

# Power Struggle



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Gen. 17:10–17, Numbers 16, 17, Josh. 4:3–9, Matt. 26:13, Luke 22:19.*

**Memory Text:** “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall” (*Proverbs 16:18*).

**A**n ill-disguised hatred against Moses and Aaron still rankled in the hearts of the multitude. To be condemned to wander in the wilderness until the first generation out of Egypt died seemed more than many of them could bear. Instead of submitting to God's judgment, some began to plot how they could rid themselves of the two brothers, as if somehow these two men, and not God, were the ones responsible for this situation.

“Korah, the leading spirit in this movement, was a Levite, of the family of Kohath, and a cousin of Moses; he was a man of ability and influence. Though appointed to the service of the tabernacle, he had become dissatisfied with his position and for some time . . . had been secretly opposing the authority of Moses and Aaron. . . . He finally conceived the bold design of overthrowing both the civil and the religious authority.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 395.

This week's lesson should be a powerful reminder to us of the corruptness of the human heart. Pride, jealousy, and love of power, if cherished and left to fester, can manifest themselves in horrific ways. God alone knows how much pain, suffering, and loss have resulted and will result from those who, knowing better, allow these bitter seeds to bear their harvest. May we learn from the mistakes seen here and not make the same ones ourselves.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 14.*

## Rebellion (Again)

**Read** Numbers 16:1–3. Read carefully the rebels’ words to Moses. What four lies are found there?

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Moses’ reaction to this attack (*vs. 4*) reveals just how frustrated he must have felt at such twisted and distorted charges, especially by those who should have known better. “They were of the number who went up with Moses into the mount and beheld the divine glory. . . . Professing great interest in the prosperity of the people, they first whispered their discontent to one another and then to leading men of Israel. Their insinuations were so readily received that they ventured still further, and at last they really believed themselves to be actuated by zeal for God.” —Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 396, 397.

Here, again, we see the manifestation of Satan’s original sin in heaven. No matter how exalted these men and princes were, or the high positions that they held, it wasn’t enough for them. They wanted more.

How careful we must be!

**What** else was behind their rebellion? Why, too, were these charges so utterly false? *Num. 16:12–14*.

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What’s so incredible are the words of these men, calling Egypt (Egypt!) the land flowing “with milk and honey.” It’s amazing how sin was so able to pervert their judgment that the country of their slavery and bondage was now referred to by them in terms that represented God’s Promised Land!

**What are ways in which we deceive ourselves, ways in which we rationalize or justify our sins and wrong deeds? How can we protect ourselves against this sad and dangerous spiritual trap?**

## *The Lesson in Brief*

▶ **Key Text:** *Numbers 16:47, 48*

▶ **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Describe the mutiny of the leaders and people against God's chosen.

**Feel:** Acknowledge the insidious and deadly nature of rebellion and the extreme measures needed to arrest its spread.

**Do:** Review and refresh the memorials God has set up to keep us walking in His paths.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

### I. Know: Rebelling Against God's Chosen Leadership

**A** The spirit of rebellion started with Korah, a Levite, and spread to other leaders. Who else did the spirit of revolt affect, and what was the result?

**B** The punishment dealt out to Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their families was dramatic and dire, but the discipline didn't stop there. What were the other disciplinary measures that followed?

**C** What memorial was created to illustrate the importance of respecting God's plan of governance, and where was it placed?

### II. Feel: The Danger of the Deadly Nature of Rebellion

**A** Why is rebellion against God's leaders such a serious matter? What other examples of rebellion against leadership illustrate the malignancy of this sin?

**B** What examples of grace and intercession are evident in this story?

### III. Do: Keeping God's Memorials Before Us

How do we keep the memory of God's supremacy alive in our lives? What can we do this week to refresh and strengthen the memorials that God personally has set up for us and the church?

▶ **Summary:** Rebellion against God's leadership has terrible consequences for us and for those around us, but God calls us to help Him intercede and offer His grace to sinners.

## If the Lord Creates Something New

Look at Moses' reaction to these men (*Num. 16:4–11*). Despite the exalted position that they had been given, they wanted more. Moses clearly saw that.

Even more important, if you listened to their words, it seemed as if they were rebelling against Moses and Aaron, as if these two, of themselves, had usurped all this authority, had overstepped their bounds, and had exalted themselves over everyone else, as well as having led them into the wilderness to kill them.

**In** reality, however, who were they truly rebelling against? *Num. 16:11*.

Again, one has to wonder where these men came up with such false charges. Whose power split the Red Sea—God's, or Moses and Aaron's? Who brought manna for them every morning—God, or Moses and Aaron? Who was it that manifested the cloud by day and the fire by night—God, or Moses and Aaron? It's hard to imagine how, with all that they had witnessed, they could have acted as they did.

**Read** Numbers 16:15–35. Notice Moses' words in verses 28–30. What is Moses saying that shows what the real issue was?

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Think of their situation. If these men had been able to incite a wider rebellion, who knows the horrible consequences that could have come. The children of Israel, hardly grounded in the Lord as they should be, easily could have gone totally astray. They had to know that the Lord was in control, that the Lord was the One who was leading them, and that Moses and Aaron were doing what God had called them to do and were not acting in their own behalf. All this should have been obvious, but again, sin has a powerful way of clouding our minds. The spirit of rebellion, once fostered, is hard to quell and often takes on a momentum all its own.

**How susceptible are you to feelings of envy regarding those who have position or authority over you? What can you learn from Christ's example that could help you overcome this potentially ruinous sentiment?**

## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1**—Motivate

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** Jealousy and grasping for power display a lack of trust that God is in control and has our best interests at heart.

**Just for Teachers:** A lust for power and authority is one of the deadliest sins, because it is often hard to detect and is usually cloaked in the “noblest” of motives. Seldom are people bold enough to admit that they seek power for their own gratification. Politicians want power “in order to help the people.” CEOs want power in order to “benefit the company.” Is it possible that even church leaders can fall into the same trap?

Read the following excerpt from Steve Walikonis’s article on power and discuss the following questions: (1) What kinds of power does God have a right to use? (2) What kinds of power does God actually choose to use? Give specific examples to support your answer. (3) What kinds of power are legitimately used by Christian leaders? Give the reasons for your answers.

**Excerpt:** “How should a church leader relate to the phenomenon of power? J. R. P. French and B. Raven identified five kinds of power: “1. Expert power: based on B’s perception of A’s competence. “2. Referent power: based on B’s identification with or liking for A. “3. Reward Power: based on A’s ability to provide rewards for B. “4. Coercive power: based on B’s perception that A can provide penalties for failure to comply with A. “5. Legitimate power: based on the internalization of common norms or values.”—“The Pastor and Power,” *Ministry*, November 2007, p. 21.

**Suggestion:** Make photocopies of the excerpt so that class members can reference it as they discuss the thought questions given above.

### ► **STEP 2**—Explore

## Bible Commentary

**I. Rebellion (Again) and Memorials** (Review *Num. 16:1–40* and *Ps. 106:16–18* with the class.)

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## Memorials

Archaeological research in Palestine has not uncovered many written materials (other than the Dead Sea scrolls), yet the Scriptures refer to a variety of memorials as visible signs to recall continuously to Israel's memory their meaning. For instance, in Genesis 28:11–22, Jacob set up a stone memorial in order to remember the covenant promises that God had made to him and to his descendants.

**How** was this terrible rebellion against Moses and Aaron memorialized? *Num. 16:36–40*. What especially was this memorial to remind them of?

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Most of the memorials mentioned in the Old Testament reminded Israel of God's will, His goodness, grace, and covenant blessings. They pointed the person Godward, upward, toward the Lord. For example, the rainbow after the Flood (*Gen. 9:13*), circumcision (*Gen. 17:10–17*), the Passover festival (*Num. 9:1–14*), the blue tassels on their clothing (*Num. 15:38–41*), or the memorial stones Joshua erected at the Jordan crossing (*Josh. 4:3–9*).

In contrast, the bronze plates in the court were a *preventative* memorial to warn a stranger or a nondescendant of Aaron from attempting to usurp the priesthood. In a broader sense, it would remind people of what happened when humans—rationalizing their own greed, ambition, and desire for power—rebelled against God. It was a memorial, warning people to “be not as Korah, and as his company” (*Num. 16:40*).

**What** are some other memorials you can find in the Bible, and what are their purposes? See, for instance, *Exod. 20:8–11*, *Num. 31:54*, *Matt. 26:13*, *Luke 22:19*. In what ways were the animal sacrifices a kind of memorial?

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**What things about the Lord and His promises do you constantly need reminding of? Why is it important to keep those promises constantly before you?**

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*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

Who has gone too far? Will the real culprit stand up?

Korah and his associates claimed that Moses and Aaron had gone too far in the exercise of their authority. Like most claims, the issue was not “black and white.” Persons who pursue power and authority usually can produce a rationale for their pursuit that has a degree of respectability at the surface level. Korah argues that (1) everyone in Israel is part of God’s people, and (2) God is with everyone. Now, who could argue with that? Could we not agree that this argument would be a sound philosophical basis for a biblically based democracy?

Korah’s real motivation, however, seems to come out in his follow-up assertion that accuses Moses and Aaron of an unwillingness to share leadership with others. Was this true? The facts appear to contradict the accusation. First, Moses had willingly accepted Jethro’s suggestion of distributing leadership throughout the nation. Second, Moses had cooperated in implementing God’s distribution of leadership to “the seventy,” even defending the right to leadership for those who had missed the “inauguration.” Nothing on record seems to indicate that Moses or Aaron tried to parlay their exalted positions as leader and high priest into some kind of personal gain or advantage.

This evidence leads us to suspect the motives of Korah and his associates. Moses countered Korah, using his own words, “ ‘You have gone too far’ ” (*see Num. 16:3, 7, NIV*). Moses suggests that the real motive behind Korah’s movement is a dissatisfaction with the degree of leadership already exercised by him. Not satisfied with the role of Levitical leader, he aspired to the priesthood. As a man of considerable ability and influence in his current position, he of course gained a sympathetic hearing among many of Israel’s leaders.

It is noteworthy that Dathan and Abiram, Korah’s fellow conspirators, would not even come and discuss things with Moses face-to-face. Instead they leveled more charges against Moses via messengers. They said that Moses had lured them away from an easy Egyptian existence. They used descriptive terms that God had reserved for the Promised Land. Some easy existence! How quickly they had forgotten the unreasonable labor requirements, the abusive beatings, even the slaughter of their own offspring. So, in the light of accusation and counteraccusation, how was the nation to discern which party was right?

Moses and Korah agree to participate in a test, a test reminiscent of the sacrifices of Cain and Abel or of the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Those who sided with Korah would bring their censers filled with incense, as would Moses and Aaron. Then the Lord would demonstrate whom He had truly chosen. At the time appointed, Korah and

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## Between the Living and the Dead

We would think that the judgments that fell upon Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and the 250 princes would have sobered the wilderness congregation. After all, fire was coming down from heaven and consuming some, while the earth was opening up and consuming the others. What more could the Lord have done to show His righteous indignation at such outright rebellion and apostasy?

**Read** Numbers 16:41–50. What should this tell us about fallen human nature? How did their accusation reflect the same accusation that Korah and the others had just made?

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What this amazing account should reveal to us is that the spirit of rebellion among some of the people hadn't ended with Korah. It remained in the camp, even after all that just had happened. It's hard to understand how anyone could have acted that way, especially after what they had just witnessed. Again, this only goes to show us how once we start the slide toward rebellion and apostasy, we might find ourselves doing some very crazy and irrational things. How crucial that we, through God's grace, claiming His promises (*1 Cor. 10:13, Phil. 1:6*), die to these sentiments before they lead us toward ruin.

**Read** Numbers 16:48. What does the idea of Aaron standing between the living and the dead mean? How do we, in this scene, get a glimpse of what Jesus has done for us?

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There are only two kinds of people in this world, the living and the dead, not the physically dead but the spiritually dead. "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (*John 3:18*). Jesus stands between the living and the dead; He's the border, the transition point from one to the other. Only through Him can we go from death to life.

**Are you among the living? Justify your answer.**

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*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

the 250 leaders who supported him appeared with Moses and Aaron at the entrance to the tabernacle courtyard.

The fact that Korah had summoned the congregation to witness the event testifies to the fact that he sincerely believed that he championed a godly cause in which he expected to triumph. Such were the delusions of a jealous and power-craving heart! Instead, a supernatural death sentence was meted out on Korah, Dathan, and Abiram as an earthquake swallowed them and their families alive, and their 250 supporters were burned to death. God had spoken clearly, but the rebellion was not yet quenched.

**Consider This:** When churches divide and leaders are at odds, how can we discern who truly is following God's lead?

## II. Between the Living and the Dead, and the Budding of Aaron's Rod *(Review Numbers 16:41–50; 17 with the class.)*

Eleazar, Aaron's son, was assigned the task of collecting the censers of the rebels and hammering them into a covering for the altar that would serve as a constant reminder of the consequences of rebellion. It was an immediate failure. The very next day malcontents within the congregation accused Moses and Aaron of murdering those who had died the day before. How senseless! Did they really believe that Moses and Aaron had the power to create earthquakes and call down fire from heaven? If not, why the accusation? If so, how foolish of them to challenge someone with such power!

For the second day in a row Moses and Aaron interceded for the rebellious congregation, when God warned them to move aside so that He could destroy Israel. Aaron ran through the congregation bearing incense in his censer, a symbol of intercessory prayer. Nearly fifteen thousand perished, however, before the plague abated. In the budding staff, God mercifully provided one more example of incontrovertible evidence of His choosing Aaron as priest. Each tribe submitted a representative staff, and all were placed before the ark of the covenant. Only Aaron's staff blossomed, signifying God's choice. The rebellion was over, but what a stiff price to pay for education.

**Consider This:** How can we be effective intercessors for those in our families or in our churches who are rebelling against God?

### ► **STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** The rebellion of Korah and his sympathizers presents a clear example of what happens when God's appointed servants are

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## Aaron's Rod That Budded

Although thousands had died in the rebellion stirred up by Korah, the Lord knew the issue of priestly leadership had yet to be settled. Even with all that He had done, the powerful and painful judgments poured out on the rebellious, God must have known that the people were still restless. With justification, He could have wiped them all out, though it was never His desire to do that. Even after all that had happened, the Lord still was willing to work with these people and reveal His saving grace to them.

**Read** Numbers 17 and answer the following questions:

• What was the reason for the test?

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• How was this test to be a means of preventing further rebellion and the resulting condemnation?

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• How does the reaction of the people reveal that they seem to have finally gotten the message that only certain people would be allowed to be priests?

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The miracle of Aaron's staff blooming and producing almonds could not be denied. The Israelites had to admit that God had wrought a miracle within the tabernacle that, once and for all, designated Aaron and his descendants as the priests of the Lord's sanctuary. The tragedy is that it cost so much suffering to get the point across. What's amazing is that the Lord was willing to do even more for them in order to set them straight.

**From our perspective, it's so easy to condemn and judge the Hebrews. Yet, what if we look at ourselves, individually (2 Cor. 3:15)? Why is it often so hard for us to learn the lessons that God seeks to teach us? Why, even when we have been given more than enough evidence of God's love and grace, do we fail to trust Him? Why do we make the same mistakes again and again? Even more important, why is it crucial that we not seek to justify our mistakes?**

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*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

challenged by those who merely seek power and prestige for themselves. However, at times those appointed to sacred office prove unworthy of their calling. Aaron's older sons, Eli's sons, Caiaphas, and Ananias are noteworthy examples from the religious community. All of the kings of Israel and many of the kings of Judah lived in rebellion against God, as well. How should a believer deal with situations in which someone in authority over them is unfaithful to God? How can the believer avoid the pitfalls of Korah yet stand up against institutional apostasy?

**Consider This:**

- A. How did Christ instruct us to approach others when we have differences? (*Matt. 18:15–19*)
- B. How did Paul interact with the high priest who conducted his interrogation? (*Acts 23:1–5*)
- C. What instructions did Paul give regarding civil authorities when one of the most oppressive regimes in history was in power? (*Rom. 13:1–7*)
- D. Does respect for authority mean that we are excused from any personal moral responsibility toward God? (*Acts 5:27–29*)
- E. How did Elijah deal with defective spiritual leadership? (*1 Kings 18*) How about Nathan? (*2 Samuel 12*) How about Jeremiah? (*Jer. 20:1–6; 28*)

► **STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** Certainly no earthly leader is perfect and infallible. If perfection were the criterion for leadership, there would be no leaders other than Jesus. Short of perfection, every leader is subject to some criticism; however, believers are called to encourage godly leaders who, though human and flawed, nevertheless do their best by God's grace to advance His cause. This is not only an encouragement for the human instrument of leadership, it also is an expression of confidence that the True Leader, the One who shapes history, is still in control.

Encourage class members to do one of the following *this week*:

1. Write an encouraging letter to a civic leader whom you honestly can commend for some accomplishment, moral stand, or personal characteristic.
2. Write or call a church leader (elder, pastor, conference official, and so on) to express your appreciation for his or her service.

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Rebellion of Korah,” pp. 395–405, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“I question whether genuine rebellion is ever curable. . . .

“Rebellion and apostasy are in the very air we breathe. We shall be affected by it unless we by faith hang our helpless souls upon Christ. If men are so easily misled, how will they stand when Satan shall personate Christ, and work miracles? Who will be unmoved by his misrepresentations? Professing to be Christ when it is only Satan assuming the person of Christ, and apparently working the works of Christ? What will hold God’s people from giving their allegiance to false Christs? ‘Go not ye after them.’

“The doctrines must be plainly understood. The men accepted to teach the truth must be anchored; then their vessel will hold against storm and tempest, because the anchor holds them firmly. The deceptions will increase, and we are to call rebellion by its right name. We are to stand with the whole armor on.” —Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 1114.

### Discussion Questions:

**1** What are ways in which sin deceives us? How can we know if we are being deceived by it? (After all, isn’t part of the deception of sin to make us think that actually we’re not being deceived?) What role does the Bible play in answering this question? How can others help us, as well?

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**2** However open and outright the rebellion we looked at this week, what are other ways that the same spirit can be manifest among us? How can we recognize it when it arises among ourselves, especially when it’s often cloaked under guises that make us think we’re not rebelling, but instead, standing up for what is right? How do we know the difference?

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**3** Why are memorials, either religious or secular, important? What are some secular memorials common in your culture, and what do they represent?

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**Summary:** The rebellion of Korah and his associates against Moses and Aaron was so deep-seated that God had to destroy them and their followers by earthquake, fire, and plague. This account should serve as a warning against envy and jealousy, as did the memorial bronze plates on the altar. If we would pray for our leaders and cherish what God has done for them and us, we may be spared the internal troubles that beset ancient Israel in Korah’s uprising.