating Aaron’s

appointment as high priest. Once God made His will unmistakable, the conspirators would have no choice but to back down. On a deeper level, as those 250 leaders prepared their censers and handled the sacred incense, they might well have remembered the warning in Exodus 30:37–38: “But as for the incense which you shall make, you shall not make any for yourselves, according to its composition. It shall be to you holy for the Lord. Whoever makes any like it, to smell it, he shall be cut off from his people.” They would also recall how divine fire broke out from heaven to slay Nadab and Abihu. Moses may have hoped that a reverent fear would overtake their hearts, prompting them to pull out of this conspiracy just as On had done.

Verse 18: “So every man took his censer, put fire in it, laid incense on it, and stood at the door of the tabernacle of meeting with Moses and Aaron.”

Yet they completely disregarded Moses’ underlying pastoral intention. The following morning, Korah and the 250 leaders took their censers, brought their own unauthorized fire, laid incense upon them, and assembled right at the doorway of the tabernacle of meeting before Moses and Aaron. Seeing them carrying censers filled with strange fire must have brought the tragedy of Nadab and Abihu rushing back into Aaron’s mind, perhaps filling his heart with deep sorrow for these men.

Verse 19: “And Korah gathered all the congregation against them at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. Then the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation.”

This was an elaborate spectacle orchestrated by Korah to stage a public showdown against Moses and Aaron before the whole community. To that end, he summoned the entire assembly to assemble at the door of the tabernacle to witness the confrontation. Defying Moses’ instructions, he directed his followers to add burning coals alongside the incense—an intentional attempt to preempt any divine

ignition of Aaron's censer—so he could publicly indict Moses and Aaron for abusing their authority.

Korah had calculated every human detail with chilling precision, leveraging mass discontent to stage a public tribunal against Moses and Aaron. The only variable he failed to account for was God Himself. It was his own unbelief that blinded him to the reality of divine intervention. Just as Korah thought his scheme was about to succeed, the glory of the Lord burst forth before the entire assembly. When God suddenly reveals His presence, that dazzling splendor and overwhelming brilliance throws human pride into utter helplessness.

Verses 20–21: “And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.’”

Bypassing the stunned crowd, God spoke directly to Moses and Aaron: “Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.” When God holds back His presence, it is an act of long-suffering mercy. But when men persistently push past every boundary until God is compelled to appear, His holy righteousness breaks through in glory, and no sinner can stand before Him. Though God addressed Moses and Aaron, the thunder of His voice echoed so powerfully that the entire assembly surely heard it.

Verse 22: “Then they fell on their faces, and said, ‘O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and You be angry with all the congregation?’”

The moment the glory of God broke through, Moses and Aaron instantly fell on their faces. This marked the second time Moses prostrated himself in this episode. The first time was when Korah and the leaders initially confronted him; then, Moses fell on his face to seek God on their behalf. God showed forbearance then,

refraining from an immediate appearance to afford them space to repent—yet they refused. This second time, Moses fell on his face to plead for the entire assembly.

With God's presence now openly manifested, righteous judgment was imminent. Moses thus appealed directly to God's mercy on behalf of the people: "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and You be angry with all the congregation?" Moses addressed God by a profound and unique title: "the God of the spirits of all flesh." Calling Him this provides clear proof that mankind possesses a spirit. God is Spirit; therefore, He knows the spirit residing within every person. He perceives not merely the spirit of an individual, but the spirit of all mankind.

In the original Hebrew, "spirits" is plural. By choosing this exact phrasing, Moses was reverently reminding God that while the entire congregation stood assembled before the tabernacle, not every individual harbored a rebellious spirit. You are the God of the spirits of all flesh; You discern the true condition of each person's heart. Many gathered simply out of idle curiosity, and many were merely misled; not every Israelite had set their heart on mutiny. Please do not pour out Your wrath on the whole congregation because of the sin of one man—namely, Korah. In his intercession, Moses knew Korah's doom was sealed, so he specifically petitioned God not to let one man's sin bring destruction upon the entire assembly. Once again, Moses proved himself to be God's true servant, faithful in all His house.

Let us pray together: Lord, we thank You. Through the book of Numbers, You give us a clear view of how Moses served the children of Israel. You affirmed that he was faithful in all Your house; indeed, Moses stands as a wonderful pattern for how we ought to serve the church today. In church service, we will inevitably encounter misunderstandings, grievances, and even opposition. Lord, guard our hearts to remain undivided and pure, focused solely on shepherding the saints into Your presence. Help us learn the meekness of Moses and his steadfast faithfulness. We pray Your blessing upon our local church, and particularly upon the co-workers who minister among the saints. Grant them Moses' heart, that they may be devoted to bringing every believer before God. Bless our local church; we pray all these things in the precious name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.