

PREACHERS' STUDY PAPERS

NUMBERS

BOOK 1

CHAPTERS 1 TO 10:10

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These ten studies of the opening chapters of Numbers have been our first attempt at dealing with a major Old Testament book in the Preachers' Study Papers series. There were two difficulties that had to be considered. Firstly, the length of the Scripture text of each study and secondly, the interpretation of Old Testament passages.

Most of our studies in this book have taken a whole chapter at a time, some with over fifty verses. The number of verses covered in each study are much longer than our New Testament studies in Galatians and James. However, there is more narrative in the Old Testament whereas in the shorter New Testament epistles we have had to consider theological argument and reasoning. As a result the text explaining the verses is not so detailed and overall the studies, whilst covering many more verses, are not that much longer in length than those that we have in our New Testament studies.

In some of the chapters of Numbers the same action is repeated but the detail of the tribe or person is varied. Where this occurs we have studied the pattern of the first set of verses and then used a table to show the different detail for the following verses that follow the pattern.

The interpretation of each passage is dealt with by a separate section called *Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes*. This way we avoid confusion that could arise when mixing the study of the text with application. No attempt is made in the section *What these verses mean* to make any application. This section is used to look at what the text meant when written. How to understand and use the passage in our Christian life today is the purpose of the new section. (See also a further note on page iv.)

Some of the suggestions for preaching contain material that could be too much for one sermon. The danger is to get too detailed and miss the whole point of the passage. Each of our studies has a title, which tries to capture the essence of the passage. Following the title as the subject for the sermon would be a useful guide to keeping the material simple and helpful to the congregation.

We are grateful to Peter King who prepared the original material from which these studies have been prepared. Some of the sermon outlines are taken from a series preached by Adam Laughton. We trust you will find these studies helpful to your understanding of Numbers and that you will be aided by the Holy Spirit to preach the truths contained in this Old Testament book.

Grace Baptist Mission
2008

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this publication are from the New International Version
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Abbreviations for Bible Books

Old Testament

Genesis	Gen.	Ecclesiastes	Eccl.
Exodus	Ex.	The Song of Solomon	Song
Leviticus	Lev.	Isaiah	Is.
Numbers	Num.	Jeremiah	Jer.
Deuteronomy	Deut.	Lamentations	Lam.
Joshua	Josh.	Ezekiel	Ezek.
Judges	Judg.	Daniel	Dan.
Ruth	Ruth	Hosea	Hos.
1 Samuel	1 Sam.	Joel	Joel
2 Samuel	2 Sam.	Amos	Amos
1 Kings	1 Kings	Obadiah	Obad.
2 Kings	2 Kings	Jonah	Jonah
1 Chronicles	1 Chr.	Micah	Mic.
2 Chronicles	2 Chr.	Nahum	Nah.
Ezra	Ezra	Habakkuk	Hab.
Nehemiah	Neh.	Zephaniah	Zeph.
Esther	Esth.	Haggai	Hag.
Job	Job	Zechariah	Zech.
Psalms	Ps.	Malachi	Mal.
Proverbs	Prov.		

New Testament

Matthew	Matt.	1 Timothy	1 Tim.
Mark	Mark	2 Timothy	2 Tim.
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philemon	Philm.
The Acts	Acts	Hebrews	Heb.
Romans	Rom.	James	James
1 Corinthians	1 Co.	1 Peter	1 Pet.
2 Corinthians	2 Co.	2 Peter	2 Pet.
Galatians	Gal.	1 John	1 John
Ephesians	Eph.	2 John	2 John
Philippians	Phil.	3 John	3 John
Colossians	Col.	Jude	Jude
1 Thessalonians	1 Thess.	Revelation	Rev.
2 Thessalonians	2 Thess.		

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Interpreting Old Testament passages

Reading and understanding the Old Testament raises a number of difficulties for us today. We may follow the historical narrative as interesting incidents but we can so easily miss the point of why such events are recorded. Then there are the prophecies and poetry. Our difficulties are made worse because of the time lapse between the Old Testament times and the days in which we live.

The interpretation of the Old Testament for Christian believers today is not easy. There are different views held by Christians that lead to a diverse understanding and teaching of the Bible. Such differences arise from the way the Old Testament is handled. In our study papers we view the Old Testament as theological history rather than religious history.¹ In other words it is God's record of God's own dealings with the world. We view the events recorded in the Bible as being the purpose of God. God is using the Bible to communicate his thoughts to human beings. That means that the details of events we read are governed by theological meaning rather than by military or political significance.

By understanding the Bible as God's expressing his thoughts and purpose, we must see the unity of the whole Bible, the Old and New Testaments working together. This has not always been the case and there have been periods in history when the Old Testament has been looked upon as separate from the New. This meant that the Old Testament was not understood in its natural sense but was spiritualised, a hidden meaning was drawn out that fitted in with New Testament thinking. It was the Protestant reformers of the 16th century who helped the Christian Church to see the importance of the historical and natural meaning of the Scriptures.

For a further discussion of Biblical Theology see the Focus Point on page 105 of Galatians Book 2.

¹ Religious history here means that events are seen as part of an unfolding development of a particular group of people, organisation or system. Such events are interpreted as being the result of time and circumstances. They are viewed from a human perspective and often looked upon as being influenced by chance and fatalism.

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

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Why study the book of Numbers?

The books of the Bible may seem to have no special order, but closer study shows the sequence is significant. The first five books, sometimes called the Pentateuch, (meaning five-volume book from the Greek pentateuchos) are attributed to Moses.

The first book, Genesis, teaches about the fallen human race. The second of the five books, Exodus, reveals the love of God in rescuing the Israelite people from their captivity in Egypt. After the release from Egypt the Israelites needed to be taught how they should worship their God. This is the subject of the third book, Leviticus. The fourth book is Numbers which records the pilgrimage journey they made from Egypt to the promised land.¹ The study of this book will see the Israelites walking through deserts and wasteland. We shall see their trials and triumphs. The last of the five books, Deuteronomy, is a summary for the succeeding generation as they prepare to go into the promised land.

In Numbers we have a portrayal of the church of Christ. A group of ex-slaves from Egypt become an effective fighting force and a prosperous nation, ready and equipped to take on formidable enemies.

In this we have the picture of a people who were also slaves, not to a country but to the kingdom of darkness. These people, as individuals, have been rescued through the death of Jesus Christ. They are now taught by the Holy Spirit in everyday experiences and prepared for a journey. Their journey is life upon this earth, each making their way to

¹ The phrase "promised land" does not appear in Scripture. The Bible refers to *the land that Abraham will take possession of or that God will give*. It is also called *the land of Canaan*. Joseph on his deathbed used the term *the land he [God] promised on oath*. It is also described as *the land flowing with milk and honey*. In our studies we use the phrase *promised land* to describe the land of Canaan God that promised to Abraham and his descendants.

the promised land, heaven. The people are from all nations and tribes and make up what the New Testament calls the church.

There are many parallels between the Israelites on their journey and today's church. We shall also see how weak the Israelites were, which is so typical of what we see today. Yet in the same way that the Israelite people were prepared to conquer enemies to enter the promised land, so today the church is involved in a spiritual warfare where also the enemy of Christ will be conquered.



The story of Numbers

Preparation to inherit the promised land

The Israelites served the Egyptian Pharaohs as slaves for over 400 years. Egypt was a heathen country. By a miraculous intervention of God's power the Israelites now found themselves released and in the wilderness. They were a company of some two million people with no organised government to care for them. The first action God took was to teach and organise this disorganised group to live according to his laws and practices (1:1-10:10). This is the subject of our studies in this Book 1.

The failure to enter the promised land

The next section shows us what happened when they disobeyed God and would not listen to him nor trust him. The Israelites complained about their circumstances and food. They even blamed the very man who delivered them from slavery – Moses. God's judgement came on them as a punishment for their ingratitude. A challenge to the leadership from Miriam and Aaron (sister and brother to Moses) led to Moses' gracious intervention for his sister. When they came to the border with Canaan, Israelite spies were sent out to check out the land. Ten of the twelve spies were frightened with what they saw and gave a negative report. This resulted in the people's being influenced by the spies and not trusting in the promises God gave them that the land was theirs to inherit. They shrank from war with the "giants of the land" and although pardoned by God their destiny was to wander in the desert for thirty-eight more years.

A reminder of God's promises follows in chapter fifteen and then Korah makes a bid for the leadership but is solemnly judged by God. Even after that terrible episode the people rebelled in arrogant resistance to

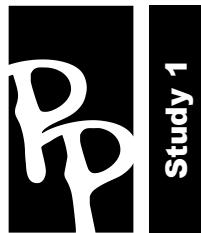
God's Word. Once again the authority of the priesthood needed to be confirmed. Victory and failure continued as God taught the Israelites over and over again, by mercy and judgement. Balaam and Balak fail in an attempt to curse the chosen nation, although Israel had no knowledge of this until they were condemned for harlotry with Moab. Then they realised Balaam was behind the treachery.

A new generation set to conquer the promised land

The third part prepares a new generation to inherit the promised land. None of the disbelieving people would see the promised land. They died in the desert. Another census was taken and various rules for dividing the land came into force together with a reiteration of worship ceremony. Midian was destroyed as the Israelites arrived on the banks of the Jordan ready to make the final push into Canaan. It is now we learn of cities of refuge and the boundaries of the promised land.

GETTING READY:

THE COUNT



Numbers 1:1-54

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- Introduction to the passage
- Study outline
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes
- A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- Focus Point: Christian warfare
- Over to you

Introduction to the passage

At the beginning of the book of Numbers the Israelites were in the desert. There were about two million people in total. Resources of food and water were scarce; there were no maps to find their way, nor signposts to direct them. For over 400 years they had been in Egypt. When they first settled in that country they were given land, but after the Pharaoh who welcomed them died, the situation for the Israelites started to get bad (Ex. 1). They became slaves and suffered greatly. Now God had rescued the Israelites and brought them out of Egypt. Here they were in the desert with no structure of government and they were on their own, surrounded by hostile nations. God had rescued the Israelites to keep the promise he made to Abraham, that the land of Canaan would be given to his offspring (Gen. 12:7). The Israelites were Abraham's descendants. God therefore rescued the Israelites, not just to free them from the terrible slavery of Egypt, but to bring them into the land that he had promised. The journey had begun more than a year earlier. Three months after leaving Egypt the rescued Israelites entered

the Desert of Sinai and camped in front of the rugged mountains of Sinai. God had already provided them with daily food (Ex. 16) and water (Ex. 17:1-7). They remained in Sinai for nearly a year, during which time God gave Moses the law, a set of commandments and detailed rules to teach the people about God and how they should live. This included instructions about the Tent of Meeting (tabernacle). The time had come for the journey to continue to the land of Canaan. First a number of arrangements had to be put into place.

Study outline

This first chapter can be divided into four parts:

1. **Counting the people.** Verses 1-16 tell how God made arrangements for the Israelites to be numbered.
2. **The results of the count.** Verses 17-46 give the results of the count and describe how God decided which men of each tribe were to be enrolled into the army.
3. **Special responsibilities.** Verses 47-53 explain who is to be responsible for moving the tabernacle of the Testimony (Tent of Meeting) when the Israelites travelled through the desert.
4. **Obedience.** Verse 54. This last verse is a confirmation that everything God commanded was obeyed.

What these verses mean

Part one: Counting the people (1-16)

Verse 1

The LORD spoke to Moses

The name *LORD* in capital letters is the translation of the Hebrew word *Yahweh*. The Jews considered the name *Yahweh* as being too sacred to pronounce so they always read the Hebrew *adonai* in its place — which means *my Lord*. When vowels were introduced into Hebrew (called the pointing) they attached the vowels of *adonai* to *Yahweh* and the pronunciation became *Jehovah*. This occurred late on in the 12th century A.D. and was the form followed by later translators of the Bible. The word *Yahweh* comes from the Hebrew “I am” (Ex. 3:14). Moses was the mediator, through whom God spoke. Moses then spoke to the people with God’s message. Moses also acted on behalf of the people before God.

in the Tent of Meeting in the Desert of Sinai

The Tent of Meeting was a canvas type structure and was the place

where God lived amongst his people. God had given Moses special instructions on how the tent was to be constructed and what was to be placed inside it. Until God gave these instructions Moses took a tent and pitched it outside the camp and went there for the Lord to descend in a pillar of cloud to speak to him (Ex. 33:7-11). The Tent of Meeting, fully furnished, was now set up in the camp, but only those appointed could enter. God spoke with Moses in the tabernacle (i.e. Tent of Meeting) instead of calling him to Mount Sinai as before. The book of Numbers continues from where the book of Exodus finishes. The Israelites were camped on Sinai, which we know today as the Sinai Peninsular.

on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt.

We are given the exact date on which this particular meeting took place. The time was precise and ordered. This was not a haphazard meeting. In Exodus 19:1 we are told the date of their arrival at the place where they are now camped. The events of Exodus 19 to 40 have taken place in the short time of less than a year.

He said:

Moses did not make up the instructions. God spoke them to him. These instructions were for Moses to carry out and were specific for the situation at the time. In later years King David tried to do the same task, but without God's direction, and the nation consequently suffered (2 Sam. 24).

Verse 2

“Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one.

A census is the record of everyone at a particular place on a particular day. God identified himself with the whole nation. God is always concerned for individuals and their names were to be recorded. The people were to be recorded in accordance with their clan or family. This signifies order and discipline, a way that the nation could be governed efficiently and for fighting men to be alerted quickly, as national leaders could communicate to everyone through the heads of clans and families. Another purpose of the census was to show how God had kept his promise to Abraham, that his seed would be exceedingly multiplied.

Verse 3

You and Aaron are to number by their divisions all the men in Israel twenty years old or more, who are able to serve in the army.

Moses and his brother Aaron were named as the ones to preside over the counting. Moses was told who was to be counted, only males who

were twenty years old or above and fit to fight. Those physically weak, diseased or handicapped were not to be included. The reason for the census was to build an army.

Verse 4

One man from each tribe, each the head of his family, is to help you.

Moses and Aaron were to be assisted in this task by a man from each of the tribes. In verse 16 they are described as the leaders of the ancestral tribes. Each of these men would be well known in his tribe and he would know the people of his tribe well.

Verse 5

These are the names of the men who are to assist you:

God identified the men who were to help Moses and Aaron in the count. The men were named. All Hebrew names had meaning and these were no exception. From these names we see that God had given gifts to these men to carry out the task and do God's will. Originally, the head of each tribe was one of the sons of Jacob whose names the tribes used. They had all died many years previously, so suitable men had been chosen to follow them as leaders.

from Reuben, Elizur son of Shedur;

From verse 5 to verse 15 God lists the names of those tribal and family leaders who were to assist Moses and Aaron in the census. The pattern of each verse is the same: the name of the tribe is stated, then the man, followed by his father's name.

Verses 5b - 15

<u>Tribe</u>	<u>Leader</u>
Reuben	Elizur
Simeon	Shelumiel
Judah	Nahshon
Issachar	Nethanel
Zebulun	Eliab
Ephraim	Elishama
Manasseh	Gamaliel
Benjamin	Abidan
Dan	Ahiezer
Asher	Pagiel
Gad	Eliasaph
Naphtali	Ahira ..."

Verse 6

These were the men appointed from the community, the leaders of their ancestral tribes. They were the heads of the clans of Israel.

In some translations the men appointed are described as princes of the tribes. Each man chosen was renowned in his tribe. These were eminent men and were recognised for their wisdom, courage and maturity. Such were the men God called to manage the affairs of the Israelite people.

Part two: The results of the count (17-46).

Verses 17-19

Moses and Aaron took these men whose names had been given,¹⁸ and they called the whole community together on the first day of the second month. The people indicated their ancestry by their clans and families, and the men twenty years old or more were listed by name, one by one,¹⁹ as the LORD commanded Moses. And so he counted them in the Desert of Sinai:

The census was begun on the same day as the order was given, the first day of the second month. All the arrangements and preparations for the journey to Canaan were done within twenty days (10:11). Detailed attention was given to the family background. Everyone knew who his relations were and their next of kin. This was important to demonstrate a family's descent from Israel and therefore Abraham. Family identification was necessary because of the laws that God had given to Moses, many of which would function once Canaan was reached and the land divided amongst the nation. See for example Leviticus 25. The census was to record all males who were twenty years or more of age and were fit to fight in battle (1:3). The main exercise was not to count numbers, but to identify each eligible male by name.

Verses 20-21 and 22-43

From the descendants of Reuben the firstborn son of Israel: All the men twenty years old or more who were able to serve in the army were listed by name, one by one, according to the records of their clans and families.²¹ The number from the tribe of Reuben was 46,500.

The pattern of verses 20 and 21 is repeated for all the tribes listed in verses 5 to 15. The only difference is in verses 32 to 35 where mention is made that Ephraim and Manasseh were the sons of Joseph. Each tribe is covered by two verses with the same wording except for the name of the tribe and the number of men. The details are as follows:

<u>Verses</u>	<u>Tribe¹</u>	<u>Number of men</u>
20-21	Reuben	46,500
22-23	Simeon	59,300
24-25	Gad	45,650
26-27	Judah	74,600

<u>Verses</u>	<u>Tribe</u> ¹	<u>Number of men</u> (continued)
28-29	Issachar	54,400
30-31	Zebulun	57,400
32-33	Ephraim	40,500 (son of Joseph)
34-35	Manasseh	32,200 (son of Joseph)
36-37	Benjamin	35,400
38-39	Dan	62,700
40-41	Asher	41,500
42-43	Naphtali	53,400

Our natural tendency is to be put off by passages full of names and statistics. The Bible includes them for a purpose, to provide valuable information that reinforces biblical truth. Some tribes had more soldiers than others. Judah numbered 74,600 and Manasseh only 32,200. It was from this tribe of Judah that the Messiah, Jesus, came. God honoured the tribe with its increase. The combination of Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph, nearly matched that of Judah. Jacob had looked upon his two grandsons as if they were his sons and they were included in the inheritance of the promised land (Gen. 48:5). Every tribe was accounted for by applying the same rules and method, though there were many involved in the task. In the same way today there are many preachers of the gospel, speaking in different languages and cultural settings, yet it is the same message dealing with the same human problem.

Verses 44-46

These were the men counted by Moses and Aaron and the twelve leaders of Israel, each one representing his family. ⁴⁵ All the Israelites twenty years old or more who were able to serve in Israel's army were counted according to their families. ⁴⁶ The total number was 603,550.

The task of counting was done in the way that God had instructed Moses. It was a huge undertaking that required organisation and discipline. It was thorough and no one was left out. This is where the leaders of the tribes were so necessary in helping Moses and Aaron. All males who were fit to fight in the army were recorded. Their totals

¹ The tribe of Levi was not included in this census. God had a specific purpose for this tribe, described in verses 47 to 53. The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were half tribes descended from Joseph. The twelve tribes listed for the census were the ones who would be allocated land in Canaan. These descended from eleven of Jacob's sons. The Levites were the direct descendants of Jacob's son, Levi, so each of the twelve sons of Jacob fathered a tribe. In the case of Joseph two tribes came from him. Technically, there were thirteen tribes, twelve who occupied land and one without land who served God by looking after the tabernacle.

came to 603,550. Based on this count, it is estimated that the total number of people must have exceeded two million.²

Part three: Special responsibilities (47-53)

Verses 47-49

The families of the tribe of Levi, however, were not counted along with the others. ⁴⁸ The LORD had said to Moses: ⁴⁹ “You must not count the tribe of Levi or include them in the census of the other Israelites.

In the instruction God gave Moses to count the fighting men, one tribe was left out, that of Levi. They were not to be counted at all. The census then was not to account for the whole group of people in the desert. The purpose of the census was clear, to establish the military size of Israel in readiness for claiming the promised land. God's instructions are to be followed accurately. Failure to do this can have serious consequences. The Bible normally gives us reasons why God requires us to do or not to do things. We will now see why the Levites were left out of the census.

Verse 50

Instead, appoint the Levites to be in charge of the tabernacle of the Testimony - over all its furnishings and everything belonging to it.

The tribe of Levi was not numbered with the others, but set apart for the ministry of the tabernacle of the Testimony. The tabernacle was a tented meeting place. It was constructed in accordance with the detailed instruction God gave to Moses (see Exodus 36-40). It was the place where God would dwell amongst the people. God's presence was marked by a pillar of cloud above the tent. Inside the furnishing was arranged as God commanded. It included the Holy of Holies, where no one but the chief priest could enter once a year to seek God's forgiveness for the sins of the people. Aaron was appointed by God to be the first chief priest. It was to stay in the family line. Aaron was from the tribe of Levi and therefore the tribe was to be set aside to look after the tabernacle and supply the priests.

² This number has caused many to doubt these events as being historically true. The desert could not support that number of people. That is true and it therefore shows the miraculous way in which God sustained so many people in such harsh conditions for so many years. As we work through our studies in Numbers we will see how much the Israelites complained about the conditions. The people had to trust God every day for their survival. This is a difficult thing for all human beings, even Christian believers, because people like to be in charge of their own lives and do not always want to trust God all day and every day.

They are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings; they are to take care of it and encamp around it.

The tabernacle was more than a simple tent. It was extensive with wooden frames and large sections of curtain. A lot of material was used for the furnishings inside. The reason why the tabernacle was a tent was because it needed to be packed up and transported, to move around with the people on their journey. It was the Levites' role to pack, carry and set up the tabernacle every time the Israelites moved. Once set up the tribe was to camp around the tent.

Verse 51

Whenever the tabernacle is to move, the Levites are to take it down, and whenever the tabernacle is to be set up, the Levites shall do it. Anyone else who goes near it shall be put to death.

The Levites' role of service in the tabernacle needed special skill and training, for when the tabernacle moved around the desert they took it down and re-erected it. So serious was this employment that if anyone else tried to do it they would be put to death.

Verse 52

The Israelites are to set up their tents by divisions, each man in his own camp under his own standard.

Order and discipline are important in any society, and here we see God setting out clearly the way they were to live.

Verse 53

The Levites, however, are to set up their tents around the tabernacle of the Testimony so that wrath will not fall on the Israelite community.

We are given the reason why the Levites had to encamp around the tabernacle. Having warned the Israelites about the danger of someone other than the Levites looking after the tabernacle, God took the practical step of placing a barrier to make the breaking of this command more difficult. The physical presence of the Levites camped around the tabernacle was a visual reminder to the rest of the nation of not coming near the tabernacle. This after all was where God was and a separation of a holy God from sinful people had to be maintained. Failure to recognise this would bring about God's anger. God was being merciful to the people by guarding that which could lead to destruction.

The Levites are to be responsible for the care of the tabernacle of the Testimony."

God's way is made abundantly clear. No one outside the tribe of Levi is to have anything to do with the care of the tabernacle.

Part four: Obedience

Verse 54

The Israelites did all this just as the LORD commanded Moses.

Obedience is the proof of commitment and loyalty. The Israelites confirmed they belonged to God by doing what he told them to do.



Summary

The opening chapter of Numbers teaches us that the people needed to be assured God was with them. They had been in captivity for many years and freedom would have been difficult to understand. They had been camped in this one place for nearly a year during which time they had received important instructions through detailed laws and regulations. The time had come for the nation to move on their journey towards the promised land. They would need to conquer the land and fight many battles. So God numbered their fighting men to show his care for them, how they would be protected with an army. But one tribe was not involved in the army. Instead it was set apart to care for the tabernacle of the Testimony. Its task would be to pack the tabernacle, carry it and set it up as the nation journeyed. From that tribe came the priests who would mediate between the people and God. The Levites were to serve God in the Tent of Meeting and protect the people from disobedience and straying too near for fear of angering God and bringing death upon the disobedient. The people obeyed God's commands.



Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes

How should we, who live in the twenty-first century, read the book of Numbers? The apostle Paul, in writing to the Corinthian Christians, quoted from the book of Numbers as a warning. In 1 Corinthians chapter 10 Paul sets out the situation of the Israelites in their desert wanderings. Paul writes that these things occurred as examples to keep Christian believers from setting their hearts upon evil things (1 Co. 10:6). Paul repeats the warning in verse 11. Numbers, as other Old Testament books, is not just in the Bible as an historical record. It is

there to help us understand God's ways and to learn from the mistakes of a past generation.

Moses was instructed to take a census of all the men fit for fighting in the army. It was to be an accurate count, not a guess at rough figures. The detailed arrangements for carrying out the census ensured that nobody was left out. We are not required to carry out a census of all Christian believers in the world. God knows every believer and their names are written down (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5, 21:27). Counting and recording shows God's love and sovereignty. He identifies those whom he has chosen in electing love. The census had an organisational purpose that led to future blessing. In the same way all those whose names are recorded in heaven are part of the church, organised to bring about blessings now and in the future. The witness of the church in proclaiming the gospel brings about these blessings. The power of the gospel (not the church) results in the Kingdom of God claiming the territory of the kingdom of darkness. This is not a territorial conquering, but that of rescuing souls.

The tribe of Levi was separate, dedicated to the service and worship of God in the tabernacle of Testimony. They guarded the people from irreverence and entering the holy place where God dwelt. Christ too appoints those in the church who will be dedicated to guard the people from going upon a path that leads to destruction. They act as shepherds to the flock and give themselves to prayer and the ministry of God's Word (Acts 6:4). Such shepherds (pastors, elders, bishops, overseers etc.) do not come from a particular family or tribal lineage; they are appointed by Christ (Eph. 4:11). Their appointment comes about because the local church community recognises their gifts and qualities as set out in God's Word (1 Tim. 3:1-11; Titus 1:5-9).

The Israelites did all that the Lord commanded Moses. They began well but sadly did not continue in that same spirit. Obedience is a vital feature of God's community. Obedience is what distinguishes a genuine Christian life (John 14:15, 23). For the Christian obedience to Christ's great command to love is the defining characteristic. Christ is our perfect example of obedience as he came to Bethlehem from heaven, went to Calvary and then returned to heaven.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme : Christian believers are part of God's community

1. God's people are a privileged community (verse 1)

Two ways in which God has blessed his people

(a) God speaks and God saves.

(b) God's people have his revelation and are rescued.

Both are essential for a community if they are to be privileged and blessed.

They can only find real truth if it is revealed by the God of truth. Knowing the truth is not enough. No human community has knowledge and power to rescue itself. It is only when God acts in redeeming power like he did in Egypt that his people are delivered. God acted in this same redeeming power when Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead. It is only through this power that we can have any hope of true rescue.

2. God's people are a human community (verses 2-46)

(a) God's community is interdependent (verse 4)

Moses could not number all the fighting men by himself and needed help. We need one another – we are the parts in the body of Christ (1 Co. 12).

(b) God's community consists of individuals (verses 2 and 18).

Every eligible man was listed by name, one by one.

God's people are all known individually.

Christ says, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (John 10:14).

(c) God's community is vulnerable

In Numbers 26 a second census is taken. Only two people from the first list are found in the second census. The first census became a list of doubters, grumblers and rebels. They did not believe in the God who speaks and saves. They died in the wilderness.

There is no Christian discipleship without discipline. Jesus promises the same hatred from the world that he endured. We must persevere and overcome through faith in Christ, who is greater than the world.

3. God's people are a worshipping community (verses 47-54)

(a) Worship stresses the uniqueness of God

The Levites were set apart for this task to guard the people from straying into where God dwelt. God is holy; he will not tolerate uncleanness or sinfulness.

(b) Worship stresses the nearness of God

Right in the centre of the camp the tabernacle reminded the people that God was living amongst them.

God was therefore in the centre of the camp but was at a distance from their tents, showing the respect we must have for him. Our approach to worship must bear in mind these two principles, the nearness of God and his holiness (separation). Through Christ we have closeness and access to God, as Christ turned God's anger from our sin at Calvary and Christ's Spirit now dwells within us.

Note: There is a lot of material in the above suggestion to preach on. The material could be split over more than one sermon, or be compacted into one sermon to cover the whole chapter. If one sermon, then take care not to put in too much detail, but give the important points with their applications.



Focus Point:

Christian warfare

The theme of the first chapter of Numbers is taking a census to establish the number of fighting men for the battles that lay ahead to conquer and enter the promised land. The application of the chapter to our New Testament era is that all those who are numbered and recorded in heaven's book of life are also engaged in warfare. It involves all who are numbered, every Christian. The Christian life is a war, not against human beings, but against Satan and his followers. It is therefore wise for Christians to know their enemy, like the men chosen to be soldiers in the verses of our study. Anyone opposing God's commands was an enemy to them, and so it is with us today.

Who are our enemies?

i. **The world.** *"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures"* (James 4:1-3). See also 1 John 2:15-17.

ii. **Our own sinful nature.** *"Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the*

rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry” (1 Pet. 4:1-3). See Galatians 5:19-21 for the use of the phrase “sinful nature”.

iii. **Satan.** “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

iv. **Many other invisible foes.** “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12).

How can we overcome them?

(a) **By using God’s Word.** “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17).

(b) **By wearing God’s armour.** “Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (Eph. 6:11).

(c) **By exercising (using) our faith.** “. . .for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God” (1 John 5:4,5).

How then should we live as good soldiers of Jesus Christ?

By praying. “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Eph. 6:18).

By denying ourselves. “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Co. 9:25-27).

By enduring difficulties. “Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory” (2 Tim. 2:3,10).

By being self-controlled. “So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled” (1 Thess. 5:6).

By being alert. “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong” (1 Co. 16:13).

Avoid getting involved with worldly things. “No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer” (2 Tim. 2:4).



Over to you

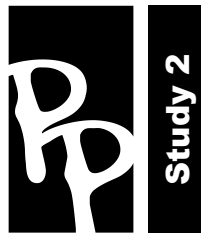
Will this be the first time that your people will hear a sermon from the book of Numbers? If so, how much background will you need to consider to set the passage into its biblical context? What would be the main points you would want to get over?

Consider how you will deal with the application of the census. We have discussed names being recorded and the preparation for spiritual warfare. How could the spiritual warfare to which we are called to fight be misunderstood in your society?

Are the two principles of God's being present and yet separated from uncleanness and sinfulness expressed in your times of worship? If not, what would need to change?

GETTING READY:

THE CAMP ON THE MOVE



Numbers 2:1-34

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes
- 📁 A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: The tribes of Israel
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

Chapter 1 covered God's preparation of the Israelite nation for moving on in their journey to the promised land. God did this by giving instructions on how all the fighting men were to be counted. One tribe, Levi, was not included in the census. This tribe was to take care of the Tent of Meeting. Having had their fighting men counted the tribes needed to be organised. God's care over his people was paramount, so now they are to be taught about God's presence among the tribes. The background to what is taking place is that the Israelites had been in captivity for a long time and they would have felt vulnerable and frightened in the barren desert where they now were.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron:

The instructions on how the tribes were to organise themselves were given by God to both Moses and Aaron. Moses had told God, at the time

when God appeared before him in the burning bush, that he was not a speaker and not suitable for the task God was giving him. God rebuked Moses for underestimating the power of God. Even so, God told Moses to use his brother Aaron, who could speak well. Moses was to speak to Aaron and Aaron would be the public speaker (Ex. 4:13-16).

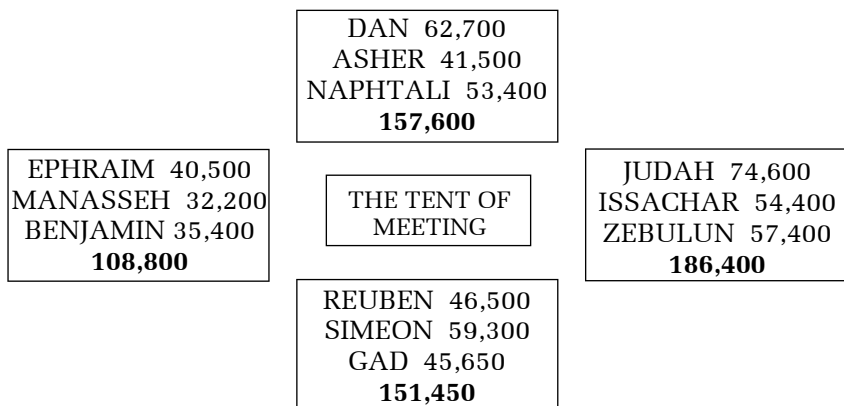
Verse 2

“The Israelites are to camp around the Tent of Meeting some distance from it, each man under his standard with the banners of his family.”

The Tent of Meeting, cared for by the Levites, was situated in the middle of the camp, with all the tents of the various tribes pitched in a large circle around it. There was a gap set by God between the Tent of Meeting and the other tents to make sure no one accidentally strayed into the Levites’ area. The penalty for such an offence was death (1:51). The picture is one of reverence. Each tribe (the family and all the descendants) had to be together with their relatives displaying the flag of their clan. There was to be order and discipline, which could be readily seen by the distinguishing tribal flags and family banners.

Layout of the camp and where each tribe was to be situated.

Verses 3 to 31 give detailed instruction of how the Israelite camp was to be arranged and in what order they were to journey. In the centre was the Tent of Meeting (verse 2). Then the twelve tribes were to be arranged in four groups of three, to the east, south, west and north of the Tent of Meeting. (See diagram below.) Within each group of three one tribe was to lead the other two when they were travelling.



Group 1: On the east side of the Tent of Meeting

Verse 3

On the east, towards the sunrise, the divisions of the camp of Judah are to encamp under their standard. The leader of the people of Judah is Nahshon son of Amminadab.

Nothing is left to opinion or preference in the organisation of the tribes. Their places are clearly defined by God, starting with Judah. Later history shows Judah's successors were faithful to Jehovah and the record in Chronicles details Judah's attempt to follow the Lord when all the other tribes had defected to idolatry. Judah was Jacob's fourth son by his wife Leah (Gen. 29:35). God also confirmed the leader of the tribe. It is the same man who was charged in helping to count the fighting men (1:7).

Verse 4

His division numbers 74,600.

This was the number of fighting men that were counted in the census (1:27).

Verses 5-8

These verses follow the same pattern as verses 3 and 4, except for the detail relating to the tribe, leader and number of men.

Verse	Tribe	Leader	Number
5	Issachar	Nethanel son of Zuar	
6			54,400
7	Zebulun	Eliab son of Helon	
8			57,400

Verse 9

All the men assigned to the camp of Judah, according to their divisions, number 186,400. They will set out first.

This first group is now assembled on the east side of the Tent of Meeting, all close relatives headed by the elder brother Judah. Notice God's wisdom in the way the tribes were assembled. Judah, Issachar and Zebulun were the youngest sons of Leah, Jacob's first wife. Judah was the oldest of the three and Issachar and Zebulun were willing to be under his leadership. These people were to go through stressful times in the near future, and strife between them would have been disastrous in the wild country ahead.

Group 2: On the south side of the Tent of Meeting

Verse 10

On the south will be the divisions of the camp of Reuben under their standard. The leader of the people of Reuben is Elizur son of She-deur.

Reuben, another of Leah's children, heads the second group of people. Reuben was Leah's first son and was kind to Joseph when his brothers would have killed their younger brother (Gen. 37:21).

Verse 11

His division numbers 46,500.

The number of men agrees with the census count (1:21).

Verses 12-15

Verse	Tribe	Leader	Number
12	Simeon	Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai	
13			59,300
14	Gad	Eliasaph son of Deuel	
15			45,650

Verse 16

All the men assigned to the camp of Reuben, according to their divisions, number 151,450. They will set out second.

The second group is now assembled under the leadership of Reuben. Simeon is under Reuben's leadership as is Gad. Gad is the son of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid. Leah could not have any more children and she gave her maid to Jacob as a surrogate mother (Gen. 30:9-10). Gad was placed in this group to take the place of the tribe of Levi, who had the responsibility of looking after the Tent of Meeting.

The Tent of Meeting (tabernacle) is positioned in the middle of the camp

Verse 17

Then the Tent of Meeting and the camp of the Levites will set out in the middle of the camps. They will set out in the same order as they encamp, each in his own place under his standard.

The Levites with the Tent of Meeting were situated in the centre of the camp surrounded by the other tribes and also in the middle when they were on the move. They were to defend the sanctuary (the tent where God lived amongst them) and the other tribes were to protect them from

outsiders (hence the numbering of the fighting men). When on the move the Levites and the Tent of Meeting follow behind the first two groups. The Tent of Meeting, or tabernacle, was a portable tent used by the Israelites for worship. God gave Moses the instructions for its construction on Mount Sinai for use during the journey to the promised land (Ex. 26).

Group 3: The west side of the Tent of Meeting.

Verse 18

On the west will be the divisions of the camp of Ephraim under their standard. The leader of the people of Ephraim is Elishama son of Ammihud.

Ephraim was the grandson of Jacob, being the second son of Joseph. He had an Egyptian mother, and this mixed nation background could have caused difficulties. It is interesting to note that the man chosen to represent this tribe was Elishama, which means “a listener to God”. A good listener would have been particularly important for the tribe of Ephraim.

Verse 19

His division numbers 40,500.

See 1:33

Verses 20-23

Verse	Tribe	Leader	Number
20	Manasseh	Gamaliel son of Pedahzur	
21			32,200
22	Benjamin	Abidan son of Gideoni	
23			35,400

Verse 24

All the men assigned to the camp of Ephraim, according to their divisions, number 108,100. They will set out third.

Ephraim was the leader of this group, being Joseph’s son who Jacob blessed, and would thereby command the greater respect. These three tribes travelled on the west side of the Tent of Meeting. All three, Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin were through Rachel, Jacob’s real love. We see the great wisdom in the way the groups were organised. In moving out of camp, they would be the third protecting group, but would move after the Levites with the packed Tent of Meeting.

Group 4: The north side of the Tent of Meeting

Verse 25

On the north will be the divisions of the camp of Dan, under their standard. The leader of the people of Dan is Ahiezer son of Amishaddai.

On the north side of the camp three more tribes were to gather, the first one being Dan. Dan was the eldest son of Bilhah, Rachel's maid, and he was designated leader of this group. In God's wisdom Dan's lineage was not a deterrent to his being given a distinctive role in the fulfilment of God's will and purpose.

Verse 26

His division numbers 62,700.

See 1:39.

Verses 27-30

Verse	Tribe	Leader	Number
27	Asher	Pagiel son of Ocran	
28			41,500
29	Naphtali	Ahira son of Enan	
30			53,400

Verse 31

All the men assigned to the camp of Dan number 157,600. They will set out last, under their standards.

This last group consisted of tribes all of whom descended from the handmaids of either Rachel or Leah. They would set out after the other three. So the organization was complete.

Verse 32

These are the Israelites, counted according to their families. All those in the camps, by their divisions, number 603,550.

We are reminded of the total number, which made up the Israelites at this time – 603,550. Added to this would have been the women and children who were not included in the census. It is thought the total, including women and children, was about 2,000,000. The leading group led by Judah was the largest with 186,400. The group bringing up the rear, led by Dan, was the second largest, 157,600. The division of the Israelites under God's direction reflected defensive strategy at the same time as wise mixing of the tribes with appointed leadership. Had these arrangements been left to the Israelites to sort out, there would have been much argument and disagreement.

Verse 33

The Levites, however, were not counted along with the other Israelites, as the LORD commanded Moses.

The total figure of 603,550 fighting men did not include the Levites. They were separated to serve God continuously and minister to the people. They were to take care of the Tent of Meeting and to conduct all the ceremonies and sacrifices.

Verse 34

So the Israelites did everything the LORD commanded Moses; that is the way they encamped under their standards, and that is the way they set out, each with his clan and family.

All God's words were obeyed, and the Israelites camped and marched in the way God prescribed. They did this without murmuring or disputing. Everyone knew what they had to do and where their place was when they camped or journeyed. Whether they were camped, packing up to get ready to move, marching, or setting up camp – it all must have been an incredible sight to see. It would have impressed other nations as they saw for themselves or heard from others (Josh. 2:10-11).



Summary

At first reading, Numbers chapter 2 may appear to be a mundane list of statistics that do not have much relevance. The opening words of verse 1 should alert us to the fact that this chapter has important things for us to notice, for we read, "The LORD said ...". Revealed in this chapter is God's master plan to bring salvation and good for his people. That plan affects Christians living today. Two million people were on the move. They had been rescued from captivity in Egypt and were destined for the land promised by God to their forefather Abraham. The Israelites had to negotiate harsh desert conditions and deal with those who opposed them. They would have to conquer the land promised to them. The Israelites were to organize themselves in accordance with the instructions God gave to Moses and Aaron. There were to be four groups of three tribes, with each group camped always on the same side of the Tent of Meeting. Each group of three tribes was to be led by the tribe appointed by God. When they journeyed, they were to keep to the order given by God. In the whole set-up the Levites with the Tent of Meeting were to be in the

Summary continued on page 26

Summary continued from page 25

centre. The Tent signified God's presence amongst them. The way the tribes were grouped and leaders appointed showed great wisdom and purpose. The total number of fighting men came to 603,550. This figure did not include the tribe of Levi. All the Israelites readily agreed to follow the instructions.



Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes

The Israelites were on a journey from captivity in Egypt to the land promised by God. In Numbers chapter 2 God gave instructions on how the tribes were to set up camp and how to move. There had to be order, organisation and discipline. Everyone had to know their rôle and place and needed to keep to it.

The New Testament teaches that Christians are in the world but not of it. They are referred to as aliens and strangers (Heb. 11:13). Christians too are on a journey. They have left the captivity of their former life, which was under the control of Satan. The Christian believer, his life now transformed and serving Jesus Christ, is heading for the kingdom of heaven. He looks upon his new life as journeying through this present world. He is not alone, but is part of a large army made up of people who have also become Christians by having their lives changed in the same way. When a person puts their trust in Jesus Christ and is saved from their sin, they become part of the church of Jesus Christ. The church began with a small group of people but is today made up of millions. The God who gave clear instructions to the Israelites for their journey gives clear instructions for the New Testament church (church of Jesus Christ) in its journey. The same principles of order and organisation are applied to the New Testament church as they were applied to the Israelite nation on the move.

The picture of the Tent of Meeting in the middle of the camp illustrates the central part it played in the life of the Israelites. So Christ should be the centre of the Christian's life, and it is to Christ we look for help and guidance (Heb. 12:2). The church to which every Christian belongs is sometimes likened to the human body, which helps us understand the relationship between Christians and Christ. The head is that part of

our body which controls the way we do things and the way we think. Jesus Christ is the Head of the church, ruling over the church as its leader and supporter.

As the Israelites had their places around the Tent of Meeting and among the tribes, so we have our place in the local church. Every member of the church has a part to play; no one is indispensable and no one can do everything by himself or herself. No one is without a part to play. According to the illustration of the church as a body, everyone in the church works together. The body looks to the head for direction and instruction. By Christian believers focusing on Christ as the Head rather than themselves, the whole body is joined and held together as each part does its work. The Lord assigned each tribe a place in the camp and when they were on the journey. This was to make sure that they did not fight and disagree among themselves and to make sure that they worked harmoniously together. The tribes and their families in their appointed locations marked by banners show us the disciplined order of Christ's church.

The Levites were not included in the census of fighting men, as they were to serve the Tent of Meeting. The Levites were not apportioned any land when they finally reached Canaan. They were set aside by God to serve him and the people. This ministry would require their full-time commitment, leaving no time to produce food. The Levites were to be supported by the other tribes through the tithes the tribes brought to the temple. The same principle applies to the New Testament church, where Christ appoints some to be pastors, teachers and evangelists to build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12). These workers are to devote themselves to this task and the congregation of the local church is to support them through the tithes and offerings they bring.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme: Marching forward, working together with God present at the centre

1. Introduction

Numbers chapter 2 may appear like a list that would only benefit people with specialist interests. The verses may suggest a mundane and now irrelevant record of troop movements for a battle long since forgotten. The opening verse tells us that this is a chapter we must take note of, for

the Lord spoke. We are taken to another level; we are shown a vital truth: behind this mundane list of troops there is a mastermind! God has organised his people according to a master plan!

2. Marching forward

A camp is mobile. All the organisation was so that God's people could move. God did not build a housing estate, but rather a mobile camp. This camp was organised for a single purpose: to penetrate and conquer the promised land. God wants his people to march forward. It has always been God's desire for his people (now the church) to move forward in every area of life.

- a) Individually:** he wants us all to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to add to our faith, to grow in holiness, to conquer and tread down new sins and new obstacles.
- b) Corporately:** God wants us as fellowships to grow in our collective zeal for prayer, holiness, evangelism and above all, God's glory. We are pilgrims and God wants us to march forward.

This has a number of vital implications for us!

- (i) In the world God wants us to penetrate and cast down those who stand against God and his Messiah. This is not through physical warfare but spiritual warfare. God expects us to engage in prolonged sessions of prayer.
- (ii) In our relationship with the world God wants us to hold on to the things of this world very lightly. Do not put down roots in this world. Do not cling to the pleasures this world can bring.

3. Working together

God's masterful mind is at work. He arranges all the tribes to his own perfect plan. A thoughtful study of the camp reveals many lessons. The 12 tribes were split into 4 sections, each of 3 tribes.

- 1 tribe led each section. Judah led the first, Reuben the second and so on.
- Normally the leading tribe was the largest of each section
- The front and rear sections were the two largest, a good military strategy if they were attacked.
- In the centre of the camp and between sections 2 and 3, when they marched, was the Tent of Meeting cared for by the Levites. Again, good strategy – the special members (Levites and the tent and all its furnishings and equipment) were protected.

The lesson: Everyone is in their proper place!

Our sovereign God, in his wisdom puts us exactly where he wants us, for our greatest good and his highest glory. God makes no mistakes.

4. God calls us to march together

The people of God are to march forward together with the Ark of the Covenant and the Tent of Meeting in their midst:

- The ARK: containing the Word of God's commandments.
- The TENT OF MEETING: a visible symbol of God's presence.

These two vital elements are needed if God's people are to be victorious. When the church is directed in all its thinking, attitudes and sacrificial service by the Word of God and when the church has the presence of the Holy Spirit in quickening power, it will advance purposefully.

We have greater power available to us. We have the completed canon of Scripture – which cannot be broken. The promises in God's Word that we have today are greater than they had in the desert. We have the Holy Spirit in us. We must then carefully tend this relationship. Take care not to offend him, for he will work best in holy channels.

5. Conclusion

The same principles that drove Israel forward around 3,500 years ago still work today.



Focus Point:

The tribes of Israel

The tribe of Judah is spoken about in various places in the Bible. In Genesis 49:10 there is a prophecy, which says, *“The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.”* The sceptre is a reference to authority and looks forward to the time when the Messiah (Jesus Christ) would descend (that is be born) from this tribe. Later they were commissioned by God to lead the attack into the promised land (Judg. 1:1-21) *“After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the LORD, ‘Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?’ The LORD answered, ‘Judah is to go; I have given the land into their hands.’”* It was Judah's tribe that anointed David as King (2 Sam. 2:1-11) They were loyal to the house of David at the time when the 10 tribes revolted (1 Kings 12:20).

The tribe of Issachar. Jacob said of this son, *“Issachar is a rawboned (strong) donkey lying down between two saddlebags (or camp fires). When he sees how good is his resting place and how pleasant is his land, he will bend his shoulder to the burden and submit to forced labour”* (Gen. 49:14,15).

The tribe of Zebulun. Jacob said of Zebulun, “Zebulun will live by the seashore and become a haven for ships; his border will extend toward Sidon” (Gen. 49:13). In the New Testament there is a reference to Zebulun, and our Lord walked on the very place where this tribe settled. “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people living in darkness have seen a great light” (Matt. 4:15).

The tribe of Reuben. Jacob spoke about his firstborn like this, “Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honour, excelling in power. Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel, for you went up onto your father’s bed, onto my couch and defiled it” (Gen. 49:3,4). They assisted the other tribes in conquest of the region west of the Jordan (Josh. 1:12-18, 22:1-6). They united with the other tribes in building a monument (probably a heap of stones) to signify the unity of the tribes on the east of the Jordan with the tribes on the west of the river. The monument was misunderstood; however explanation and reconciliation is explained in Joshua 22:10-34.

The tribe of Simeon. Jacob’s words about Simeon are, “Simeon and Levi are brothers— their swords are weapons of violence. Let me not enter their council, let me not join their assembly, for they have killed men in their anger and hamstrung oxen as they pleased. Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel” (Gen. 49:5-7). When the tribes crossed the Jordan, Simeon was chosen with others to pronounce the blessing (Deut. 27:12). Later they joined with the people of Judah and Benjamin in the renewal of the Passover (2 Chron. 15:1-15).

The tribe of Gad. Jacob said of his seventh son, “Gad will be attacked by a band of raiders, but he will attack them at their heels” (Gen. 49:19). Later on they erected a monument (pile of stones) to show the unity of the tribes east of the Jordan with the tribes west of the river (Josh. 22:10-14). Disaffected toward Saul as king, they joined the group of unhappy Israelites under David in the wilderness of Hebron (1 Chron. 12:8-15, 12:37-38).

The tribe of Ephraim. Although Ephraim was the younger brother he received his grandfather Jacob’s blessing. “Joseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right toward Israel’s left hand and Manasseh on his left toward Israel’s right hand, and brought them close to him. But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim’s head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh’s head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn” (Gen. 48:13,14). They

did not dislodge the Canaanites living in Gezer as God said they should, and disagreed with both Gideon and Jephthah (Judg. 8 and 12). But they did join with others in reinstituting the Passover (2 Chron. 30:18). Sadly they worshipped Baal. *“When Ephraim spoke, men trembled; he was exalted in Israel. But he became guilty of Baal worship and died”* (Hos. 13:1).

The tribe of Manasseh. Along with Ephraim’s tribe Manasseh replaced the tribes of Joseph and Levi. When the allocation of land was made, Manasseh divided so that half lived on the east of Jordan with Gad and Reuben. It was with these two tribes that the monument (pile of stones) was erected which caused concern in the camp (Josh. 22).

The tribe of Benjamin. *“Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he devours the prey, in the evening he divides the plunder,”* said his father Jacob. Despite the command of God *“The Benjamites, however, failed to dislodge the Jebusites, who were living in Jerusalem; to this day the Jebusites live there with the Benjamites”* (Judg. 1:21). They joined Deborah in the war against Sisera (Judg. 5:14) and were invaded by the Ammonites (Judg. 10:9). They did not avenge the crime of the Gibeonites against the Levite’s concubine (Judg. 19-20). Saul, the first king of Israel, came from the tribe of Benjamin (1 Sam 10:20-21).

The tribe of Dan. *“Dan will provide justice for his people as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan will be a serpent by the roadside, a viper along the path, that bites the horse’s heels so that its rider tumbles backward”* (Gen. 49:16,17). Deborah, one of the leaders in Israel, accused Dan of cowardice. *“Dan, why did he linger by the ships?”* (Judg. 5:17). Later on this tribe descended into idolatry (Judg. 18).

The tribe of Asher. Jacob said that, *“Asher’s food will be rich; he will provide delicacies fit for a king”* (Gen. 49:20). Deborah, a leader in the time of the Judges, also criticized Asher when she said, *“Asher remained on the coast and stayed in his coves”* (Judg. 5:17). Hezekiah invited all the tribes to Jerusalem to submit to the Lord, but many refused. The people scorned and ridiculed the king’s messengers. Nevertheless, some men of Asher, Manasseh and Zebulun humbled themselves and went to Jerusalem (2 Chr. 30).

The tribe of Naphtali. *“Naphtali is a doe set free that bears beautiful fawns,”* said Jacob in his blessing (Gen. 49:21). The people defeated Sisera (Judg. 4:6, 4:10, 5:18) and later followed Gideon (Judg. 6:35, 7:23).



Over to you

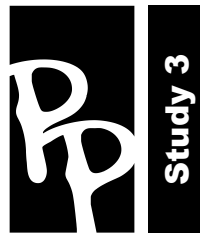
How does this chapter help you in your present situation? Does it have any relevance?

Is your church organised for the spiritual warfare in your locality? If not, what needs to be done?

Do you know the direction in which your local church is going? Is this reflected in the prayer life of the church?

ONLY THE LEVITES

AND NO ONE ELSE



Numbers 3:1-51

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 Study outline
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes
- 📁 A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: Redemption, Redeemer
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

In the first two chapters of Numbers we discovered God cares for his people and is always with them. Now the journeying Israelites need to be reminded that to serve God they must do what he says. Isolated in the desert it would have been easy to drift into bad practices thinking no one was looking at them. However, God is always there, not just to look after them, but also to be worshipped.



Study outline

Three subjects are taught throughout the chapter of our present study, which illustrate the need to follow God's way.

- a. **It is God who chooses people for service.** God called the family of Aaron to be priests and any one else trying to do that work was a fake, not a real priest (verses 1-13).

- b. **To be called a priest meant Aaron's family had special tasks within the Tent of Meeting.** Unauthorised persons serving in this way were in danger of losing their lives (verses 14-39).
- c. **God decided how the responsibilities given to the priests were to be worked out.** They were not allowed to do things their way (verses 40-51).

What these verses mean

Part 1: The Lord's choice (verses 1-13)

Verse 1

This is the account of the family of Aaron and Moses at the time the LORD talked with Moses on Mount Sinai.

Aaron's family, chosen to be ministers of their day (priests), needed to be instructed in the important rôle given to them. Moses and Aaron were brothers, great-grandsons of Levi. Levi was born to Jacob by his wife Leah (Gen. 29:34), and died in Egypt (Ex. 6:16) aged 137 years. Through Levi's son Kohath Amram was born, who had two sons, Moses and Aaron by Jochebed (Ex. 6:16-20). The family of Aaron, as it existed at the time Moses was with the Lord on Mount Sinai, is described in the following three verses.

Verse 2

The names of the sons of Aaron were Nadab the firstborn and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar.

Aaron had four sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. These would be the natural descendants in the Aaronic order.

Verse 3

Those were the names of Aaron's sons, the anointed priests, who were ordained to serve as priests.

These four named sons were all ordained as priests to serve the Lord. The instructions given to Moses to anoint and ordain Aaron's sons have been carried out (Ex. 28:41).

Verse 4

Nadab and Abihu, however, fell dead before the LORD when they made an offering with unauthorised fire before him in the Desert of Sinai.

Of the four sons two were not alive. We are reminded of the sad incident when Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized fire to God and were punished with death there and then (Lev. 10:1-5). They had taken their father's censer (fire bowl) and put fire into it. At this time they were not allowed to do that, so God punished them.

They had no sons; so only Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests during the lifetime of their father Aaron.

Nadab and Abihu had no sons of their own, so the two younger brothers, Eleazar and Ithamar, took their place, serving while Aaron lived.

Verse 5

The LORD said to Moses,

Having briefly explained the background, the Lord now gives Moses the details of the priesthood for the tribe of Levi.

Verse 6

“Bring the tribe of Levi and present them to Aaron the priest to assist him.

The tribe of Levi, separated from the Israelites, shows that God decided the work of the Tent of Meeting. Moses was not given an option as to who would assist Aaron’s family. God had already chosen the Levites to assist Aaron in these duties.

Verse 7

They are to perform duties for him and for the whole community at the Tent of Meeting by doing the work of the tabernacle.

The Levites not only served the Lord in the Tent of Meeting, but the whole community. Perform the duties means attending to the needs. The word “tabernacle” that is used means the Tent of Meeting. The work the Levites were to do would be in the outer courts and the main chamber of the tent. They could not go into the inner part (holy of holies or inner sanctuary) and perform sacrifices. They assisted by bringing the animal sacrifices from the people to the priest and helped in the killing of them. They would have ensured that inappropriate persons were kept out of the tent.

Verse 8

They are to take care of all the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting, fulfilling the obligations of the Israelites by doing the work of the tabernacle.

God gave clear instructions to his people and now these Levites were to fulfil their obligations on behalf of and for the people. They were to take care of all the instruments and furnishings, that nothing would be lost or damaged, especially when they were on the move.

Verse 9

Give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are the Israelites who are to be given wholly to him.

In being given wholly to Aaron it showed they were totally committed to the service of the Lord. They were entirely given to assist the priests;

no one in the tribe was exempted. The priests did not pay for them; they were given as free gifts for the service of God. They were to be maintained by the tithes of the other tribes.

Verse 10

Appoint Aaron and his sons to serve as priests; anyone else who approaches the sanctuary must be put to death.

This verse confirms the separation of the priests from the people. If anyone else tried to do their work, they would be put to death. God is the authority in the Israelite camp as he is in the church. As priests they had access to where no one else was permitted to go and they were to devote themselves to their task. They had the rest of the Levite tribe to assist them and therefore were not to be diverted into other work.

Verse 11

The LORD also said to Moses,

There was more to the service of the Levites than doing their duty. A new principle is revealed in the verses to come.

Verse 12

"I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine, God had separated the Levites from the other tribes and set them apart for the service in the Tent of Meeting. God did this in his own will and pleasure. The Levites represented the people before God. A Levite stood in the place of the elder son of each family camped in the desert. God took the Levites as substitutes for the elder sons.

Verse 13

for all the firstborn are mine.

God made a special claim for the firstborn. All creatures are his, but the firstborn are very important to him for the following reason.

When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether man or animal. They are to be mine.

When God destroyed the firstborn of the Egyptians and saved the firstborn of Israel, he had a special claim upon them as his. All the firstborn sons were dedicated to the Lord.

I am the LORD."

God stamped his authority at the end of the verse on his claim for the substitution of the Levites for the firstborn of the other tribes with the statement, "I am the LORD".

Part 2: The Lord's service (verses 14-39)

Verse 14

The LORD said to Moses in the Desert of Sinai,

Again the Lord gave instructions to Moses, and this time it was for another census.

Verse 15

“Count the Levites by their families and clans. Count every male a month old or more.”

Previously, at the beginning of this book, all males aged 20 and older were counted, i.e. identified, but this time all males who are one month and over are to be included. The first occasion concerned the armed forces, where at the age of 20 a man was considered suitable for battle. Here we have those who will serve God by representing others. The Lord claims as his all males from one month old. They were to be trained and prepared for service from a young age. All males were to be counted, even the infirm. No one could think that they were disowned or rejected by God.

Verse 16

So Moses counted them, as he was commanded by the word of the LORD

The words of the Lord were obeyed and the number of Levites recorded.

Verses 17-37

The result of the census of the Levite males above one month is given in these twenty-one verses. Their clans, numbers and responsibilities are set out in the table on page 38. For the full text of these verses see the end of this study on page 47.

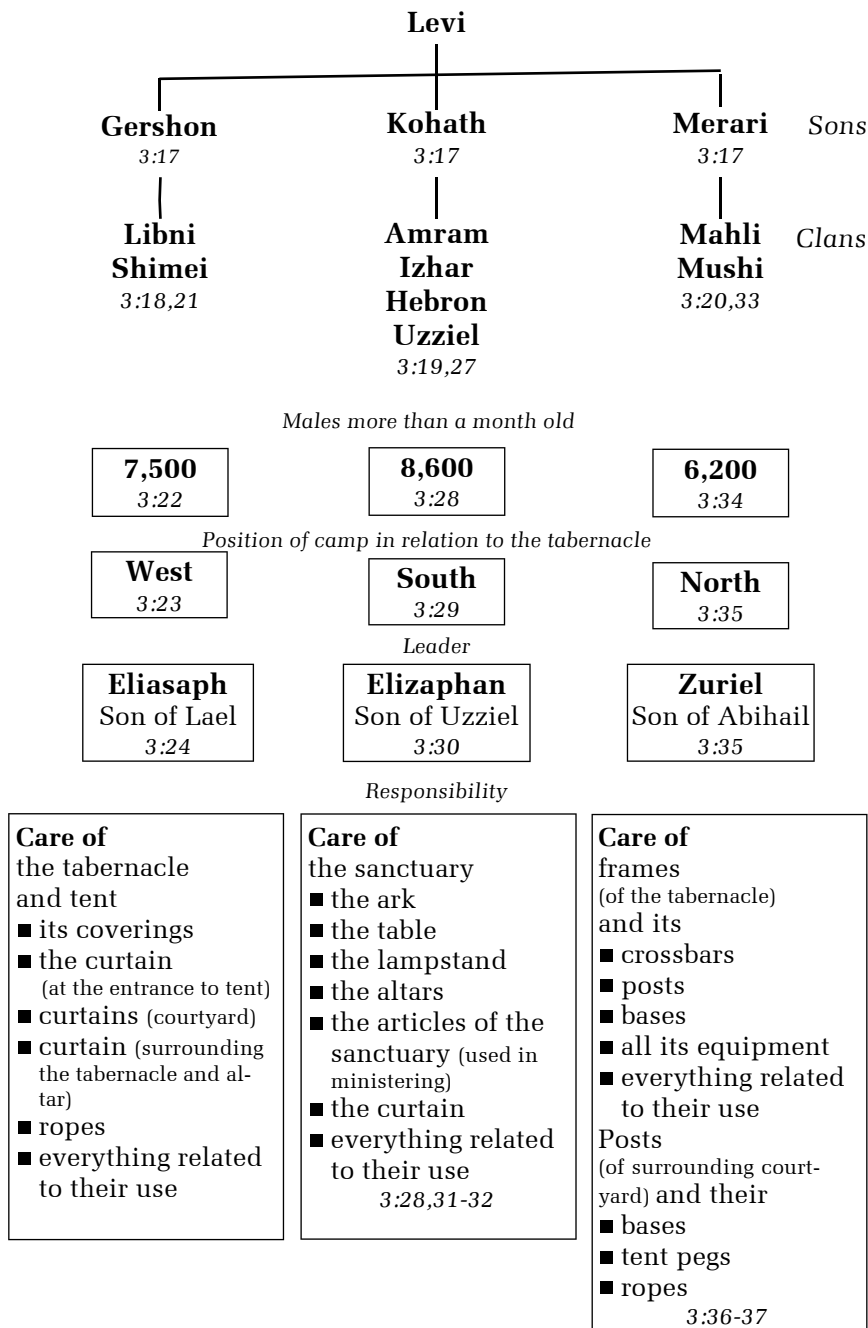
Verse 38

Moses and Aaron and his sons were to camp to the east of the tabernacle, towards the sunrise, in front of the Tent of Meeting.

Moses, the chief ruler, Aaron, the high priest, and his sons, priests under him, were given the most honourable place of all. They were to camp in front of the tabernacle, between the tent and the camp of Judah.

They were responsible for the care of the sanctuary on behalf of the Israelites.

Moses with Aaron and his sons were located in front of the tabernacle because of their exclusive care of the sanctuary. Moses and Aaron were of Kohath, whose clans were given the task of caring for the sanctuary whenever the camp was on the move.



Anyone else who approached the sanctuary was to be put to death.

The Lord was precise and specific in his instructions. The sanctuary was to be approached only by Moses, Aaron and his sons. We see that they were to camp in front of the tabernacle in order to guard against any unauthorised entry. Ignoring this instruction had very serious consequences, execution.

Verse 39

The total number of Levites counted at the LORD'S command by Moses and Aaron according to their clans, including every male a month old or more, was 22,000.

The grand total of all eligible firstborn Levites was 22,000. This number showed that the Levites were the smallest tribe. This was 300 less than the total of those counted in verses 22, 28 and 34. There are two probable reasons for this difference. The first is that the 300 not included in this verse were the firstborn. In 3:13 the Lord said that all the firstborn of Israel were his, which included the Levites. This leads on to the second reason. In 3:45 we will see that the counted Levite males were to be exchanged for all the firstborn of Israel. Since the Levite firstborn were already claimed by God and could not be exchanged, they were left out of the total figure of 22,000 given in this verse.

Part 3: The Lord's way (verses 40-51)

Verse 40

The LORD said to Moses, "Count all the firstborn Israelite males who are a month old or more and make a list of their names.

Moses was now told to count all the firstborn males of a month old or more in the other tribes and make a list of their names. The exchange of Levites in place of every firstborn Israelite male, as spoken of in 3:12, takes place under the detailed direction of God in these next verses. God was showing Moses and the Israelite nation that serving God depended upon salvation, as prescribed by God. God was setting apart a people who would serve him. God identified the people (in this case the firstborn Israelites) and they could only be accepted by God through substitution and payment of a redemption price. This has been God's way, from when Adam and Eve first disobeyed, for man to be saved. God was teaching Israel that it would be through his son Jesus Christ being a substitute for sinners and paying the penalty for our sins with his own life (redemption) that would be the only way of salvation.

Verse 41

Take the Levites for me in place of all the firstborn of the Israelites, and the livestock of the Levites in place of all the firstborn of the livestock of the Israelites.

Moses was instructed in the detailed working of how the Levites were to be exchanged (substituted) for the firstborn of Israel. The Levites were to serve God by ministering to the priests and serving in the tabernacle. The exchange did not just relate to the males but also to the animals. All the cattle of the Levites were to be exchanged for the firstlings of the Israelite cattle. The Levites were not being deprived of their cattle nor were they required to sacrifice them. It emphasised that the Levites were to be totally devoted to serving God, with everything they had, including their cattle.

I am the LORD.”

God has a right to everything and can claim whom he pleases for himself in a special manner. He therefore could and did take the Levites to himself.

Verses 42-43

So Moses counted all the firstborn of the Israelites, as the LORD commanded him. ⁴³ The total number of firstborn males a month old or more, listed by name, was 22,273.

When Moses counted the elder sons of the eleven tribes and listed them, the total came to 22,273. This meant there were 273 more Israelite firstborn than the Levite males who were a month old or more. 273 firstborn would be left over and there would not be a Levite substitute for them.

Verse 44

The LORD also said to Moses,

With the numbers counted, God gave further instruction to Moses on what to do.

Verse 45

“Take the Levites in place of all the firstborn of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites in place of their livestock. The Levites are to be mine. I am the LORD.

God had already declared that he had claimed the Levites; now he tells Moses to take the Levites instead of the firstborn of Israel whose numbers he had counted.

Verse 46

To redeem the 273 firstborn Israelites who exceed the number of the Levites,

Moses was now told how the difference of the 273 firstborn were to be included in the exchange. This was the number that was left over after exchanging every Levite male over one month old with every firstborn of the other 11 tribes of Israel. The 273 firstborn could not be included

in the new arrangement as it was only the Levites who could serve the priests in matters of the tabernacle.

Verse 47

collect five shekels for each one, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs.

To make up to the number of 22,273 firstborn Israelites, five shekels was to be collected for each of the 273 Israelite males who could not be exchanged. The shekel was a currency used for payment, being about four days' wages. Where an exchange of one firstborn for one Levite male could not take place, a money transaction had to be used instead. The 273 firstborn that could not be exchanged for a Levite male had to be bought (redeemed).

Verse 48

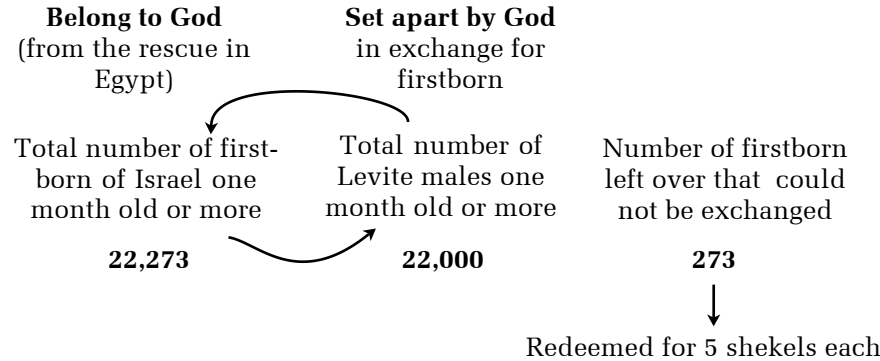
Give the money for the redemption of the additional Israelites to Aaron and his sons."

The money for the firstborn belonged to the priests in the place of the 273 whom God claimed for himself but could not be exchanged for a Levite male. The money was to make up for this deficiency.

Verse 49

So Moses collected the redemption money from those who exceeded the number redeemed by the Levites.

Moses collected the money of five shekels from each of the 273 firstborn who were left over after the exchange of Levite males for Israelite male firstborn. We are not told how the exchange of males took place. It could have been that Moses began with the oldest firstborn so that the 273 left over were the youngest. Moses could also have done the whole thing by the drawing of lots.



Verse 50

From the firstborn of the Israelites he collected silver weighing 1,365 shekels, according to the sanctuary shekel.

The redemption money collected from each of these Israelite firstborn who were not exchanged weighed approximately 15.5 kilograms.

Verse 51

Moses gave the redemption money to Aaron and his sons, as he was commanded by the word of the LORD.

The collected money was then given to Aaron in accordance with God's instructions.



Summary

In the first two chapters of Numbers God instructed Moses on how the Israelites were to be organised for their journey and entry into the promised land. The third chapter, the subject of this study, is devoted to the tribe of Levi. They were not included in the arrangements in the first two chapters and received separate and different instructions. The tribe was assigned by God to assist Aaron and the priests. We are given some information about the priests in the opening verses, informing us of the serving priests and those who had been removed by God, through death, because of disobedience. The main part of the chapter concentrates on the camp arrangements for the tribe and the particular responsibilities for the three clans of the Gershonites, Kohathites and Merarites. A count is made of all the Levite males over one month old. Another count is made of all the firstborn of Israel over one month old. The firstborn belonging to God are exchanged for the Levite males, who will symbolically become the firstborn of the nation. There were 273 more firstborn males than Levite males and so Moses is instructed to collect money from the left over firstborn. Those whom God was calling to be set apart were to convey the whole message of salvation to the Israelite and all other nations. Substitution (one standing in for another by an exchange) and redemption, were God's appointed means. The establishment of the Levites to assist the priests required them to be set apart by God through substitution and the payment of a redemption price. This was a visual lesson of God's way, that Christ would be our substitute and the redemption price was his death.



Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes

Many people living today call themselves Christians. Ask them how they became a Christian and they will struggle to give a clear answer. They may talk about being born of Christian parents or say that the society they live in has a predominantly Christian ethos. Others may say that they decided to be a Christian because it makes them feel good. There is much uncertainty in people's minds because they have no understanding of God's ways. Numbers chapter three is very relevant for our uncertain age, where so many different ideas about God circulate. The opening verses about Aaron's sons warn us about doing things our own way and ignoring what God has said. Such behaviour and attitude is like saying to God that what he has written in his Word is not quite right and needs amending or changing. In the closing chapters of the Bible there is a warning that nothing is to be added or taken away from what has been written (Rev. 22:18-19). The consequences of such disobedience are very serious. There is only one appointed way for man to be made right with God; that is through faith in Jesus Christ. He has to be our substitute and he has paid for our salvation with his own life.

The specific instructions to the three Levite clans emphasise God's sovereignty over his people. Those whom God has called through his Son and set apart from this world are to follow a lifestyle prescribed by God. The New Testament has much instruction for the way Christians are to behave and go about their lives. Local congregations (churches) are to be properly organised and run. There is clear teaching about leadership, use of people's talents and gifts and what the task of the church is all about. The church is a whole number of people known to God.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme: We must draw near to God and serve him in God's way

1. God's way - not ours! (3:1-10)

We come near to God on God's terms only

(a) My way (1-4)

Nadab and Abihu had died before the Lord when they offered profane fire before the Lord. Our way leads to death.

(b) God's way (5-10)

When we're told God's way, it's not long before we begin to imagine that we can improve upon God's way. It is usually seen in trying to "improve" the simplicity of God's New Testament ways, which often involves a return to Old Testament thinking.

- i) **Worship:** in Christ, we come to God through Christ our Priest, dependent on the help of the Holy Spirit. The only sacrifices we bring are those of praise and our lives. The incense we burn is our prayers; we have no human priests or altars. The building we meet in is not even God's house. All such thoughts are unauthorised fire!
- ii) **Evangelism:** in our modern age we have to be contemporary. But like some in the church in Corinth, we can be tempted to adopt and trust all things "modern" in the hope we will communicate in a relevant style. Paul was willing to do much, but he would allow no method to detract or trivialise from the "awful glory" of the cross.
- iii) **Prayer:** you can buy "prayer crosses", beautifully sculpted, wonderfully tactile. The idea is that, as you hold the cross, meditating upon the Lord's cross, so your worship will be uplifted. This is really the beginning of idolatry! (see John 4:24 – we no longer need outward visible things like prayer crosses or even the tabernacle).
- iv) **It affects traditionalists and modernists alike.** In essence the folly is to say, "I did it my way." That either means we invent a new way or we resolutely cling to the old way, irrespective of what the biblical principles are.

2. God's representative - the firstborn (3:11-51)

God set aside the Levites as representatives who will redeem the people. The firstborn was loved and favoured, representing God's love for his people.

(a) Representatives (11-13)

"I myself have taken the Levites... instead of every firstborn." The firstborn male child was to be head of the household upon the death of his father. He received the inheritance but also took responsibility for the family. From this principle the term "firstborn" became a title of special love and honour. In Exodus 4 God said to Pharaoh, "Israel is my firstborn son." In other words, Pharaoh was holding God's beloved children as prisoners.

When God struck the firstborn of Egypt, he protected the firstborn of Israel by providing them with a representative, a male lamb. They were bought with the price of a lamb's life and so all the firstborn of Israel belonged to God.

But here God chooses to liberate the firstborn through another payment. The tribe of Levi will become a payment – a ransom – to liberate the firstborn of Israel from this service.

- i) The Levites were the special firstborn of God. They were set apart by God, for God's own service and to represent the people to God.
- ii) When the people saw a Levite they could say, "He is my representative. God's love to that Levite represents God's love to us all. Every one of us is loved by God, like a firstborn child."

(b) Redemption (14-51)

Two more lists are taken, the number of Levites and the number of males older than one month from Israel. There was to be a strict one-to-one exchange. There was a slight difference of 273 between the two counts, so these final 273 Israelites were released by payment of redemption money. The Levites were the redemption price of each individual. Now, in Christ, God's firstborn high priest, we are represented and redeemed for God!

Application - Christ is our firstborn redeemer!

- 1. Christ is called "the firstborn" in a number of passages. God the Son was not created but is eternal. It is a title of God's special love resting upon him. Christ is God's beloved Son, his firstborn, in whom he is well pleased!
- 2. Christ is the representative of every one of his people.
- 3. Christ gave himself into the service of God to pay the redemption price for his people, setting them free. Christ's giving himself meant literally that he gave himself as priest and offering. At his crucifixion he was offered as a sacrifice to pay the penalty of our sin.
- 4. Now, as our high priest, he presents us to God as perfect in God's sight, because of Christ's perfect life, sinless death and eternal prayers in the presence of God!



Focus Point:

Redemption, Redeemer

Redemption is closely related to salvation. It is more specific than salvation because it indicates the means by which salvation is achieved, namely by payment of a ransom. A redeemer is a person who rescues someone or something by paying a price for them. In the Old Testament the law of Moses said that if a man had to sell his land to pay off debts, a close relative should buy the land back (redeem) and give freely to the poor relative. Likewise a firstborn animal brought for sacrifice could be redeemed if it were not slaughtered for that purpose. If the animal were not bought back it had to be killed.

In the context of our study in Numbers 3 the firstborn of Israel were redeemed. The firstborn were spared in the last plague which God visited upon Egypt. As a result God had a special claim upon the firstborn who had to be redeemed. Whilst camped at Mount Sinai all the firstborn were redeemed by being substituted by a Levite male of one month or older or by the payment of five shekels.

God redeemed individuals and the whole nation of Israel. God redeemed from dangers and troubles. Often the payment (ransom price) was in the power and strength required to achieve the release from danger or trouble. Israel's rescue from Egypt and release from captivity in Babylon are described in terms of redemption.

There is little direct reference in the Old Testament to redemption from sin. It is in the New Testament that the concept of people being redeemed from sin is widely used. Yet the Old Testament teaching does prepare for the New Testament teaching of a ransom being paid to be rescued from sin. The New Testament concept of redemption also follows the Old Testament in that people can be delivered from all the troubles of this life. The apostle Paul writes about a day of redemption (Eph. 4:30) and tells us that our corrupted bodies will be redeemed (Rom. 8:23). The suffering and death of Jesus was a ransom price that had to be paid not only to free us from our committed sin but also from all the effects of sin. The believer's redemption is not yet fully complete; that will only happen on the day of the Lord's return (also known as his second coming).

For the Christian the description of Jesus Christ as Redeemer reminds the believer of the great and personal cost for him or her to be that believer.

Text of Verses 17-37

¹⁷ These were the names of the sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath and Merari.

¹⁸ These were the names of the Gershonite clans: Libni and Shimei. ¹⁹ The Kohathite clans: Amram, Izhar, Hebron and Uzziel. ²⁰ The Merarite clans: Mahli and Mushi. These were the Levite clans, according to their families.

²¹ To Gershon belonged the clans of the Libnites and Shimeites; these were the Gershonite clans. ²² The number of all the males a month old or more who were counted was 7,500. ²³ The Gershonite clans were to camp on the west, behind the tabernacle. ²⁴ The leader of the families of the Gershonites was Eliasaph son of Lael. ²⁵ At the Tent of Meeting the Gershonites were responsible for the care of the tabernacle and tent, its coverings, the curtain at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, ²⁶ the curtains of the courtyard, the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard surrounding the tabernacle and altar, and the ropes—and everything related to their use.

²⁷ To Kohath belonged the clans of the Amramites, Izharites, Hebronites and Uzzielites; these were the Kohathite clans. ²⁸ The number of all the males a month old or more was 8,600. The Kohathites were responsible for the care of the sanctuary. ²⁹ The Kohathite clans were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle. ³⁰ The leader of the families of the Kohathite clans was Elizaphan son of Uzziel. ³¹ They were responsible for the care of the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the articles of the sanctuary used in ministering, the curtain, and everything related to their use. ³² The chief leader of the Levites was Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest. He was appointed over those who were responsible for the care of the sanctuary.

³³ To Merari belonged the clans of the Mahlites and the Mushites; these were the Merarite clans. ³⁴ The number of all the males a month old or more who were counted was 6,200. ³⁵ The leader of the families of the Merarite clans was Zuriel son of Abihail; they were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle. ³⁶ The Merarites were appointed to take care of the frames of the tabernacle, its crossbars, posts, bases, all its equipment, and everything related to their use, ³⁷ as well as the posts of the surrounding courtyard with their bases, tent pegs and ropes.



Over to you

Have you set God's ways before the people you minister to? Consider the consequences of Nadab and Abihu of not doing things in the way the Bible teaches.

Reflect upon your group of people. Is there order in the way things are done? Is it only you and a few other people involved in the functioning of your local church whilst the rest do nothing except turn up for services. Do all professing believers have a rôle and task to do?

What do you consider are the implications of being redeemed by Christ for God? How would you convey this to your congregation?



Numbers 4:1-49

This Study Paper contains the following :-

-  Introduction to the passage
-  What these verses mean
-  Summary
-  Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes
-  A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
-  Focus Point: Walking with God requires attention to detail
-  Over to you

Introduction to the passage

In our previous study of chapter 3 consideration was given to the whole of the Levite tribe. In chapter 4 attention is given to a specific age group of men, those between 30 and 50 years of age. They were the ones suitable for the heavy work of taking down the Tent of Meeting. They were to carry the tent and all its belongings when the Israelites journeyed. The tent had to be reassembled when camp was set up in a new location. The chapter is full of detailed and precise instructions.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron:

Once more the instructions come from the Lord through Moses and Aaron to the people. The God of the Bible speaks because he is the living God, unlike lifeless and useless idols of man's making.

Kohathites

Verse 2

“Take a census of the Kohathite branch of the Levites by their clans and families.

A further count was to be made, that of the Kohathite branch of the Levite tribe. All the Israelite males who were 20 or older were counted in chapter 1. Moses was instructed in chapter 3 to count all the males in the Levite tribe who were more than one month old.

Verse 3

Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work in the Tent of Meeting.

Suitable men were identified, their age being between 30 and 50 years. They had to be fit enough to do the strenuous work of taking down and re-erecting the Tent of Meeting (3:31). For going to war men had to be 20 or more with no upper age limit. Here in the service of the Tent of Meeting the instruction was specific. The men were to be in the best of strength and prime of life. Those to be picked out and counted were to be already active in coming and serving in the work.

Verse 4

“This is the work of the Kohathites in the Tent of Meeting: the care of the most holy things.

It was the clans of the Kohathites whose task was to look after “the most holy things” of the tabernacle. These were the furnishings and utensils in the Tent of Meeting that only Aaron and his sons had access to.

Verse 5

When the camp is to move, Aaron and his sons are to go in and take down the shielding curtain and cover the ark of the Testimony with it.

Only Aaron and his sons could go into the holy place and cover the ark of the Testimony. No one else was allowed to see the ark.¹ They were to pack what the Kohathites were to carry. The ark was to be covered by the curtain that shielded it in the tent.

Verse 6

Then they are to cover this with hides of sea cows, spread a cloth of solid blue over that and put the poles in place.

After they had covered the ark with the curtain, a further protective covering was that of animal skins. The skins were thick and strong and

¹ The ark is described in Exodus 25:10-22. The Israelites believed God lived among them in the tabernacle between the wings of the cherubim on the mercy seat. God spoke to Moses from this place (Numbers 7:89) during the years they wandered in the wilderness as they prepared to enter the Promised Land.

kept out the rain, wind and sun. The ark was finally covered with blue cloth, probably signifying the colour of the heavens. There was no need for human hands to touch the ark when on the journey because carrying poles were slotted into the rings on each side of the ark.

Verses 7 - 8

“Over the table of the Presence they are to spread a blue cloth and put on it the plates, dishes and bowls, and the jars for drink offerings; the bread that is continually there is to remain on it. ⁸Over these they are to spread a scarlet cloth, cover that with hides of sea cows and put its poles in place.

Everything had to be in its place, the table, the plates, dishes, bowls, and showbread.² The table, like the ark, was to have three coverings. After the first covering of a blue cloth various utensils were to be placed on top. The bread was to remain in its bowl. Then the table with the utensils were to be covered with a scarlet cloth and then covered with animal skins. Poles were also used to carry the table.

Verses 9-10

“They are to take a blue cloth and cover the lampstand that is for light, together with its lamps, its wick trimmers and trays, and all its jars for the oil used to supply it. ¹⁰Then they are to wrap it and all its accessories in a covering of hides of sea cows and put it on a carrying frame.

Aaron and his sons were to continue in packing up the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting. The oil lamps, needed to light the area, had to be emptied, and dismantled then wrapped up to keep them safe for the journey. The skins used are sometimes called sea cows' skins but other translations say badgers' skins or goatskins. All the furnishings were to have two coverings.

Verse 11

“Over the gold altar they are to spread a blue cloth and cover that with hides of sea cows and put its poles in place.

Again the blue cloth and skins of sea cows were to cover the gold altar, and it was to be carried on poles. This altar was used to offer incense to the Lord (Exodus 30:1-10). It was made of acacia wood and covered completely with gold – hence its name “the gold altar”. It stood opposite the ark and so was regarded as “belonging to” the most holy place.

² In the NIV translation showbread (shewbread) is translated as the bread of the presence. In 4:7 the bread that is continually there is to remain there. The showbread was twelve baked loaves which were put out on each Sabbath on the table on the north side of the tabernacle. The priests were to make sure that there were always loaves before God's presence. When new loaves were brought, the twelve put out on the previous Sabbath were eaten by the priests in a holy place.

Verse 12

“They are to take all the articles used for ministering in the sanctuary, wrap them in a blue cloth, cover that with hides of sea cows and put them on a carrying frame.

The detailed instruction continued for all the contents of the Tent of Meeting. All these came under the heading of holy things and needed to be covered and protected for the journey. These items, like the lampstand and all its accessories, were to be placed in a carrying frame. The larger items such as the ark and altar had carrying poles.

Verses 13-14

“They are to remove the ashes from the bronze altar and spread a purple cloth over it. ¹⁴Then they are to place on it all the utensils used for ministering at the altar, including the firepans, meat forks, shovels and sprinkling bowls. Over it they are to spread a covering of hides of sea cows and put its poles in place.

Any ash left over from the sacrifices needed removing so the bronze altar could be covered and made ready for moving. This altar was where the sacrifices were made every day and on special occasions.

Verse 15

“After Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy furnishings and all the holy articles, and when the camp is ready to move, the Kohathites are to come to do the carrying. But they must not touch the holy things or they will die. The Kohathites are to carry those things that are in the Tent of Meeting.

Aaron and his sons packed and covered the objects. Nobody else was allowed near to or in this holy area until Aaron said so. Failure to obey this command meant certain death. Once Aaron and his sons had packed and covered the items from the Tent of Meeting, the Kohathites could approach to carry the Tent of Meeting and its utensils. All the items were covered and could not be seen by the human eye. God was not present on the mercy seat above the ark until it was all unpacked again, but the Kohathites were not permitted to touch any of the items. They were to use the carrying poles or carrying frames.

Verse 16

“Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, is to have charge of the oil for the light, the fragrant incense, the regular grain offering and the anointing oil. He is to be in charge of the entire tabernacle and everything in it, including its holy furnishings and articles.”

Eleazar, the priest and now the eldest of Aaron's sons, had to oversee the work of the Kohathites and to make sure the covering was complete before the carriers came to do their part. He was responsible for

everything in the tabernacle. Whilst the Kohathites were used for carrying the holy furnishings and articles, Eleazar was to take personal charge of the lamp oil, incense, flour and anointing oil. These were the items that were to be used in the morning and evening grain offerings and not given to the Kohathites to carry (see Exodus 29:38-41).

Verse 17

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron,

Further instruction is given to Moses and Aaron concerning the Kohathites. It is God setting out further vital information that must be followed.

Verse 18

“See that the Kohathite tribal clans are not cut off from the Levites.

Aaron and his sons were to take care of the Kohathites and make sure that they acted in accordance with God’s instructions. Even accidental mishaps would have had severe consequences. The priests were not to give any cause for the Kohathites to act improperly or irreverently and cause them to be cut off from the tribe.

Verse 19

So that they may live and not die when they come near the most holy things, do this for them:

The cutting off is here described as death. God has prescribed meticulously how he is to be approached by man. This included the use of the holy things and the priests were responsible for the Kohathites to serve in the tabernacle in accordance with God’s requirements. It was to be a continuing duty.

Aaron and his sons are to go into the sanctuary and assign to each man his work and what he is to carry.

Part of the supervisory care that the priests were to exercise was to arrange what each Kohathite man was to carry. This was personal and pastoral, having the spiritual and physical condition of every man at heart.

Verse 20

But the Kohathites must not go in to look at the holy things, even for a moment, or they will die.”

The Kohathites could not be lax in the duties they were given to do. It was a great privilege to be given the charge of caring for the furnishings and articles from the Tent of Meeting. With that privilege came a requirement to do everything in the way God had set out. There were serious consequences if anyone deviated. One look was an offence.

Aaron and his sons were to oversee the Kohathites so that they would not suffer death through neglect or mishap.

Gershonites

Verses 21-23

The LORD said to Moses, ²²“Take a census also of the Gershonites by their families and clans. ²³Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work at the Tent of Meeting.

Moses was to carry out the same task for the Gershonites as he had for the Kohathites. He was to count all those between 30 and 50 years (see note on verse 3).

Verse 24

“This is the service of the Gershonite clans as they work and carry burdens:

The Gershonite clans were given the responsibility of the drapery and curtains of the tent of meeting (3:25-26). They now received their detailed instructions.

Verses 25-26

They are to carry the curtains of the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, its covering and the outer covering of hides of sea cows, the curtains for the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, the curtains of the courtyard surrounding the tabernacle and altar, the curtain for the entrance, the ropes and all the equipment used in its service. The Gershonites are to do all that needs to be done with these things.

They were to take down all the curtains, hangings and coverings of the tabernacle when the ark and the rest of the holy things had been packed and moved out.

Verses 27-28

All their service, whether carrying or doing other work, is to be done under the direction of Aaron and his sons. You shall assign to them as their responsibility all they are to carry. This is the service of the Gershonite clans at the Tent of Meeting. Their duties are to be under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron, the priest.

Their duties were clearly set out, being mainly to carry the coverings and curtains. Ithamar, Aaron's second remaining son, was the priest in charge and he had to make sure the detailed commands were carried out precisely. There was a lot of material, ropes and accessories to be looked after. Each person was assigned a task in this complex operation. Everything that was taken down in one place was to be put up at the next location of the camp.

Merarites

Verses 29-30

“Count the Merarites by their clans and families. Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work at the Tent of Meeting.

Moses was to carry out the same count for the Merarites as he had done for the Kohathites and Gershonites.

Verses 31-32

This is their duty as they perform service at the Tent of Meeting: to carry the frames of the tabernacle, its crossbars, posts and bases, as well as the posts of the surrounding courtyard with their bases, tent pegs, ropes, all their equipment and everything related to their use. Assign to each man the specific things he is to carry.

The Merarites had the heavy equipment to carry. These were the frames, crossbars and posts (3:36-37). These all supported the great curtain, which went round the outside of the Tent of Meeting. Each person had to know exactly what to do. All the structural pieces had to be accounted for when packing and transporting. Missing pieces would have caused confusion and delay. Working with such equipment could easily have led to accidents, while taking down and re-erecting.

Verse 33

This is the service of the Merarite clans as they work at the Tent of Meeting under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron, the priest.”

The work of the Merarites was overseen by Ithamar, who also cared for the Gershonites in their tasks. Interestingly there were 6200 Merarite men over one month old counted in the census of 3:34. Almost half of these were between 30 and 50 years old (4:44). The Lord had supplied the greatest number of strong men from the least numbered family to do the work he had assigned them.

Verses 34-49

The statistics of the count

In verses 2, 21 and 29 Moses was instructed by God to count the number of men in each of the three communities of the Kohathites, Gershonites and Merarites who were aged between 30 and 50. Each of these verses is followed by detailed instruction for the duties of these men. In this last section of the chapter the statistics of the count are given. The information for each family clan follows the same pattern finishing with the total for all three that made up the Levite tribe.

The information given from the count is not accompanied by any further comments or notes. The Holy Spirit has preserved this record

Verse	Community	Verse	Who was counted	Verse	Number counted	Confirming detail
34	Kohathites	35	All the men from 30 to 50 who come to serve in the work in the Tent of Meeting	36	2,750	Total of those who served in the Tent of Meeting as counted by Moses and Aaron in accordance with the Lord's command
38	Gershonites	39		40	2,630	
42	Merarites	43		44	3,200	
46	All Levites	47		48	8,580	Each assigned his work and told what to carry. They were counted as the Lord commanded Moses.

for us as part of the unfolding history of God's purposes and plan. We are not intended to know any particular details behind these numbers except to draw out basic principles. We can begin to visualise the scale of operation that required 8,500 fit and healthy men to pack up, carry and set up the Tent of Meeting and all its belongings. This needed great organisation and discipline. We recognise God's wisdom in the way that the Merarites had the largest number of suitable men for the heavier work. Overall they were the smallest of the Levite clans. From these figures we appreciate the logistics involved, amidst the upholding of God's holiness and limited access to his presence in the Tent of Meeting.



Summary

In chapter 3 the Levites were counted and set apart for God's service. This required some adjustment as the Levites replaced all the firstborn of Israel, who until then belonged to God. The number of male Levites by their clans and families, who were more than one month old, was established. The Levite tribe was made up of the communities of the Gershonites, Kohathites and Merarites. They were all listed and their responsibilities assigned. In chapter 4 more detailed instruction was given to Moses concerning these three communities. A count was to be made of all men between the ages of 30 and 50. These were the men who were in their prime, physically and mentally. The tasks were described in more detail. The Kohathites

Summary continued on page 57

Summary continued from page 56

were to take care of the ark, table, altar and holy things. They were not allowed to see or touch these items. The priests had to cover all these items in a particular way and use either poles or carrying frames for their transportation. Only when this was done were the Kohathites to come and carry. The Gershonites were responsible for all the drapery and curtains. The Merarites had the heavier work with the frames and poles. The number of men counted totalled 8,580. The largest group came from the smallest community, the Merarites, showing God's attention to detail in what he purposed.



Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes

What does this study teach us who live in the New Testament era? We must be careful not to interpret the text with information that is not given. We are not to over-spiritualise detail otherwise we will miss the main points of the chapter. The chapter is part of God's unfolding plan and it is wise to view the text in the context of the bigger picture. God is unchanging and therefore the principles that are seen here are the same principles we apply to our current situation.

1. Maturity is required for effective service

There is no fixed rule for ministry in the New Testament church. The principle is that an elder must not be a recent convert (1 Tim. 3:16). Jesus and John the Baptist began their public ministry at the age of 30. In Numbers 4 God requires the men aged 30 to 50 to be set apart for specific service. From this we can deduce that those to be set apart for service in the local church need to be men of a certain maturity and experience of life. It is to the local church's benefit if their church leaders have experienced other types of work before they take on church work. There is plenty of evidence that young men struggle in pastoral and leadership roles. In Acts 13 the Holy Spirit told the church at Antioch to send Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Both these men were already serving the Lord in that local church.

2. Great care is to be taken with the things of God

The instruction given to the Levites for the caring for the Tent of Meeting was very detailed. Nothing concerning God is to be treated in a casual

or careless manner. The New Testament does not give such detailed instruction, but the attention we are to give concerning personal faith and matters in the church is to be taken seriously. The Bible sets out principles rather than detailed rules for the Christian believer. The way a Christian lives and how the local church functions has to be worked out from such principles. This requires diligent study of the Scriptures and a disciplined daily devotion through prayer. Christ has given to his people the way in which they are to live and be his disciples.

3. A caring ministry

Moses and Aaron were told by God to make sure that the Kohathites would not look at the holy things when they were uncovered. The danger for the Kohathites was that they were responsible for moving the furnishings and holy things. They could easily have overstepped the boundaries set by God by becoming too lax in the way they treated these objects. Such action would have cut them off from the Levites by dying. Aaron and the priests were to ensure that all the objects were covered before the Kohathites were called in and assigned their tasks. Jesus told Peter to take care of his sheep (John 21:16). The word *pastor* (shepherd) is used widely today to describe a church leader. The role of the church leader is to take care of the people through teaching and helping them to be faithful followers of Christ. Paul gives Timothy advice in dealing with people so that they will not fall away from the faith (e.g. 1 Tim. 6:20-21). Such a result would cut the people off from the church and fellowship with believers.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme: Draw near to serve God

Chapter 4 explains how the Levites were to serve God and how they could come near to him. Some principles.

(a) Maturity is an important priority

Thirty to fifty years of age (4:3)

30 was when a young man was considered to have come of age. He was mature yet still physically strong. The best years are dedicated to God's service.

Application: let us give our best years to God's service.

(b) Work and worship are one

All who come to serve in the work in the Tent of Meeting (4:3)

We notice immediately how practical the work of serving God is. The

spiritual service of the Levites consisted in large part in moving, lifting and carrying.

Application: in the New Testament we are all in Christ, priests and Levites to God. We are all to serve God throughout our lives. Christ has granted us freedom beyond the imagining of our Old Testament brothers. Most amazing is that we have a direct, unhindered and safe access into the most holy of holy places. This is Christ's gift to all his children. Although the Levites were dedicated to God, only Aaron's sons could ever pack away the most holy items in the holiest of holy places. If one of the other Levites went in there or touched one of the holy items he would die (4:17-20).

Contrast that with some of the wonderful verses in the New Testament.

- 1 John 1: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched ..."
- Hebrews 4:14-16: "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly ... Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

We are to fulfil our high calling and come near to God with prayer. Our priestly duty now is to preach the gospel of Christ to bring about the salvation of the nations.

(c) All the work was one work

Each was assigned his work and told what to carry. Thus they were counted, as the Lord commanded Moses (4:49)

There was one work of which all of the Levites were part.

Application: let us see every practical duty as part of God's service.

Paul says that we were bought with a price and therefore should honour God with our bodies. The general principle is that we serve God in every way, not least with our physical bodies and service. Even the smallest practical service for Christ, the tiniest cup of water given to one of his saints, the smallest corner of this world illuminated by the light of Christ in us is part of the one work of the gospel of Christ.



Focus Point:

Walking with God requires attention to detail

The small details can be so easily overlooked in the business of life and trying to get the job done. This happens in Christian ministry and the Christian life. An important lesson we take from our study is the need

to pay attention to the small things. It would have been so easy for the Israelites to forget some of the procedures God gave them in the instructions for the Tent of Meeting. Had they forgotten they might have put someone's life at risk and lost blessing from their neglect. Preachers and teachers are tempted to lower standards to please the people, but this puts the spiritual life of the Christian in danger. Notice the way the items in the Tent of Meeting were all covered before moving them. This shows us the need to be protected from the sinful influences of the world we are travelling through, just as utensils of the tabernacle needed protection from the elements in the desert. Attention to detail has to be given in public worship, displaying reverence and holy devotion to God. We need to be careful in the small things of our personal lives and our relationship with God, so that we can be a witness to the unbeliever. We need to be diligent in how we relate to other members of the fellowship.

What are the details that the Christian believer needs to attend to? The answer is in all aspects of daily living. It involves such things as self-examination, prayer, Bible reading, love, zeal, attitudes to wealth and poverty etc.³



Over to you

What relevance has this study to your situation? What would be the practical application?

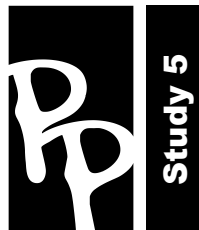
How much attention is given in preparation for when your congregation comes together for a worship service? How long do you spend in preparing your sermon? (It has been suggested that for every five minutes you speak, one hour should be spent in study.)

Do you desire to give your people the truth and expose false doctrine to them? How do you do this?

³ A book with the title "Walking with God", published by Grace Publications Trust, deals with this whole subject. It is an abridgement of J. C. Ryle's "Practical Religion". A copy of "Walking with God" can be obtained by writing to Grace Baptist Mission at the address given at the beginning of this study book.

KEEPING THE CHURCH PURE:

SIN MUST BE DEALT WITH



Numbers 5:1-31

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- Introduction to the passage
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes
- Some suggestions of what to preach about from these verses
- Focus Point: Confession and repentance
- Over to you

Introduction to the passage

Care is needed in studying Old Testament material. This chapter is a good example. As we read this chapter we may find some of the narrative harsh or even primitive to our modern way of thinking. What is important is that we grasp the truth that is being set out and then apply that truth to our New Testament context. The make-up of this and the next chapter is straightforward. A basic principle is set out in 5:1-4 that sin must be put away. The situation of everyday physical life is used to teach us spiritual truth. Uncleanliness is a picture of sin. The Israelites were living as nomads, so any sign of uncleanness would have to be dealt with very quickly. Disease would spread quickly through the closely tented camp, and human waste must be put as far away from the residential area as possible. This principle is then illustrated with three laws; restitution (5:5-10), the test for unfaithfulness (5:11-31) and the law of separation [Nazirite] (6:1-21). The law of separation is the subject of the next study.

What these verses mean

The principle: Put away uncleanness (5:1-4)

Verse 1

The LORD said to Moses,

Once more the commands come from God through Moses. Having dealt with the priests and then the Levites, the narrative turns to the people.

Verse 2

“Command the Israelites to send away from the camp anyone who has an infectious skin disease or a discharge of any kind, or who is ceremonially unclean because of a dead body.

The command is that anyone who has a disease of any kind must be sent out and kept out of the camp. This was not the first time that either Moses or the people were instructed about uncleanness and isolation. This subject was dealt with in detail in the laws and regulations given by God from Mount Sinai (see Leviticus chapters 13-15).

Verse 3

Send away male and female alike; send them outside the camp so that they will not defile their camp, where I dwell among them.”

There was no distinction between male and female; anyone contaminated must be separated. In a hot climate, with so many people living close together, it was sensible to quarantine people who were diseased. The primary need for keeping uncleanness out of the camp was emphasised again in Numbers because God would be dwelling amongst them as they journeyed. The lesson that God was teaching the Israelites was simple. God and sin cannot mix. God is pure, clean and perfect. God was using the physical to teach them the spiritual. Dead bodies had to be handled, people would become sick and bodily discharges took place all the time. These all represented uncleanness and defilement and had to be put outside the camp. A physically healthy person was to live in the camp, but their hearts and minds were still sinful. The laws and regulations concerning uncleanness and defilement, which dealt with the physical, taught the people to prepare their hearts before God and recognise the real pollution that is caused by sin.

Verse 4

The Israelites did this; they sent them outside the camp. They did just as the LORD had instructed Moses.

The instruction given was obeyed. Detailed laws in Leviticus covered the length of time of such separation, usually for an initial seven days. It was the priest who would declare a person clean. Before returning

into the camp, the person would have to bring an offering for sacrifice to the priest (see for example Leviticus 14:3-7). The detail that was given to Moses by God in all the laws and regulations shows how important it was to observe and obey them. Sin is serious and cannot be treated lightly. It causes separation from God and this state continues until the sin is dealt with and is no longer present. This is the principle set out in the opening verses of this chapter.

First law arising from the principle: Restitution (5:5-10)

Putting things right by paying the price and providing the sacrifice

Verses 5-6

The LORD said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites: ‘When a man or woman wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the LORD, that person is guilty

The Lord continued speaking with Moses. The principle laid down was that sin must be put away. However, sin is not something that can be got rid of as if it never happened. God now gives further regulations. The first one is that sin must be paid for. Sin includes wrong done in any way to another person. He or she has not just offended that person but they have sinned against God.

Verse 7

and must confess the sin he has committed.

Sin needs to be confessed and repented of. It is not words alone that are said but a remorse that wants to put things right and a desire for the wrongdoing not to be repeated. Jesus said that we are first to admit our sin to the person we have wronged before going to God (Matt. 5:23-24).

He must make full restitution for his wrong, add one fifth to it and give it all to the person he has wronged.

In coming to the offended person full restitution had to be made. Saying sorry and expecting immediate forgiveness was not enough. Any loss had to be made good by the guilty person. Not only was the offended person to have their loss restored but was also to be compensated with an additional fifth (20%) of the loss.

Verse 8

But if that person has no close relative to whom restitution can be made for the wrong, the restitution belongs to the LORD and must be given to the priest, along with the ram with which atonement is made for him.

Provision was made for the restitution to be made to the person's relatives if, for example, the person had died. If there were no relatives, then the payment went to God through the priest. There was no way in

which the offender could get out of making restitution. The offended person could have been a convert to Israel and so would not have a Jewish ancestral family line. If such a person died and had no immediate relatives, God had made provision for restitution to be made through the priest. After all, the sin was against God as much as against the person. The offended person was compensated by the additional payment but atonement had to be made for the sin against God. This was done by the offender's bringing a ram to the priest for sacrifice. This requirement is described in detail in Leviticus 6:1-7.

Verses 9-10

All the sacred contributions the Israelites bring to a priest will belong to him. ¹⁰Each man's sacred gifts are his own, but what he gives to the priest will belong to the priest."

The ram offering and all offerings that were brought to the priest belonged to the priest personally. The principle stated here is set out in detail in the laws and regulations of Leviticus (e.g. Lev. 6:16, 7:7-10). The main reason was that the priests were to be maintained in the service God had called them to.

The second law arising from the principle: The test for unfaithfulness (5:11-31)

Clean out the sin

Verses 11-12

Then the LORD said to Moses, ¹²"Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If a man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him

The principle set out in verses 1-4 is the necessity of putting away sin. Moses has instructed the Israelites in the law of restitution, which deals with how to put away sin when offence has been given to another person. In the remainder of this study and this chapter the sin of unfaithfulness is dealt with. This is where disloyalty and betrayal come between man and wife. There is no closer human relationship than marriage, and trust is the greatest virtue.

Verses 13-14

by sleeping with another man, and this is hidden from her husband and her impurity is undetected (since there is no witness against her and she has not been caught in the act), ¹⁴ and if feelings of jealousy come over her husband and he suspects his wife and she is impure—or if he is jealous and suspects her even though she is not impure—

The situation set out was that of the wife's sleeping with another man; this could not be proved, yet the husband suspected that things were not right in their marriage relationship. The seriousness of adultery

and other improper sexual relationships is seen in Leviticus 20. The punishment for such actions was death and was applicable to both the man and the woman. Here the instruction was specific to the wife suspected of unfaithfulness. This did not mean that the husband was being excused from dishonourable behaviour, but the issue that was being addressed was a husband's suspicion and jealousy. The provision made was to protect the woman from any injustice that could have arisen from her husband's jealousy. The sin of unfaithfulness is by its nature a private sin and not easily proven unless the couple concerned were caught in the act. A husband's jealousy could have been aroused to such a degree that he would demand the punishment prescribed by the law without any proof of adultery. The wife could have been innocent and yet be accused and punished. What if the husband were no longer interested in his wife, would accusing her of adultery be a useful way of getting rid of her?

Verse 15

then he is to take his wife to the priest.

The husband, being suspicious, was to take his wife to the priest, whether or not his wife were guilty.

He must also take an offering of a tenth of an ephah of barley flour on her behalf. He must not pour oil on it or put incense on it, because it is a grain offering for jealousy, a reminder offering to draw attention to guilt.

The procedure to find the evidence was laid down. It involved the husband bringing some barley flour. It was to be treated as a grain offering (Lev. 6:14-23) and the entire offering was not to have oil poured on. It was a reminder that this was a matter of suspected guilt. This was an offering of memorial and an appeal to God's justice.

Verse 16

“The priest shall bring her and make her stand before the LORD.

The priest presented the accused wife before the Lord. The whole procedure rested on the truth that God knows and God judges.

Verse 17

Then he shall take some holy water in a clay jar and put some dust from the tabernacle floor into the water.

The solemn procedure commenced with the priest's taking water from a vessel¹ on the altar and pouring it into a clay jar. He then mixed it with

¹ The vessel was a laver or bowl from which the priests would wash when they ministered at the altar. The water had no special or magical qualities. The water taken from the laver was called holy water because it was water set apart and used in tabernacle ceremonies. The water used was not taken straight from the well.

dust from the floor of the tabernacle. The earthen vessel (clay comes from the ground) and the dust were fitting for the seriousness of the occasion. The jar was coarse and plain; there were no pretty, delicate and refined vessels or sweet drinks. From the earth and dust we came and to it we shall return. This was a reminder of the seriousness of unfaithfulness, the penalty being death when a person was caught in the act of adultery.

Verse 18

After the priest has made the woman stand before the LORD, he shall loosen her hair and place in her hands the reminder offering, the grain offering for jealousy, while he himself holds the bitter water that brings a curse.

The uncovering and loosening of the woman's hair by the priest was taking away the woman's modesty. It also emphasised that if she were guilty then she had shown herself as not being in subjection to her husband. The barley flour now made up as the grain offering for jealousy was placed into her hands. This was a reminder to the woman that she was in this situation because her husband was jealous and suspicious of her behaviour. She was holding the grain offering as if it were her own offering. The priest held the jar of water. It was called bitter because of the effects it would have on those that were guilty.

Verses 19-22

Then the priest shall put the woman under oath and say to her, "If no other man has slept with you and you have not gone astray and become impure while married to your husband, may this bitter water that brings a curse not harm you. ²⁰ But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and you have defiled yourself by sleeping with a man other than your husband"— ²¹ here the priest is to put the woman under this curse of the oath—"may the LORD cause your people to curse and denounce you when he causes your thigh to waste away and your abdomen to swell. ²² May this water that brings a curse enter your body so that your abdomen swells and your thigh wastes away."

The priest told the woman very clearly what was at stake. If she were willing to tell the truth, in that she was not guilty of unfaithfulness, then the water given to her by the priest would do her no harm. If she were guilty when she drank the water it would cause pain and discomfort.

"Then the woman is to say, "Amen. So be it."

The wife had to acknowledge she understood by saying, "Amen, so be it."

Verses 23-28

“The priest is to write these curses on a scroll and then wash them off into the bitter water. ²⁴ He shall make the woman drink the bitter water that brings a curse, and this water will enter her and cause bitter suffering. ²⁵ The priest is to take from her hands the grain offering for jealousy, wave it before the LORD and bring it to the altar. ²⁶ The priest is then to take a handful of the grain offering as a memorial offering and burn it on the altar; after that, he is to make the woman drink the water. ²⁷ If she has defiled herself and been unfaithful to her husband, then when she is made to drink the water that brings a curse, it will go into her and cause bitter suffering; her abdomen will swell and her thigh waste away, and she will become accursed among her people. ²⁸ If, however, the woman has not defiled herself and is free from impurity, she will be cleared of guilt and will be able to have children.

All that had been said to the wife in verses 19 and 20 was written on a scroll and then washed in the water. This was a sign of identifying the sin with the test of guilt. After an offering of some of the grain the woman drank the bitter water. If she were guilty of unfaithfulness to her husband she would suffer physically and would be rejected as a woman by her people. If she were innocent the woman would be cleared of guilt and be able to have children.

Verses 29-30

“This, then, is the law of jealousy when a woman goes astray and defiles herself while married to her husband, ³⁰ or when feelings of jealousy come over a man because he suspects his wife.

This was the procedure that was called the law of jealousy. It was appointed by God to deter wives from being unfaithful and to stop husbands from being cruel to their wives. The purpose behind this and other laws was to keep Israel pure before the Lord.

The priest is to make her stand before the LORD and is to apply this entire law to her.

The husband was not to take matters into his own hands but to bring his wife before the priest. The priest was to act in accordance with the law and perform every rite and ceremony required.

Verse 31

The husband will be innocent of any wrongdoing,

If the husband followed the procedure prescribed by the law of jealousy then no blame could be laid against him. It made no difference to the outcome, whether his wife were innocent or guilty. Ignoring this procedure and taking other action could not be justified, even if his wife had

been unfaithful. The husband would then be guilty of wrongdoing, especially if he had taken someone's life in a fit of jealousy.

but the woman will bear the consequences of her sin.”

The woman had to suffer if she had sinned. Guilt brought her the shame of being childless and it could have been the grounds of divorce. Her sin may not have been adultery, but her behaviour was such that it caused suspicion or jealousy. Being brought before the priest to endure the test of unfaithfulness would in itself be an ordeal, even if the test showed that she had not slept with another man.



Summary

The principle that sin has to be put away is set out at the beginning of this chapter. Uncleaness was to be dealt with straightaway. The purity of the Israelite camp was essential because God lived amongst them. Anything unclean had to be put outside the camp. This principle was then illustrated by two laws. The first one related to sin's being accounted for. This required restitution to take place with the person who was sinned against and also with God. Any wrongdoing against another person was a sin against God. Payment had to be made for that which was taken plus a compensation of one fifth. Then a sacrifice had to be brought to the priest so that the sin could be atoned for. The second illustration of putting sin away concerned suspicion by a man of his wife's being unfaithful. This could have led to jealousy. This would result in two sins in the camp: the unfaithfulness of the wife (defilement, dishonesty) and a seething jealousy of the man. Provision was made through the law of jealousy for the matter to be dealt with. It was based upon God's knowing the hidden thoughts and actions and the administration of his perfect justice. The man was not to act by taking matters into his own hands. He was to bring his wife to the priest, who would follow the law and test whether she had been unfaithful. This way the man could not be to blame. Only if the wife were guilty of unfaithfulness would she suffer.



Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes

Cleanliness and purity are readily identified by Christians as being part of their spiritual make-up. Being cleansed from sin, washed and renewed is the message that runs through New Testament teaching. A good example is Titus 3:5-7. We use illustrations from physical life to understand spiritual truth. So the regulation that the Israelite camp had to be kept clean of disease and infection was an important spiritual lesson concerning man's spiritual pollution and disease, sin. Anyone who was infected or who had come in contact with contamination was to be put out of the camp. It was common sense and good practice hygienically. Those who were physically well stayed in the camp. Spiritually they were as polluted and contaminated as those put out of the camp. The principle being taught was that we have been put out of God's camp (his family) because of our spiritual disease. Only when a person is cleansed of that spiritual disease can they come into and be part of God's family. The only way that this can happen is by that person's trusting in Jesus Christ who by dying on the cross has been punished for their sins.² The New Testament describes this as cleansing and purifying. Another name we give for God's family is "the church".

The two laws, restitution and the law of jealousy, need careful consideration. They may appear outdated or harsh as we read them today. They were given to the Israelites by God and cannot be ignored. God does not change and man's basic needs are the same as ever. Therefore the laws are as relevant to us today as they were then. We need to bring the teaching of the New Testament to bear upon these laws to draw out their relevance for us.

Where we have wronged another person, we have committed a sin against God. That truth has not altered and we need to follow the instruction given. We have to put things right with the person against whom we have done wrong; then we confess our sin before God. In both these actions forgiveness should be forthcoming. The offended person

² Sickness should not be automatically looked upon as arising out of a sin. It is wrong and unkind to view illness as a direct result of a sin and accuse the person of some sin without ever being able to identify it. Hebrews 12 describes God's painful chastening when we have sinned and not repented. That may include afflicting us with an illness to make us come to our senses. This is not the same as saying that all illness means we have committed sin. The man born blind in John 9 shows the error of such thinking (see verses 2-3 in particular).

is instructed by the New Testament to forgive and God is merciful and willing to forgive that which is confessed in the name of his Son, Jesus. We confess through Jesus because he is our sacrifice. In Old Testament times, before Jesus came, confession was made through the bringing of animals to the priest. The killing of the animal and its sacrifice on the altar was the way the sin was atoned for. Today we confess to Jesus believing that when he died on the cross he became the sacrifice for our sins and atoned for them through his death.

The repayment plus one fifth as part of the restitution is a principle sadly missing in most judicial systems of nations today. The tendency is to lock away the condemned person. The victim is not compensated and the person in prison does not take the full responsibility for his actions. Often imprisonment can make a person worse. A Christian needs to keep the biblical principle of restitution in mind when putting things right with another person. This does not mean that a payment of money is involved, but the law of restitution does teach us the spirit in which our confession and putting things right has to be done.

What do we make of the situation where the husband suspected his wife of adultery? The important lesson to be drawn out is that this was a provision by God to test an oath of innocence. We must view this as a physical picture to teach us spiritual truths. If she had lied before God the woman would have brought a curse upon herself. God exposes liars and hypocrites. The principle set out at the beginning of the chapter is that sin has to be put away, rooted out and got rid of (the spiritual lesson of infected people being put outside of camp). Unfaithfulness does not fit with being part of the people of God (the church). In Corinth the apostle told the church that a particular man who was guilty of sexual immorality had to be put out of the church (1 Co. 5:1-5). Such a person is not barred from attending the services, but cannot be part of the community of believers and enjoy all the privileges that such communion brings. Remember, we are talking about people who have made a profession of faith, but are not holding to the fundamental teachings of that faith. Where the unfaithful believer confesses and repents, he or she can be restored to the fellowship of the believers. The provisions that God made in the Old Testament were not to condemn but to redeem. We find God's grace in both the Old and New Testaments, because he is unchanging and is of the same disposition now as he was then.



Some suggestions of what to preach about from these verses

We have given three suggestions of what could be preached on from this chapter. Each one can be developed and expanded to meet the needs of the people being preached to. All three suggestions can be incorporated into one sermon by taking the main points. In preparing one message for the whole chapter be careful not to put in too much detail.

Theme 1: God's people must keep themselves pure and devoted (5:1-4)

Unclean means dirty and the only solution for uncleanness is a wash. But a person could become unclean before God for many reasons. Three are listed in verse 2:

- Disease (leper)
- Discharge (presumably abnormal)
- Death (touching a corpse)

God is in the camp; everything in the camp must reflect God's perfection and purity. Anything that suggests impurity or imperfection reflects upon God and must be put out. It cannot defile the camp. Often the penalty for approaching God in an unclean state was death.

Principle: physical symbols teach spiritual truths. God knows the secret things, which are more than the visible symbols. What God forbids on the outside he forbids on the inside. If you truly want your heart to be pure, you will not object to seeking purity on the outside.

Application:

1. The church of Christ must be pure and devout.

Our hearts and motives matter most, but we are commanded to exercise public purity and devotion.

2. We need to be made clean.

Christ dealt with all three of these examples of defilement in his earthly ministry.

- A leper came to Christ and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean!" Christ touched the leper and said, "I am willing, be clean."
- A woman with a discharge of blood for 12 years touched Christ's robe... Christ said, "My daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace."
- Christ stopped a funeral procession... the only son of a destitute widow. We're told, "He touched the [open] coffin... and said, 'Young man, get up!'"

It would be tempting to conclude that the Old Testament is harsh to lepers and Jesus is compassionate. We have examples to show that way of thinking is not right.

- In the New Testament Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead for lying.
- In the Old Testament Naaman a Syrian and a leper was healed (and saved) by God's compassion.

God cares about outcasts and lepers in the Old Testament.

This passage teaches that if we want to be right with God we must be clean from all our sin. What is clear for us today is that Christ is able to make us clean. In Christ anyone can be clean in God's new kingdom. You can be made clean by Christ (1 John 1:7).

Theme 2: Fraud and forgiveness (5:5-10)

God wants his people to be faithful to each other. For God's people to be united there must be implicit trust that we are all committed to each other's good.

Verse 6 sets out that when a man or woman commits any sin against another person that man or woman has been unfaithful to the Lord.

Unfaithfulness is a serious matter. Leviticus 6 explains it as a breach of trust, as dishonesty and cheating. Such sin would stir up dangerous undercurrents of mistrust in the camp. It would affect the army's unity. It must be purged. How?

Confession to God – for sin is against God (5:7: “and must confess his sin”).

- (a) They were required to come to the priest because whilst the other person was defrauded, the sin is “unfaithfulness against the Lord”.
Example: David confessed his adultery and murder in Psalm 51: “Against you, you only (*the Lord*), have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” David is not denying that he has hurt others; he recognises that sin is sin because God is God.

- (b) Sacrifice – for sin is deadly (5:8 “along with the ram with which atonement is made for him”).

We cannot remove guilt. Sin leaves a curse that only death can remove. God takes no delight in the death of the sinner, but rather that the sinner should live. God made provision for sin to be removed by sacrifices that would take the place of the sinner. Instead of the sinner's being punished by death, the sacrificed creature became the substitute. This is what Jesus Christ did when he came to earth. He became a sacrifice and his death is the substituted punishment for anyone who trusts in him.

Note: The sin is not covered by the sacrifice if we have not been reconciled with the person against whom we have sinned (Matt. 5:23-24).

(c) Restitution to man – for sin is costly (5:7 “He must make full restitution... add one fifth”).

God’s law of “an eye for an eye” was never intended to allow personal revenge. Rather it means that the punishment must fit the crime. When a guilty verdict is reached in public law the offender must pay a penalty. In Luke 19:8: Zacchaeus said, “Look, Lord... if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

Application

1. Disunity through sin and breaking of faith must be dealt with immediately in Christ’s church.
2. When we wrong another we often assume that it’s enough to apologise and that is the end of the matter. Not necessarily. If we are able to restore or make amends in practical demonstration – then let us!
3. Overlooking wrong – seek reconciliation. 1 Cor 6:7: “The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged?”

Has anyone offended you? Seek reconciliation. “Oh, but I am the offended party.” So was God and he went straight ahead and sought reconciliation through the giving of his Son for you.

Theme 3: Purged out - jealousy (5:11-31)

People may joke about “the green-eyed monster”, but it is no joke. Proverbs says, “Jealousy is the rage of a man. Jealousy is as cruel as the grave... it is a blazing fire/” Distrust between a husband and wife is the deepest of all divisions. Marriage is the building block of society. If marriages fail, society falls. This must not happen in God’s camp. Soldiers cannot fight if they suspect their wives at home. Above all marriage illustrates God’s relationship with his people. Marriage must be defended.

But suppose a man suspects his wife. Whether she’s innocent or guilty, witnesses willing to speak will be hard to find. Another way is needed to root out jealousy or sin. God institutes this elaborate oath:

1. The suspected woman is put on oath “before the Lord”.
2. The priest pronounces the curse if she is guilty. The woman responds, “Amen”. This is her plea of “Not guilty”.
3. She drinks water mixed with dust from the tabernacle floor.
4. Judgment follows. If innocent nothing happens. If guilty some sickness or infertility.

This procedure is not a grim ordeal. In trials by ordeal the person is presumed guilty and must clear his name. In God's test there is no human prejudice. God's law protects women in a male society. No man can vent his suspicion in secret. His marriage was public, before God, so shall this ritual be. There were to be no private vendettas. A wise man thinks twice before public accusation. A wise man will talk to his wife. This test is not harmful and clear judgment is given. Either the man or the woman is vindicated. The man must put to death his jealousy and embrace his wife if she is innocent.

Like all rituals this oath teaches us spiritual truth: Nothing escapes the searching purity of God's judgment. The holy water from the golden bowl, mixed with dust from the tabernacle, represented the searching holiness of God. By drinking it, a person was saying, "Search me, O God. See if there be any wicked way in me."

Application:

Judgment must begin at the house of God. Christ expects integrity, trustworthiness and fidelity from his people.

- (a) In marriage. The adulterer and adulteress may speak of love but their love is a perverse, cruel love that sacrifices the innocent partner and children. They are degraded with selfish lust. God will judge the adulterer and the adulteress.
- (b) In church.
 - In Acts 5 judgment fell upon Ananias and Sapphira, who sold a possession, but lied about how much they actually gave from the sale of their property.
 - At Corinth the wicked abuse of the Lord's Supper had led to some of the believers being judged by God and dying.
What does this mean? It means that God exposes and judges all liars and hypocrites. Unfaithfulness is incompatible with membership of the people of God.
- (c) In private. What if we were to endure such a test today? How would we fare? How faithful have we remained to Christ, our husband, this week? Are we not in danger of loving the world? Would our conscience be clear?
What a man is, in secret, on his knees before God, that he is, and no more.

Conclusion: leave your life of sin

This whole chapter is about God's grace to sinners. Even in the Old Testament God gave all these systems, not to condemn, but to redeem. The God who exposed liars and hypocrites was also ready to forgive the repentant. The same is true today. We see this fully in Christ.



Focus Point:

Confession and repentance

At the heart of God's provision for man is a way out of the mess that man finds himself in. This mess is the result of man's own doing. The key to the escape is confession and repentance. In our study we have the instruction, "and must confess the sin he has committed" (5:7). In the Gospels we find that John the Baptist, who was the one sent to prepare the way for Jesus, preached a baptism of *repentance* for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3). In our Focus Point we give consideration to these two words and their meaning.

Confession

This word comes from the Greek that means *to say the same thing*. When we confess we are in agreement with something. A person who makes a personal acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour is agreeing with what God has said in the Bible. Such a person has made a *confession* of Christ. They are saying the same thing that God has said. In the same way when a person confesses their sin, they are saying the same as God says about sin. Confession of sin is an acknowledgement that forgiveness for wrongdoing against God is only possible through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament the bringing of animals to the priest to be sacrificed on the altar in the temple was part of the worshipper's confession of their sin. They were agreeing that the animal sacrifice and their acknowledgement of their breaking of God's law over the head of the animal was the way that God had set up to deal with the forgiveness of their sins. In the New Testament Christ has replaced the animal sacrifice. The confession of our sin is to be made to God alone and not through any person. There are some occasions when believers are encouraged to share their confession with one another (James 5:16). That is not the same as confessing their sins to God for forgiveness.

Repentance

The Greek word "metanoia" translated in the English "repentance" involves a change in the whole way of thinking. The old way is regretted and there is a desire to live in the new way. It is an essential ingredient in the process of salvation. In the New Testament meaning there has to be a turning from sin to God. Both actions are required for a person to be saved, to move from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God. A person can change their lifestyle and be rid of bad

habits but not turn to God. They may be an improved person but spiritually it will all be useless. The opposite can happen too. A person turns to God, may cry over their sin but not turn from and leave their sin. True repentance has not taken place.

Repentance does not stop when a person is saved. Believers in Christ are spiritually renewed and changed, but they still have the old flesh (sinful nature). A Christian's life is continually a personal battle between the Spirit and the flesh (see Romans 7:21-24). Repentance has to be a daily experience for the Christian believer. The more a person knows God the more he or she understands the depths of their sinful nature and the deeper the sense of their repentance. A preacher who lived a long time ago said, "If I die in the pulpit I want to die preaching repentance, and if I die out of the pulpit I want to be practising it" (Philip Henry).

As we speak with God, acknowledging who he is and his attributes and admitting our failures, mistakes and wrongdoings – we are confessing. This has to be accompanied by action, a turning from the sin with a resoluteness not to repeat it. It is not just an inward desire, but may involve doing something e.g. avoiding going to a particular place, meeting with certain people, not watching certain films or reading books or magazines etc. This is repentance.



Over to you

What is the normal practice of dealing with wrongdoing in your society? How does it differ from the biblical pattern?

How do you deal with a believer who is unrepentant of a particular sin? Is there guidance in the passage we have been studying to help you?

What is the important lesson you have learnt from this study? How would you apply this lesson to your own situation (or congregation)?

CONSECRATION IS FOLLOWED

BY BLESSING



Numbers 6:1-27

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes
- 📁 A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: Separation
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

In the opening verses of chapter 5 God, through Moses, commanded the Israelites to put away sin. Anyone who became infected or contaminated had to be put outside of the camp. This demonstrated the spiritual lesson. This principle was followed by three sets of laws that illustrated and applied the principle. The first two were in chapter 5, the law of restitution and the law for dealing with suspected unfaithfulness. The third law relating to the principle of putting away sin related to the Nazirite vow and forms the main part of chapter 6. The word Nazirite comes from the Hebrew word that means “to be set apart”. The law of the Nazirite was a practice to show a separation from the sin associated with the world, whereas the laws relating to restitution and unfaithfulness were dealing with excluding those guilty of uncleanness or sexual sin. Taking a Nazirite vow was to show special devotion to God. Who were the people who took such vows and what did they do?

What these verses mean

Verse 1

The LORD said to Moses,

God continues to give instructions to Moses concerning the laws and regulations in preparation for the journey and settling in the promised land.

Verse 2

“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the LORD as a Nazirite,

To make a vow means to promise. It was customary in those days for a person to make a vow to God when in particular circumstances, such as danger or expressing gratitude for preservation e.g. a difficult childbirth. The promise given under the Nazirite law was voluntary; there was no pressure or compulsion for a person to do this. The vow taken was because the person desired to live entirely dedicated and separated to God.

Verses 3-4

he must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or from other fermented drink. He must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins. ⁴As long as he is a Nazirite, he must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins.

Taking the Nazirite vow was voluntary but strict rules were to be followed once the vow was taken. The purpose was separation from the world and this was to be done in four ways demonstrating complete dedication to God. The first was full separation from everything that came from the grapevine. This included alcoholic wine, juices, grapes, raisins or anything connected with the vine. This distinction of the Nazirite was in contrast to the previous chapter, which taught separation because of sin. Here we have separation from sin to a holy life with God. The grapevine would have been the plant mostly associated with the pleasures of life. Whilst its fruit was nutritious, it gave rise to excessive use when fermented as wine. The grape was also linked with sensuality. By abstaining from the fruit totally, the person was showing symbolically a separation from worldly pleasures.

Verse 5

“ ‘During the entire period of his vow of separation no razor may be used on his head. He must be holy until the period of his separation to the Lord is over; he must let the hair of his head grow long.

The second requirement of the vow was a separation by not cutting the

hair. Long hair was a visible sign of the vow and the sincere desire to keep the promise. This continuing reminder of the vow, seen by all his compatriots, put pressure on the Nazirite. To let one's hair grow, unchecked, showed a certain disregard for this world's fashion and a commitment to serve God. Cutting the hair meant there had been defilement (see verse 9, and Jeremiah 7:29). The vow of separation was always for a specified period of time, which was determined voluntarily by the person.

Verses 6-7

Throughout the period of his separation to the LORD he must not go near a dead body. ⁷ Even if his own father or mother or brother or sister dies, he must not make himself ceremonially unclean on account of them, because the symbol of his separation to God is on his head.

The third requirement of the vow was avoiding contact with the dead. It was another picture of keeping away from sin. The person taking the Nazirite vow was prepared to do something the rest of Israel was not. Non-attendance at a funeral was unusual in those days so it was seen and commented on. It may seem extreme, but this also showed that the person loved God more than his relatives. The whole point was that God was the Lord of life and during the period of the vow there was to be no defilement through being close to a dead body.

Verse 8

Throughout the period of his separation he is consecrated to the LORD.

The fourth requirement of the vow was that during the period of separation the person's whole life was consecrated to the Lord. To be consecrated means a total commitment to God's service. It was not a matter of just abstaining from the grape, not cutting hair or keeping away from dead bodies. The period was to be devoted to God in service in the community. This was not a time for a person to hide away and be a hermit.

Verse 9

“If someone dies suddenly in his presence, thus defiling the hair he has dedicated, he must shave his head on the day of his cleansing—the seventh day.

The law of the Nazirite provided for the situation where a person died suddenly in the presence of a Nazirite. Defilement was unavoidable and contamination occurred. There was a need for cleansing. The Nazirite was ceremonially unclean and on the seventh day after defilement took place the hair had to be shaved off as a sign of casting off the

defilement. This provision was for the unexpected and would not apply if sin were deliberate or could have been avoided.

Verse 10

Then on the eighth day he must bring two doves or two young pigeons to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

On the eighth day after being defiled the guilty person had to bring an offering to the priest. The offering was made up of two doves or two young pigeons. The defiled Nazirite was to come to the door of the Tent of Meeting, but could not go in because of his uncleanness. The two doves or two pigeons were the same offering that a poor woman who had given birth was to bring to the priest for her purification (Lev. 12:8).

Verse 11

The priest is to offer one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering to make atonement for him because he sinned by being in the presence of the dead body.

Two offerings were required: one of the birds was for a sin offering whilst the other was for the burnt offering. The sin offering was to atone for the sin of the person who had been in the presence of a dead person. The bird died to take the place of the person who sinned so that he might live. The burnt offering was a gift from the defiled person to God, thanking God for accepting the sin offering. The burnt offering was the only sacrifice where the whole creature was burnt. In all other offerings part of the creature was for the priest to eat.

That same day he is to consecrate his head.

The ceremonially cleansed person must now re-grow his hair as a sign of re-consecration. The whole vow was to start again, everything until now being cancelled. It showed what care had to be taken so that the person would not defile himself by being in the presence of a dead body.

Verse 12

He must dedicate himself to the LORD for the period of his separation and must bring a year-old male lamb as a guilt offering. The previous days do not count, because he became defiled during his separation.

As the days prior to the sin were not counted in his separation, the person concerned had to start again. To do this, another sacrifice was required, made with a year-old male lamb for a guilt offering. The guilt offering was similar to the sin offering except that the guilty person had to pay for what had not been done or had been lost. This usually required an extra fifth. The year-old lamb would have been quite an expense for most people. The whole procedure for a person coming

into contact with a dead body involved three sacrifices and a return to the beginning when the vow was first made.

Verse 13

“ ‘Now this is the law for the Nazirite when the period of his separation is over.

When the period of separation made in the vow was complete, a strict set of procedures was to be followed before the person could be discharged from their vow and return to normal life.

He is to be brought to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

The vow was discharged publicly by the person's being brought to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. We are not told who was to bring the Nazirite, but we have this sense that the completion of the vow should be witnessed and known by others.

Verse 14

There he is to present his offerings to the LORD: a year-old male lamb without defect for a burnt offering, a year-old ewe lamb without defect for a sin offering, a ram without defect for a fellowship offering,

The vow was discharged publicly with sacrifices. The size of the offering that had to be brought was large when compared to the general sacrificial offerings that are described in the book of Leviticus. Here three animals were required and they could not be substituted with birds if the lambs and ram could not be afforded. When the vow was taken, the person was not only devoting himself to God with his separation from sin and the world, but also had to be willing and able to bring the offerings for the discharge from the vow. For many people these offerings would have been beyond their normal means. It was a true test of their devotion. These were to be used in three types of sacrifice.

- i. The burnt offering (a year-old male lamb) was to acknowledge God's sovereignty over the person bringing the offering .
- ii. The sin offering (a year-old female lamb) was to atone for breaking God's law. The offering of the life of an animal was the ransom price for the sinner to become free from punishment. The Nazirite was considered by others to be pure, but he was still a sinner in his heart and had to bring sacrifices to God.
- iii. The fellowship offering (a ram) was thankfulness to God who helped the person to keep the promise of the Nazirite vow. In some English translations this offering is called the peace offering. Part of the fellowship offering was for the priest to eat.

Verse 15

together with their grain offerings and drink offerings, and a basket of bread made without yeast—cakes made of fine flour mixed with oil, and wafers spread with oil.

In addition to the three meat offerings, grain, drink, bread, cakes and wafers were to be brought. These were to accompany the meat offerings. In Leviticus 7:11-21 the regulation for the fellowship offering is set out. If this offering were an expression of thankfulness then the cakes, bread and wafers had to accompany the meat offering. Yeast was not permitted, because it represented contamination that would spread throughout the dough. Bringing items to the altar for sacrifice with yeast was not acceptable.

Verses 16-17

“ ‘The priest is to present them before the LORD and make the sin offering and the burnt offering. ¹⁷ He is to present the basket of unleavened bread and is to sacrifice the ram as a fellowship offering to the LORD, together with its grain offering and drink offering.

The priest was to take all the offerings to the Lord and carry out the three offerings.

Verse 18

“ ‘Then at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, the Nazirite must shave off the hair that he dedicated. He is to take the hair and put it in the fire that is under the sacrifice of the fellowship offering.

The hair, which was grown as a sign of submission, is itself now sacrificed. It was placed under the bread, ram, grain and drink which formed the fellowship offering. The shaved hair was the ultimate sign of offering to the Lord. The vow could now be cancelled, as the burning of the hair showed God had accepted the vow. This all took place in public view at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. Others witnessed that the vow was fulfilled and would not be offended if they saw the person drinking wine or attending funerals.

Verse 19

“ ‘After the Nazirite has shaved off the hair of his dedication, the priest is to place in his hands a boiled shoulder of the ram, and a cake and a wafer from the basket, both made without yeast.

The priest now prepared further items from the fellowship offering. It appears that this ritual was an addition to the normal fellowship offering and was only applicable to the Nazirite vow. In a fellowship offering, as set out in Leviticus 7, the priest was to be presented with the right shoulder of the animal. Here the reference to the boiled shoulder is the left one and so the priests received both shoulders. The priest

also took a cake and a wafer from the basket that had been prepared for the fellowship offering.

Verse 20

The priest shall then wave them before the LORD as a wave offering; they are holy and belong to the priest, together with the breast that was waved and the thigh that was presented. After that, the Nazirite may drink wine.”

The items listed in the previous verse were waved by the priest to show that it was given to him as payment for his duties. Only when these ceremonies were completed could the Nazirite resume normal life.

Verse 21

“This is the law of the Nazirite who vows his offering to the LORD in accordance with his separation, in addition to whatever else he can afford. He must fulfil the vow he has made, according to the law of the Nazirite.”

The law relating to the Nazirite was concluded. A person who took this vow had to follow this law of separation for the period of the vow and also comply with its requirements when it finished. Everyone who took the vow was obliged to follow it, even if they were poor. Lastly there was a freewill offering according to how much the Nazirite could afford. It would have been expected that a rich person would give more than one who did not have much.

Verses 22-23

The LORD said to Moses, ²³“Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

The instructions to Moses have not yet ended. What now follows may seem strange at this point in the narrative because Aaron and his sons, as the priests, are directed in the giving of blessing to the people. A blessing in this case is a temporal or spiritual good that is given by God. Understood this way we see how entirely appropriate it is for God’s blessing to follow a life consecrated to him. The layout of this whole chapter underlines the promise that all who live for God will receive much blessing from the Lord. Notice the blessing came from God, through the mediator (Moses) to the priest (Aaron) for the people. People cannot pronounce blessings on other people, whether they are ministers or not. As humans we seek the Lord’s blessing as recorded here.

Verses 24-26

“ ‘The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵ the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

²⁶ the LORD turn his face towards you and give you peace.” ’

The blessing is a poem of three lines. Each line begins with “the LORD”. This could look forward to the New Testament picture of God in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The first part of the benediction asks for spiritual prosperity and safekeeping. The shining of the Lord’s face shows a caring, kind and generous attitude and purpose. It is an understanding that God’s pleasure is upon the people and that he grants them sweet access to himself through prayer and service. His face turned towards us indicates that God is attentive to our needs. He surrounds the people with his favour and brings peace to the hearts of those he blesses.

Verse 27

“So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

Lastly God gave the priests permission to use his name in blessing the people. The people were being identified with God as his people. Through the pronouncements of the priests God was going to bring temporal and spiritual good to the people. We now see the cyclical working of consecration and blessing. When blessed in such ways people want to vow special service for God, to be separated to him. That in turn will bring more blessing. In our chapter the consecration is set out first, but the desire to consecrate one’s life comes about because of the blessing that God has already given.



Summary

The Nazirite was an example to the Israelites of someone prepared to be totally committed to serving God. Not drinking alcohol demonstrated a discipline beyond normal living at that time. Not cutting the hair showed concern for God’s service rather than conformity to this world. Keeping away from dead bodies was a dedication to spiritual things rather than the routine of life that ends in death. Rejecting unsuitable food emphasised the desire to be different. This was the purpose of the law of the Nazirite. It was a voluntary vow for a period that the person himself set. When the period of the vow ended the discharge from it was public and required sacrifices far in excess of the normal offerings. Taking a Nazirite vow was serious, demanding strict discipline and dedication. The vow was not to be fulfilled hidden away from the world, but in serving God by being in the world but not of it. Provision was made if the person

Summary continued on page 85

Summary continued from page 84

who had taken the vow accidentally touched a corpse. This taught the people that all sin pollutes and must be paid for. The period of consecration had to start again. Sin cannot be brushed aside as if it didn't matter. The reward for being separated and devoted to God was God's giving rich blessings, which brought peace to the heart in the midst of a turbulent world. That in itself was the stimulus to be separated and dedicated to God.



Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes

Our immediate problem with Numbers 6 is that there is nothing equivalent to the Nazirite vow in the New Testament. It would be going outside of New Testament teaching to insist that Christian believers should take vows. For example there is no warrant for a person to have to promise that they will abstain from alcohol to come into membership of a church or take up a particular position in a church. The New Testament sets out principles and is very clear about abuse of alcohol and many other things. The thing to remember about the Nazirite vow is that it was voluntary and temporary. So how do we handle this passage?

It is important that we recognise the transition between the Old to the New Testament. The Old Testament is all about the preparation for the coming of the Messiah. His coming was to deal with the fall of man through sin and the consequent separation from God. Everyone who lived before the coming of Jesus Christ as the Messiah had to be rescued and saved from his or her sin in the same way as everyone who has lived or lives since the coming of the Messiah. The difference is that those who lived before did not fully know who was to be the Messiah or how he would save people. So the Old Testament is full of pointers to how Jesus would make people right with God. The sacrificing of animals, for example, was to teach the people that they had to trust in one who would be their substitute and die as a punishment for their sin. People had to believe in that, by faith, in the same way that people today have to believe by faith in Christ's death on the cross. People living today know the first coming of the Messiah as a historical fact. The events, ceremonies and types in the Old Testament are often referred to as shadows of what took place in the New Testament.

We can therefore look upon the Nazirite vow as a symbolic picture of consecration to the Lord. When a person puts their trust in Jesus Christ it means that they have been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and now belongs to the kingdom of God. The symbolic abstinence from produce of the grapevine, the non-shaving of the head and not being near dead bodies is now replaced by references such as, “Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - which is spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:1-2). A person does not become a Christian by taking a vow, but by trusting in Christ and consequently becoming a changed person because of the spiritual transformation that takes place. The separation with which the Christian struggles is with the desires of the flesh. These are listed in Galatians 5:16-21 and are what the world follows. Being a follower of Jesus Christ means choosing a path of self-denial and living differently from the world. It is not a vow limited for a temporary period as we have in Numbers 6. What the Nazirite vow does is to teach us symbolically from the old covenant what consecration means in the reality of the new covenant.

The blessing tied in with consecration is therefore continued from the old to the new. The priestly benediction is repeated today through benedictions given at the close of services using the name of triune God of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God has not changed and continues to bless those who give themselves to him. The heavenly blessings with which Paul opens his letter to the Ephesians are an example of the spiritual good that initiates dedication and then sustains it. As the apostle John wrote, “We love because he [God] first loved us” (1 John 4:20).



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme: The holy calling of God's people

1. Costly Devotion – the Nazirite Vow (6:1-21)

Vows played a major part in the spiritual life of God's Old Testament people. Vows were made following blessings and answers to prayer, or before facing difficulties. The Nazirite vow was the most searching of all. The word “Nazir” is connected to the Hebrew verb meaning “to separate” for God, for God to use in this life. Everything about this vow, its sacrifices and restrictions pointed to something special: intense devotion to God and his holiness.

The Nazirite vow involved 3 areas: he must not drink anything from the vine, cut his hair or be in contact with a dead body. These showed that the Nazirite was the Lord's pilgrim, sacred like a priest and kept pure.

2. There are several famous Nazirites in the Bible:

- Samson the Judge was "a Nazirite to God from the womb until the day of his death". Samson's mother was placed under the vow by the Angel of the Lord, until Samson was born (Judg. 13).
- John the Baptist (Luke 1) was set apart as a life-long Nazirite.
- Paul shaved off his hair, in Acts 18:18, as he finished such a vow. Later he pays for the sacrifices of four Jewish Christians who had vowed.

But most Nazirites were not famous – but they were special. For they were ordinary people devoting themselves as living sacrifices upon the fire of God's cause. They were responding to something wonderful that God had done. Perhaps before marriage, after children, or a healing. A Nazirite loved God, needed God and was willing to be consumed as fuel in the fire of God's glory!

All Nazirites when they finished their vows had to offer sin offerings (v14). No one fully kept the vow. Despite all their intensity, they were sinful, just like us. The Nazirite was not a super-hero. He represented God's desire for all ordinary Old Testament believers.

There has only ever been one true Nazirite. One man whose life was consumed for the glory of God. One man who burned with the devotion of the Nazirite. Although there is no link in the sound of the words, he came from Nazareth. Christ is the devoted one. But his zeal and obedience make it possible for us to know God and to serve God now.

3. The Nazirite pattern for us

We have more reason to dedicate ourselves to the Father who loved us and to the Christ who died to save us? Doesn't the Nazirite live in Romans 12:1-2?

Take up the Nazirite vow.

- We are pilgrims. Should we not restrain our drinking of the vineyard of this world? Our home is heaven – should we live such settled lives here? Do we communicate our faith in the resurrection?
- We are priests. Our gifts, our beauty, our strength, are all for Christ. Should we not show by our lives that God owns the right to use all of us and that it is only as we depend on God that we can achieve anything?

We ought to be pure.



Focus Point: Separation

The emphasis of the Nazirite vow was to *separate* oneself from the world and be devoted to God. Separation is a concept that runs through the Bible and is a vital part of holiness. For the Christian believer separation is to be a feature of his or her life, yet Scripture is clear that the Christian interacts with the world as a messenger of the good news of Jesus Christ. So what is this separation that does not mean cutting oneself off?

The Israelite people were God's chosen people. God expected them to imitate his holiness, his being separated from sin. God's perfection cannot be together with that which is not perfect otherwise God would become imperfect. The Israelites were not to engage in the practices of the surrounding, ungodly nations. These nations practised child sacrifice and fortune-telling; they had mediums and witches. The Israelites were not to intermarry with people from these nations. The Israelites were to separate themselves so that they would not be influenced and start living in the way of the surrounding nations. They were to avoid being contaminated. The reason for this was that they were being used by God to bring forth the Messiah and so the Israelite nation had to be kept pure. So separation is not only being set apart from contaminated things, but being set apart for a particular use.

In the New Testament the emphasis on God's calling his people to be unique is even stronger. God continues to choose and call people to believe in his Son, Jesus Christ and to be his followers. Such people who belong to the Lord are new creatures and have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. They are changed people and it is therefore expected that their conduct and lifestyle will be different. What has taken place is that the person has had a spiritual rebirth (he is born again). However, the old nature (the flesh) has remained and a conflict exists between the old and new (the flesh and the spirit). Part of the daily struggle a Christian experiences is to promote the spiritual rebirth and suppress the old sinful nature of the flesh. The old nature craves for the things of the fallen world (Gal. 5:19-21) whilst the reborn spirit desires the things of heaven.

Separation is not a matter of external acts, a list of forbidden activities. Jesus extended the Old Testament law by pointing to the thoughts and attitudes. Adultery is committed in the mind not just in the flesh.

Strife, jealousy, selfishness, dissension, envy etc. are all spiritual sins. A common mistake has been to have a list or rules of activities that are forbidden. In some circles people are judged to be believers or not on the basis of whether they smoke, drink alcohol, play cards and go out to cinemas and theatres. It is possible to live a life that is very separated in action, but very worldly or unseparated as far as attitudes are concerned. This was the problem with the Pharisees.

Biblical separation for the believer is having to measure thought, attitudes and actions against certain principles:

- Can it be done for the glory of God? (1 Co. 10:31)
- Can it be done in the name of Christ with his blessing? (Col. 3:17)
- Is this what Christ would have been likely to do? (1 John 2:6)

Will it contribute positively to the spiritual well-being of others? (1 Co. 10:23-30).



Over to you

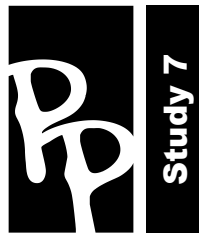
Is separation and devotion (consecration) a concept understood and practised by those in your congregation who profess to be Christian believers?

Do you teach and challenge your people from the Scriptures about true Christian discipleship? How would you use Numbers 6 to do this?

Does your church lay down rules about what actions are permissible and those that are not? How do these rules bear scrutiny in the light of our study?

BRINGING GIFTS AND

OFFERINGS TO GOD



Numbers 7:1-89

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes
- 📁 A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: Some principles for Christian giving
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

We come to three chapters, 7-9, which do not necessarily follow chronologically the first six chapters of Numbers. The events of our study chapter take place in combination with Exodus 40. A possible reason for the arrangement of the text in the book of Numbers, and not in Exodus, is because the subject matter fits with the preparation for the journey that the Israelite people are about to begin. Chapter 7 is a long passage with 89 verses, but it is straightforward. 78 verses are given over to the gifts that the leader of each tribe brought for the offering of the altar. One list of gifts is repeated twelve times, one for each tribe. This is then followed by a record of their sum total. What at first reading may appear to be unnecessary repetition has valuable instruction.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

When Moses finished setting up the tabernacle,

Exodus 40:33 informs us that Moses finished the work of setting up the

tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting. All the preceding verses of that chapter give a detailed description of this work. The opening verse of Numbers chapter 7 seems to follow on from that point in Exodus.

he anointed it and consecrated it and all its furnishings. He also anointed and consecrated the altar and all its utensils.

The tabernacle was set apart for worship by being anointed and consecrated. Anointing indicates God's approval and consecration shows us how unique the tabernacle and all its furnishings and utensils were.

Verse 2

Then the leaders of Israel, the heads of families who were the tribal leaders in charge of those who were counted, made offerings.

The men who were to assist Moses and Aaron in taking a census of the whole Israelite community (Num. 1:5-15) are described as the leaders of Israel. They represented every tribe. Moses described them as having been in charge of the counting. He uses the past tense since he has put this information after the census. The leaders brought offerings to the Lord for the service of his sanctuary.¹

Verse 3

They brought as their gifts before the LORD six covered carts and twelve oxen—an ox from each leader and a cart from every two. These they presented before the tabernacle.

The offerings they brought were not for sacrifice but were practical gifts. The presents were useful, to help their fellow Israelites – carts and oxen. Each leader brought an ox but each pair of leaders provided a cart. No reason is given for this arrangement, though it has been suggested by some scholars that the carts would not have been ordinary wagons but rich carriages. The tribal leaders presented the gifts before the tabernacle. From the next verse it appears that Moses would not receive the gifts until he received instruction from the Lord, hence their placement before the tabernacle.

Verses 4-5

The LORD said to Moses, ⁵ “Accept these from them, that they may be used in the work at the Tent of Meeting. Give them to the Levites as each man's work requires.”

The Lord approved the offerings and told Moses to use them to carry the large amount of poles and coverings, together with the vessels of the Tent of Meeting. This made the Levites' rôle easier. Everything to do

¹ Sanctuary in this context means a special place set apart where God dwelt among his people and where special laws applied. Today some use the word “sanctuary” to describe the inside of the church building. Others would disagree with the use of such a term, because they would say that the church is the people and not the building.

with the setting up of the tabernacle and its packing away came through the Lord's instructions to Moses. Yet the detail to do with the moving of the tent, its furnishings and vessels came through human discretion. Did the tribal leaders work this out for themselves or did Moses give them a hint under divine guidance?

Verse 6

So Moses took the carts and oxen and gave them to the Levites.

Moses did as God said, not retaining the gifts, but passing them on to those they were intended for. Moses obeyed, probably not knowing how his action would fit so neatly into the instructions that God would reveal to him a month later.

Verse 7

He gave two carts and four oxen to the Gershonites, as their work required,

We can follow the logic of how the gifts were distributed because we have already considered in chapters 3 and 4 the division of responsibilities for the work between the three Levite clans. Two carts and four oxen went to the Gershonites to help them carry the coverings of the Tent of Meeting.

Verse 8

and he gave four carts and eight oxen to the Merarites, as their work required.

The Merarites received twice as much as the Gershonites because their task needed more heavy moving equipment to carry the heavy pillars, sockets and boards of the Tent of Meeting.

They were all under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron, the priest.

The work of both the Gershonites and the Merarites was supervised by Ithamar. Ithamar was Aaron's fourth son, but since the death of his two older brothers for their disobedience to God only he and Eleazar were left to continue the Aaronic priesthood line. The Lord's instructions were overseen by the spiritual leadership, in this case delegated to Ithamar.

Verse 9

But Moses did not give any to the Kohathites, because they were to carry on their shoulders the holy things, for which they were responsible.

The Kohathites did not need the assistance of carts and oxen. They were responsible for the most holy things, which included the ark of testimony, table, altar and other holy furnishings of the tabernacle. The priests were responsible for packing these items and only when they

had finished covering all these items were the Kohathites allowed to come to carry (4:15). The ark, table and altar were to be packed in a way that allowed poles to be put through the covering material so that the Kohathites could carry them with the poles on their shoulders. They were not to touch any of the items with their own hands. As the Kohathites were to carry using the poles on their shoulders, there was no need for them to have carts.

There could well have been a break in time between the practical gifts in verses 1-9 and the offerings brought for the dedication of the altar from verse 10 onwards. If there were a time lag it would have been about a month. The altar dedication gifts could have been brought after the census was taken and after the Levites received their instructions in caring for the tabernacle.

Verse 10

When the altar was anointed, the leaders brought their offerings for its dedication and presented them before the altar.

In Exodus 40:9-10 Moses was instructed in the anointing of the tabernacle and the altar. To anoint means to pour on or smear with oil someone or something that is set apart for God for a special purpose. In Exodus 30:22-33 the Lord instructed Moses how the anointing oil was to be prepared and used. The anointing oil was to be special and could not be made up for any other use. Moses followed the instruction and when the altar had been anointed, offerings were brought so that the altar could be dedicated. The ***anointing*** of the altar was a one-off act prescribed by God to show the uniqueness of the altar for the exclusive use by the priests in the service to God. The ***dedication*** of the altar was the act, by the people, confirming their recognition and commitment to the altar's being set apart for God. The people's support was seen in the offerings they brought. This was not an act to gain the favour of Jehovah, but was done in sincere love to God.

Verse 11

For the LORD had said to Moses, "Each day one leader is to bring his offering for the dedication of the altar."

The commitment of the people to the altar, being a special item of furniture in the tabernacle as an important part in their worship of God, was to be shown by their leaders. The way that the leaders were to bring the offerings was to be ordered and to show honour. One leader per day was to come. This meant that the offering took 12 days to be brought. This would have made an impact upon the people, teaching them the

solemnity of what was taking place. Had all the leaders come on the same day, there might have been chaos and confusion and the significance of what was taking place would have been lost.

Verse 12

The one who brought his offering on the first day was Nahshon son of Amminadab of the tribe of Judah.

The order in which the leaders of each tribe came with their offering followed the layout of the camp as set out in Numbers chapter 2. This specified order may suggest that the bringing of the offerings for the dedication of the altar took place after Numbers 2. On the east side of the tabernacle were the divisions of the tribe of Judah. The leader of the people was Nahshon.

Verse 13

His offering was one silver plate weighing a hundred and thirty shekels,

The silver plate, or dish, weighed about 1½ kilograms and was to hold the meat offering that would be brought for sacrifice.

and one silver sprinkling bowl weighing seventy shekels,

The silver sprinkling bowl weighed about ¾ kilogram and was to hold either the drink offering or the blood of the sacrifices.

both according to the sanctuary shekel,

The standard of measurement used for weight was the sanctuary shekel. There were three types of shekel, one for ordinary business, the sanctuary shekel and the royal shekel. Payments for goods were often made with silver, which was then weighed out according to the appropriate shekel. For ordinary business the common shekel was used, which weighed 11-12 grams. The sanctuary shekel weighed about 10 grams and the heaviest, the royal shekel, weighed about 13 grams.

each filled with fine flour mixed with oil as a grain offering;

Both the dish and the bowl were filled with fine flour mixed with oil. This was to be used for a grain offering (Lev. 2:1-16, 6:14-23). Part of the grain offering was burnt as a gift to God. The rest belonged to the priest and his family. The grain offering was a present to God, a type of gift or tribute given to a superior person. Whereas in the earthly sense such a gift was to find favour with the person (for example, a king), the grain offering was part of appeasement of God, for him to turn his anger away and, instead, to receive his good will.

Verse 14

one gold dish weighing ten shekels, filled with incense;

The golden dish was a smaller item weighing about 110 grams. Some

translations describe the utensil as a large spoon. The vessel was filled with incense to be used on the altar. Incense has an aroma that rises when it is burned. This aroma is pleasing to God. Incense is a symbol of prayer (Rev. 5:8, 8:4).

Verse 15

one young bull, one ram and one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering;

Three animals were brought for the burnt offering. The burnt offering was by fire when the whole animal was offered. In other fire offerings the priest could keep some of the offering for himself. The Hebrew word for burnt offering comes from the verb “to go up”. The whole offering was to go up to God. In the burnt offering the worshipper made the gift of the animal to God to honour him. The worshipper dedicated himself to God and identified himself with the animal when he placed his hands on the head of the animal. This led to God’s accepting the worshipper because payment for sin had been made (Lev. 1).

Verse 16

one male goat for a sin offering;

A male goat was brought for the sin offering. A sin offering was to put things right with God for unintentional sins. Even in the act of bringing offerings for the dedication of the altar there was the impurity of sinful man. The altar offerings had to be accompanied by a sin offering. With a sin offering the priest burned the fat and the kidneys on the altar and with the other men of his family ate the meat in a holy place. The worshipper did not share in any part of the sacrifice (Lev. 2).

Verse 17

and two oxen, five rams, five male goats and five male lambs a year old, to be sacrificed as a fellowship offering.

A total of seventeen animals were brought for the fellowship (peace) offering. The large number brought was because of the nature of the fellowship offering. It was a joyful occasion showing the blessing of peace with God. The meal was shared by the priest and his family and the worshipper and his family. Only the fat around the intestines, the kidneys and the liver and the fat around the sheep’s tail were burnt in the fellowship offering. The priest and his family ate the breast and the right thigh in a ceremonially clean place. The worshipper and his family ate the rest (Lev. 3).

This was the offering of Nahshon son of Amminadab.

All of these things were the offering brought by Nahshon of the tribe of Judah. All the clans of the tribe would have helped in making this

offering. The offering was brought under the standard with the banners of his family.

Verses 18-83

These verses follow the same construction as verses 13-17. The remaining tribes brought their offerings for the dedication of the altar.

Verses	Day	Leader	Tribe	Offering
18 – 23	Second	Nethanel	Issachar	The offering he brought was one silver plate weighing a hundred and thirty shekels, and one silver sprinkling bowl weighing seventy shekels, both according to the sanctuary shekel, each filled with fine flour mixed with oil as a grain offering; one gold dish weighing ten shekels, filled with incense; one young bull, one ram and one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; one male goat for a sin offering; and two oxen, five rams, five male goats and five male lambs a year old, to be sacrificed as a fellowship offering.
24 – 29	Third	Eliab	Zebulun	
30 – 35	Fourth	Elizur	Reuben	
36 – 41	Fifth	Shelumiel	Simeon	
42 – 47	Sixth	Eliasaph	Gad	
48 – 53	Seventh	Elishama	Ephraim	
54 – 59	Eighth	Gamaliel	Manasseh	
60 - 65	Ninth	Abidan	Benjamin	
66- 71	Tenth	Ahiezer	Dan	
72 - 77	Eleventh	Pagiel	Asher	
78 - 83	Twelfth	Ahira	Naphtali	

Equal honour came to each tribe. Time was taken to present each tribe's gift, so adding to the honour of the occasion. The tribes showed how important to them these gifts were by the way they presented them. This was the beginning of a lifetime work for the Levites. If all the gifts came on the same day, much of the food may have been wasted, some of which was food for the priests (Lev. 2:10). The order in which the tribes brought their gifts followed the choosing of the tribes in chapter 2. The record is repeated twelve times. Would it not have been enough to say, "And so all the leaders came"? By repeating the event for each tribe no distinction was made between them. God carefully recorded what each tribe did, showing his personal joy for all the people equally.

Verses 84-88

These were the offerings of the Israelite leaders for the dedication of the altar when it was anointed: twelve silver plates, twelve silver sprinkling bowls and twelve gold dishes. ⁸⁵Each silver plate weighed

a hundred and thirty shekels, and each sprinkling bowl seventy shekels. Altogether, the silver dishes weighed two thousand four hundred shekels, according to the sanctuary shekel. ⁸⁶The twelve gold dishes filled with incense weighed ten shekels each, according to the sanctuary shekel. Altogether, the gold dishes weighed a hundred and twenty shekels. ⁸⁷The total number of animals for the burnt offering came to twelve young bulls, twelve rams and twelve male lambs a year old, together with their grain offering. Twelve male goats were used for the sin offering. ⁸⁸The total number of animals for the sacrifice of the fellowship offering came to twenty-four oxen, sixty rams, sixty male goats and sixty male lambs a year old. These were the offerings for the dedication of the altar after it was anointed. So all the gifts for the dedication of the altar, spread over the 12 day period, were recorded. Where did all the wealth come from? The Israelites were in the desert with no trade to increase their wealth. When they came out of Egypt the Egyptians gave them enormous wealth (Ex. 12:35-36). So the tabernacle was furnished with the riches of Egypt who had kept God's chosen people in bondage.

Verse 89

When Moses entered the Tent of Meeting to speak with the LORD, he heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the atonement cover on the ark of the Testimony. And he spoke with him.

God now shows his pleasure by speaking with Moses. The ark of the testimony is described in Exodus 25:10-22. It was a box about 1.14 metres by 0.68 metres by 0.68 metres, made of wood. The lid, covered with gold (called the mercy seat), had two angels called cherubim carved to spread their wings over it. God said he would meet with Moses there (Ex. 30:6). The tabernacle was not an empty shrine but a place where the living God dwelt.



Summary

Two sets of offerings were brought to the tabernacle. The first offerings were brought by the leaders when Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle. The gifts consisted of six carts and twelve oxen. God accepted these gifts and Moses gave them to the Gershonites and Merarites for moving the equipment of the tabernacle. The distribution of these practical gifts related to the work allocated to each clan.

Summary continued on page 99

Summary continued from page 98

The Kohathites received none, for they were to carry the furnishings with poles on their shoulders. The Merarites had the heaviest load to carry and received the most carts and oxen. The second set of offerings were for the dedication of the altar. Each leader of all the tribes brought the same for a grain offering, a burnt offering, a sin offering and a fellowship offering. The bringing of the offerings was spread out over twelve days with one tribe per day. The people, through their leaders, were affirming and committing themselves to the altar as being the special place, set apart where sacrifice for sin would take place. When all was finished Moses entered the tent and heard the voice of God speaking. The special dwelling place for God was ready and complete.



Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes

What does this chapter teach the Christian church? Some of the formal religious churches of Christianity treat their buildings as special places as if God lives in them. They will have altars and other furnishings, statues and icons. In such places the worship of God takes the form of ritual and ceremony. A personal knowledge of God through faith in Jesus Christ is not the norm. The early New Testament church knew none of this. We read of believers gathering in houses to meet for worship. God meets with his people wherever they come together (Matt. 18:20). The building doesn't matter, but the people. Why then the tabernacle, its altars and furnishings in the Old Testament? The difference is the Lord Jesus Christ. His coming to this earth was the greatest historical event that brought about an enormous change. The tabernacle, and subsequently the temple, was set up so that substitutionary animal sacrifices could take place. Jesus became the substitutionary sacrifice that did not need to be repeated. As a result our form of worship has changed from that of the Old Testament and we no longer rely on buildings and altars.

The principle we need to consider is that God had done something wonderful and the people responded in the bringing of gifts. In our study the tabernacle had been established. This was God's showing the people that he was amongst them and how he could be approached and worshipped. Out of this flowed practical gifts and offerings that

showed their acceptance of and commitment to God's ways. When a person becomes a follower of Jesus Christ an enormous change takes place in that person's life. The person is freed from being a slave of Satan and is now a citizen of the kingdom of God. The person wants to show God that he now follows him and accepts God's ways. We come to the root of Christian giving.²

The Christian person now loves the Lord. His heart is bound to the Lord and the Christian considers Jesus to be his real treasure. Any possessions of this world are now looked upon and treated as being used in the service of the Lord. It is not just possessions but time and effort as well. The people, through their leaders, gave practical gifts for the cause of the tabernacle and costly offerings that concerned its spiritual functioning. The Christian gives to the service of God with a loving and willing heart. It is practical, for the well-being of others, to bring people to Christ. God does not accept gifts that come from a begrudging heart, but he wants a cheerful and willing giver. Commitment and allegiance to the cause of Christ are what we take from this chapter.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – Bringing our gifts to God

1. The motivation for giving

Two examples of people bringing gifts and offerings. One followed the anointing and consecration of the tabernacle; the second was for the dedication of the altar.

Both resulted from a willing and grateful heart, responding to what God had done. The tabernacle was the way to God for the people Israel. The people rejoiced in this provision. Today we must come through our Lord Jesus Christ into God's presence.

The willingness and generosity of the people were motivated through their appreciation of what God had done. Our motivation for giving is motivated by what God has done for us through Christ.

2. Practical giving

The gifts of the carts and oxen were practical gifts, useful to the Levites in their work.

² Gordon J Keddie *According to the Promise* (Evangelical Press)

The carts and oxen were distributed to the Levites as an aid to their work in such a way as to give the maximum benefit. See how God is wise in all he does, giving us all the help we need to do his work.

Christians are to be conscious of the needs in the church, and individual people's lives. The "cup of cold water" (Matt. 10:42) can break down barriers and is smiled upon by our God. Let us all be ready to give and receive, remembering all is done in the Lord's name.

3. Purpose of our giving

The offerings brought for the dedication of the temple were to enable the prescribed offerings to take place. They showed a deep spiritual commitment to God's ways and being in the right relationship with him.

The offerings also maintained those whom God set aside for his service because they were able to feed themselves and their family. As a result they could devote themselves fully to the service of God.

Our gifts of time, energy and possessions are to show our deep spiritual commitment to God and his ways. Our priority is for the work of the gospel to take place, for people to come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. God blesses his work when it stems from his people who are united in the cause (John 13:35). Everything we do must be mixed with love.



Focus Point:

Some principles of Christian giving

1. We should give without making a display of our work (Matt. 6:1-4).
2. We give according to our ability (1 Co. 16:2).
3. Everything should be done willingly (1 Chron. 29:3-9).
4. Always be liberal (that means not giving grudgingly) (2 Co. 9:6-15).
5. Remember we give to God; do so cheerfully (2 Co. 9:7).
6. It is wise to give to the church, into a common treasury, not secret gifts to a leader. A leader who accepts gifts that way is very unwise.
7. As the leaders in Israel gave individually, and God recorded the gift from that tribe, so God notices how we give. Remember we give back what belongs to the Lord, for we have nothing of our own.
8. By giving to a common treasury the gifts are merged into one fund, making it appear all have given equally. Thus the poor and the rich are brought together (Mark 12:42-44).

9. Our giving must be a sign of thanksgiving and thankfulness to God, not as a duty. This is sometimes called a freewill offering.
10. Our greatest offering is our life and service to our Lord. This is the ultimate sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.



Over to you

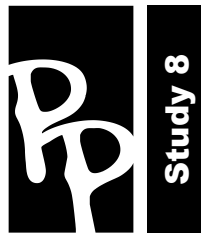
What are the practical lessons you have gained from this study that are relevant for your cultural situation?

Why do the people in your congregation give? Is it out of duty, because it is expected of them, or out of a thankful and appreciative heart? Do your teaching and preaching bring about any of these attitudes?

How do your people understand Christian giving and commitment? Is it seen in material terms only or in devotion of life?

GOD'S LAMPS ARE LIT FOR

SERVICE



Numbers 8:1-26

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes
- 📁 A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: The sacrifices
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

The Tent of Meeting had been set up in accordance with God's instructions and had been completed and its commissioning had taken place. The Levites, who were to be set aside for the work of the tabernacle (see chapters 3 and 4) were now ready to be accepted into their important rôle. Before this took place, we first have a brief account of the seven lamps (candlesticks) which were to be positioned in the Tent of Meeting and lit. The main part of our study chapter is devoted to the establishment of the Levites' service of God and the nation of Israel through their work in the tabernacle. Is there a link between the lamps and the consecration of the Levites? The lamps were to give light in that area of the Tent of Meeting. The Levites were to be God's lamps to the rest of Israel, shining the light on God and his ways. This is a picture comparison of the lamps and the Levites. The Levites were at the centre of the spiritual life of the nation, a life that was to be essential on the march to and conquest of Canaan, the promised land.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

The LORD said to Moses,

It is not clear when the instructions God is about to give Moses took place. It could have followed the gifts of offering brought by the tribal leaders (chapter 7). It could also have immediately followed the instructions for the giving of the Levites to the priests to assist in the work and service of the tabernacle (chapters 3 and 4).

Verse 2

“Speak to Aaron and say to him, ‘When you set up the seven lamps, they are to light the area in front of the lampstand.’”

The instruction was from God to Aaron, the priest, through Moses. It concerned the lighting of the seven lamps. The lamps were on a lampstand made out of pure gold. The details of the construction of the lampstand (golden candlestick) were given in Exodus 25:31-40. The lampstand was made as instructed (Ex. 37:17-23). The purpose of the lampstand and the lamps was to provide light in the Tent of Meeting, especially the table of showbread that was situated opposite. From Exodus 30:8 we find that the lamps were to be lit as the daylight was ending and darkness beginning.

Verse 3

Aaron did so; he set up the lamps so that they faced forward on the lampstand, just as the LORD commanded Moses.

Aaron, God’s servant, lit the lamps. This was probably the first time that the lamps were lit and that is why Aaron officiated. It is thought that the middle lamp was lit from the altar first, and then the other six from that first one.

Verse 4

This is how the lampstand was made: It was made of hammered gold—from its base to its blossoms. The lampstand was made exactly like the pattern the LORD had shown Moses.

We are reminded that the lampstand was made in the pattern God had shown Moses. It was made up entirely of gold and there was no deviation from God’s instruction. God was precise in his instructions and he expected all that he said to be followed.

Verse 5

The LORD said to Moses:

God spoke to Moses concerning the consecration of the Levites. This occasion may not have followed on immediately after the lighting of the lamps, but took place on a different occasion. It is interesting to note

that though the Levites were limited to assisting the priests, were not allowed into the sanctuary and were to do the heavy work of carrying the tabernacle, God had them consecrated to himself by a solemn rite. The Levites were not consecrated together with the priests, thus drawing a distinction between them and avoiding the danger of the Levites' priding themselves on being equal to the priests. Being consecrated showed the reverential nature of their work, even if it involved menial tasks.

Verse 6

“Take the Levites from among the other Israelites and make them ceremonially clean.

The Levites had been called to service by God (3:6) and in preparation they were to be made ceremonially clean. The word “ceremonially” shows that the cleansing would be a ritual. This could not in itself bring about the purification of the people. The ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were visual aids to spiritual truth. By taking part in the ceremonies and ritual, people learnt spiritual truth. The ceremonial cleansing and associated offerings are described for us in verses 7–14 that follow.

Verse 7

To purify them, do this:

Three separate acts must be followed as part of the ceremonial cleansing.

Sprinkle the water of cleansing on them;

Sprinkling with water indicated the washing away of any pollution.

then make them shave their whole bodies

Shaving the whole body set the Levites apart from their compatriots, cleansing them from any pollution that water did not take away.

and wash their clothes,

Washing clothes was a sign of ultimate cleanliness of both body and garments.

and so purify themselves.

With this ceremony complete the Levites were declared clean. The spiritual lesson for Israel was that God is holy and cannot look upon sin. The Levites, in being set apart to serve God, had to become cleansed. As valuable as this lesson was, the ritual did not make their sinful hearts clean. All that happened was symbolic, so there had to be further ceremonies in the consecration of the Levites for God's service.

Verse 8

Make them take a young bull with its grain offering of fine flour mixed with oil; then you are to take a second young bull for a sin offering.

The second series of ceremonies focused on the very thing that the first part could not deal with – sin and its penalty. The activities of the first ceremony showed the condition in which the Levites were to serve God, cleansed and purified. The second ceremony was to show how such cleansing was to take place – a sin offering. Sin has to be punished and the penalty for sin is death. The spiritual lesson of the sin offering was that a substitute could be offered in the place of the one who had sinned. The second series of ceremonies, which formed part of the consecration of the Levites, contained four types of offering. The two bulls were for a sin and a burnt offering. Accompanying one of the bulls were ingredients for a grain offering (fine flour mixed with oil). This was an offering that accompanied the sin offering and was burnt as a gift to God. The aroma from this burnt offering was pleasing to God. The combination of the sin, burnt and grain offerings showed how God was pleased for man to acknowledge and confess his sin before God in the way appointed by him. There were no ingredients for the fourth offering, the wave offering, as in this case the Levites would be the offering (see verse 13).

Verse 9

Bring the Levites to the front of the Tent of Meeting and assemble the whole Israelite community.

The consecration of the Levites, involving the offerings, was to be carried out in full view of all the Israelites, in front of the Tent of Meeting. The significance of this ceremony in front of the people will be seen in the following verses. The phrase “the whole Israelite community” does not mean that every person came. It means that every part of the nation came together; every tribe and section of the community was represented.

Verse 10

You are to bring the Levites before the LORD,

The Levites were positioned in the courtyard of the Tent of Meeting, in front of the tent door (verse 9) in the space between the tent and the altar. This was the altar where the burnt offerings were made and in that sense was where the Lord was present to accept the sacrifices.

and the Israelites are to lay their hands on them.

The people were to lay their hands on the Levites. This had two significant meanings. Firstly, the people were identifying themselves

with the Levites. This did not pass on any gift or power to the Levites, but showed unity between all God's people. Secondly, there was a symbolic transference from the people through the Levites. In Leviticus 16:21 Aaron was to lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the sins of the people. By this action the sins of the people were transferred to the goat, which was then sent away to a solitary place taking the people's sins with it. It is likely that either the leaders of each tribe or the eldest sons laid their hands on the Levites to represent the people.

Verse 11

Aaron is to present the Levites before the LORD as a wave offering from the Israelites, so that they may be ready to do the work of the LORD.

The Levites are likened to a wave offering as Aaron presented them to the Lord. The wave offering was part of the fellowship (peace) offering. The person bringing the offering would take the breast of the animal and wave it before the Lord as a wave offering. The breast then belonged to Aaron and his sons. The waving of the breast symbolised that it belonged to the Lord. In this case there was no animal breast to be waved. The Levites were not physically waved, but it was a symbolic act by the people, through the laying on of hands, that the Levites were given in service and dedication to the Lord on the people's behalf and with their agreement. The Levites represented the whole nation before God. They were the living substitutes for the firstborn of the twelve tribes of Israel (see Study 3, pages 40-41).

Verse 12

“After the Levites lay their hands on the heads of the bulls, use the one for a sin offering to the LORD and the other for a burnt offering, to make atonement for the Levites.

The Levites in turn were to lay their hands on the two young bulls that were brought for the sin and burnt offering in verse 8. The sin offering reminded everyone present that although the Levites were set apart and purified, they were still sinners. The great cloud of smoke from the offerings had to come between God and the people before any communion could take place. The sin offering also showed how unworthy the Levites were to serve in this way. The instruction to use a bull for the sin offering was a requirement for when anointed priests or the whole Israelite community sinned (Lev. 4:3, 4:13-14). The burnt offering signified devotion to the Lord and was linked to the sin offering because first sin has to be accounted and paid for. In the burnt offering the worshipper laid his hands on the head of the burnt offering (Lev. 1:4).

Verse 13

Make the Levites stand in front of Aaron and his sons and then present them as a wave offering to the LORD.

A second symbolic act of a wave offering was carried out. This time the instruction was for the Levites to stand in front of Aaron and his sons, and Moses presented them to assist Aaron and his sons, dedicating them to the Lord in the work of the tabernacle.

Verse 14

In this way you are to set the Levites apart from the other Israelites, and the Levites will be mine.

Through this special consecration the Levites were identified as belonging to God. They were cleansed and purified, sacrifices were offered for them, they were presented before the Lord, the hands of the people of Israel were put upon them, and they were offered and waved before the Lord. They were set before Aaron and his sons, as their ministers, in God's service.

Verses 15-18

“After you have purified the Levites and presented them as a wave offering, they are to come to do their work at the Tent of Meeting. ¹⁶They are the Israelites who are to be given wholly to me. I have taken them as my own in place of the firstborn, the first male offspring from every Israelite woman. ¹⁷Every firstborn male in Israel, whether man or animal, is mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set them apart for myself. ¹⁸And I have taken the Levites in place of all the firstborn sons in Israel.

The separating of the Levites to God was completed. The Levites went to serve God on behalf of the people in the Tent of Meeting. God had substituted the Levites for every first male born to an Israelite woman. This is a reference to Exodus 13 when every firstborn male was consecrated to God to commemorate the day Israel came out of captivity in Egypt. During the night the Lord struck down the firstborn of every home unless the doorframe was marked with blood from a slaughtered lamb. All the Israelites had marked their doorframes and the Lord passed over their homes and their firstborn lived.

Verse 19

Of all the Israelites, I have given the Levites as gifts to Aaron and his sons to do the work at the Tent of Meeting on behalf of the Israelites and to make atonement for them so that no plague will strike the Israelites when they go near the sanctuary.”

Aaron had presented the Levites to be devoted to God (verse 11) and now God gives the Levites to Aaron to assist him and his sons in the

work at the Tent of Meeting. This all meant that the Levites were to serve the people, the priests and the Lord. The priests, Aaron and his sons, made atonement by sacrifice. The Levites made atonement by being there and assisting the priests. In this way the Levites contributed to the nation's honour, safety and prosperity. God had declared the Levites best suited out of Israel and gave them as a gift to Aaron. This was in preference to the firstborn sons who may not have been so skilled and gifted. The neglect of duty would have had repercussions. Ensuring the work was done correctly and constantly, thus satisfying God's laws and keeping any displeasure away, prevented plague from falling upon Israel as a punishment (see 1:53 and 16:46).

Verses 20-22

Moses, Aaron and the whole Israelite community did with the Levites just as the LORD commanded Moses. ²¹The Levites purified themselves and washed their clothes. Then Aaron presented them as a wave offering before the LORD and made atonement for them to purify them. ²²After that, the Levites came to do their work at the Tent of Meeting under the supervision of Aaron and his sons. They did with the Levites just as the LORD commanded Moses.

The commands were obeyed and the Levites took up their place in the Tent of Meeting assisting the priests. Aaron made the offering and the Levites did as the Lord commanded Moses.

Verse 23

The LORD said to Moses,

Notice how each time a command is given it is to Moses as the mediator. The matter now to be dealt with is the working age of the Levites.

Verse 24

“This applies to the Levites: Men twenty-five years old or more shall come to take part in the work at the Tent of Meeting,

In chapter 4:3 the minimum age was set at 30 years old, but here it is lowered to 25. The reason seems to be that it was felt wise for young men to gain experience between 25 and 30 so that they could take on the full duties at 30 years old. Novices can easily be lifted up with pride! The responsibility of the work was such that any error or mistake had serious consequences. Young men have a tendency to be light-hearted and flippant. As they matured into manhood, they were trained for five years in preparation. By the age of 30 their maturity and preparation made them ready to serve in the work of the tabernacle.

Verses 25-26

but at the age of fifty, they must retire from their regular service and work no longer. ²⁶ They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the Tent of Meeting, but they themselves must not do the work. This, then, is how you are to assign the responsibilities of the Levites."

The retirement age was set at 50 years old. This was not to demean older men. In fact they were told to assist the younger men in the work. The arrangement of using men in the age bracket of 30 to 50 years of age was very practical. These are the prime years of life and are to be used for the service of God. When physically the strength of the body begins to weaken, the experience of many years' service was to be used in helping the younger men.



Summary

The opening verses of the chapter set the theme for what follows: being a light. Aaron was to light the lamps on the lampstand. This gave light to the immediate area of the tent, especially to the table with the showbread. This picture of giving light, so that objects can be seen, is continued with the consecration of the Levites. The Levites were to be like living lamps of God. Their work and service was to be the means by which the Israelite people were to come to know and understand God. Yet their service was to assist Aaron and the priests. Some of their work was menial, repetitive and physically demanding. It was still important work that required strict observance of God's instructions. This was all signified by the way Moses was told by God to consecrate the Levites. They were being set aside for the service of God. God was claiming them to be his. Every part of the Israelite community was involved and gave their support. The setting apart of the Levites for their ministry required a cleansing ceremony and sacrificial offerings. They could not serve God without being cleansed and having their sins dealt with. Not only were the Levites set aside in this special way, but they were to give God the best time of their life. This was between the ages of 30-50. For five years Levite men were prepared for service. When physically they had peaked, they were not disregarded. Instead they were to assist the stronger, younger men by using their accumulated experience. This is a pattern designed by an all-knowing and wise God.



Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes

Aaron, God's servant, lit the lamps, dispelling the darkness (see Psalm 18:28). This is a picture of preachers expounding the Scriptures so that people understand God's Word. They shed light on it. The central lamp on the lampstand was lit from the altar first. Christ is the centre of our worship, the Light of the world. From him his servants get their light and become the light that is set on a hill, a witness to the world. The lampstand had to be made according to the pattern God instructed. It is important we tell the people what God has told us – exactly like the pattern. Gold is a most precious metal and so is the light of the gospel, precious throughout its entire teaching, making people wise to salvation and bringing eternal life.

The consecration of the Levites, through the cleansing ceremonies and sacrificial offerings, sets before us valuable principles for Christian ministry and service. There are lessons here for all Christian believers, not just pastors and preachers. In verses 20-22 we have Moses, Aaron and the whole community doing what God commanded. We have the equivalent in John 14:15 where Jesus says, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." The people in Numbers obeyed because they understood that through the sacrifices their sins were being punished and forgiven. They appreciated that God could look upon them as being washed and cleansed. In Titus 2:12 we read that the grace of God teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions. We do not obey God because the preacher tells us to. Obedience follows when we believe that Jesus Christ is the Saviour sent by God's generous love and undeserving favour, and when we totally trust in him and in nothing else. Paul describes this as the Spirit's work, because the Spirit's fruit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control will be evident in the obedient person (Gal. 5:22-23).

The Levites were set apart to serve God full time in the tabernacle. All the other tribes of Israel supported them so that they could devote themselves fully to God's service. It was for the spiritual well-being of the people, for through the Levites' ministry the people would learn of God. The people gave their assent and support, demonstrated by the laying on of hands. In the Christian church there are those whom God sets apart to serve full time. They too are supported by the rest of the Christian community. The setting aside of such a person is recognised publicly. All the people present give their assent and the practice of

laying on of hands is continued. How do we know whom we should set aside for such ministry? Acts 13:2 records that the Holy Spirit informed the worshipping congregation at Antioch to set aside Barnabas and Saul (later renamed Paul) for full-time ministry. They were to be missionaries travelling to other lands. The same principle applies today. The Holy Spirit shows a local congregation someone who should be set aside. This can come about in various ways. For example a person may have teaching gifts and this is recognised by the local church. The church, together with the person, seeks the will of God (worshipping). One of the ways we can discern the Lord's will is when the local Christian community is of one mind. This will have come about by prayer, studying the Bible and having fellowship together in worship. The person is set aside publicly at a service (maybe called recognition, ordination), which is the consecration of that person. The people's assent is demonstrated through the laying on of hands.

The regular service of the Levites was between the ages of 30-50. Before that they were trained and prepared. After 50 years of age they moved to lighter duties. Is the New Testament so prescriptive? No, but the same underlying principles are to be found. An elder is not to be a recent convert (1 Tim. 3:6). Maturity and preparation are needed, as well as all the other qualifications. Paul urges the Christians in the church in Rome to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This applies to believers of all ages, but the combination of spiritual maturity and an active, fit body will be found in the age range 30-50. Christian believers are to give of their best years to God, not too early and not too late. It does not seem right for an older man to hang on in some position when younger men are available. The principle of training and preparation, together with standing aside but helping with wise and experienced counsel, is much needed in the Christian church. The age rule for the Levites has much to commend itself to the New Testament church.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – Serve the Lord your God

1. The lamps must be lit (Verses 1-4).

- (a) The Lord gave instructions as to where the light in the Tent of Meeting should stand. It gave light to the tent and especially onto the table of showbread. Christ is the light shining into this

dark world, showing men and women their situation and need of being rescued from their terrible situation. If there were no light they would not see their situation; it is the light that exposes it. This is a picture of the gospel message, the most important part of the church's ministry.

- (b) The Christian church is described by Jesus as being a light set up on a hill. Those who make up the church must be living lights, otherwise there will be no light and people will not see. We need to be ready to listen to God's instructions and then obey them. Only in that way can we be God's lamps that have been lit.

2. The Levites' commitment (Verses 5-26).

- (a) The Levites dedicated themselves totally to the Lord. Because they had been called to the rôle, separation was necessary in sprinkling, shaving and washing clothes. These are important principles for all Christians, who need the Holy Spirit (sprinkling), and new life separated from sin (a shaved body) and "garments of holiness" (washed clothes).
- (b) As believers we are given new, spiritual, clothes, the old ones being contaminated with worldly lust and desire. As the Levites washed their clothes so we are washed in the blood of the Lamb, becoming acceptable to God (Eph. 3). We are told to put off the old ways of the world, and put on the new way of Christ.
- (c) The wave offering (verse 21) shows dedication and acceptance. The service was full-time – they were wholly the Lord's. The Christian yields himself to God in service and devotion every day and what we give to God (our life) will be given back to us honoured and enhanced. Christians should be diligent to serve God in everything they do, both in our church life and in secular employment. Is our service just "part-time" when we have nothing better to do?

3. Giving of the best (shining brightest) (Verses 23-26)

- (a) The Levites were to serve in the tabernacle between the ages of 30-50. They were to be prepared from the age of 25 and were to retire at 50. At 50 they were to do lighter work and help the younger men.
- (b) Christians are to give of their best in serving God. They are not to put off things they can do in the church until they are older and have more time. The consecration of the Levites to do all types of work in the tabernacle showed that God looks upon all

service as valuable and important. There is always work to be done. Jesus said the harvest is great, but the labourers are few.

4. Conclusion

The importance of the presence of the Levite is explained at verse 19. The believer's presence in a community should be vital to that village, town or city. Does your life reflect the grace of God in you?



Focus Point:

The sacrifices

Sacrifice in the Old Testament stood for substitution (that is one standing in for another), and all the teaching on forgiveness of sin comes from that principle. The Passover lamb was the foundation on which all the other sacrifices stood. This sacrifice, explained in Exodus 12, was only performed once, at the great exodus from Egypt, and then annually as a memorial to the first Passover. It was at this time that God entered into a covenant (agreement) with Israel and they became “the people of God”. From that time on the sacrifices offered were either **in communion** with God (burnt, peace offerings), or **for communion** with God (sin, trespass offerings). The priest stood as the mediator, the one standing between God and the people, and after the shedding of the blood he assured the people that God had accepted the offering.

The requirements of a sacrifice were:

1. Those things brought - animal, grain - must have belonged to the person who was offering.
2. The animals must be free of any blemish (disease, injury).
3. Salt must be added to the sacrifice as a sign of wholesomeness (Lev. 2:13).
4. The creatures for sacrifice could be oxen, sheep, goats or birds according to the ability of the person offering.

Types of sacrifice:

1. **The burnt offering** (Lev. 1) represents total surrender to the Lord, seeking his acceptance. It followed the sin offering and preceded the trespass offering. The sacrifice was always a male, denoting strength. The animal was killed and the priest collected the blood and sprinkled it around the altar (Num. 28:1-8). The burning symbolised the offerer's desire to be purged of sinful acts.
2. **The sin offering** (Lev. 4). This was the most important of all the offerings, as it made atonement (covered and paid for the sin) for the

person, signifying redemption (releasing from sin). It was sometimes called the guilt offering and atoned for sin committed unintentionally or in ignorance (Lev. 4:1-12). The sin offering had retrospective effect (that means sins which were committed a while ago were included) and pointed to the sinfulness of our nature (sexual defilement, leprosy and death).

3. **The trespass offering** (Lev. 5:14-19; 7) was offered for a particular reason, where a special ransom (payment for a sin) was required, as in the case of a healed leper (Lev. 14:12) or the interrupted Nazirite vow (Num. 6:10-12).
4. **The fellowship (peace) offering** (Lev. 3) was the most joyful offering, promoting fellowship with God. It was a ritual meal shared with God, the priests, and often other worshippers [Lev. 5]. An animal sacrifice, brought voluntarily, expressed praise to God and fellowship with others. The **waving** of the sacrifice (that is lifting it high above the priest's head and then lowering it again) symbolised giving to God and receiving back from him.
5. **The meal, meat or grain offering** (Lev. 2) came with a burnt or peace offering, and consisted of flour and oil with frankincense. It was never used with the sin offering or by itself. Each meat offering was accompanied by a drink offering. The law required four of the meat offerings: the daily offering, the substitution for sin offering (that was when the person was extremely poor - Lev. 5:11), the offering for jealousy (Num. 5:15 but with no frankincense) and the consecration of the priest (Ex. 29). Other sacrifices were voluntary but consisted of the same materials.

The Lord Jesus Christ, as our sacrifice, embodied all these offerings when he died on the cross of Calvary. He is our all-sufficient sacrifice, and only through him can God accept us. The letter to the Hebrews is a review of all the Old Testament ceremony, explaining that when Messiah came i.e. the Lord Jesus Christ, the rituals of the ceremonial law were no longer required. Jesus himself is the great sacrifice, and all believers come to God through his obedience. That is why Christians do not sacrifice animals, but come in faith to God. A new covenant has replaced the first covenant of works, and is called the covenant of grace. There is now no rôle for a priest in the Church, for all believers are kings and priests to God (Rev. 1:6). Jesus Christ is our High Priest (Heb. 4:14), mediating for us, as Aaron did in the old order.



Over to you

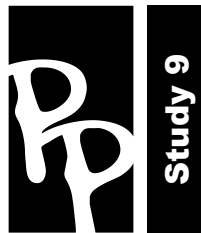
Is your church a city that is set on a hill? Do your people (collectively as a church and individually) bring the gospel light to your town or village?

How committed are the people in your church to serving God? Do they think it is the church leaders' task or the responsibility of everyone?

Are your people consecrated? Have they professed a personal knowledge of God through Jesus Christ and been cleansed by the Holy Spirit? Can they be God's shining light unless they have trusted in Christ for salvation?

REMEMBER HOW GOD HAS

RESCUED YOU FROM BONDAGE



Numbers 9:1-14

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- Introduction to the passage
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes
- A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- Focus Point: The Passover
- Over to you

Introduction to the passage

The Israelites are one year into their freedom from Egypt. After the incident at the Red Sea (Ex. 14) we hear no more about their former captors. God had truly freed them from slavery. After three months of journeying the Israelites arrived at Sinai and set up camp. During this encampment Moses went up Mount Sinai a number of times to receive instructions from God. The events of this period are recorded in Exodus chapters 19 to 40. After nine months the tabernacle was set up, the laws and regulations had been received and the people instructed. They were nearly ready to move off and head for the promised land. First though the Israelites were to celebrate the Passover, the first since the night in Egypt (Ex. 12) when the angel killed the firstborn of Egyptian families. This last plague had been the one that led directly to their release from captivity.

What these verses mean

Part one: The celebration

Verse 1

The LORD spoke to Moses in the Desert of Sinai in the first month of the second year after they came out of Egypt. He said,

God spoke to Moses during the beginning part of the first month of the second year after the exodus from Egypt. This instruction took place three to four weeks before the census of the Israelites in chapter one (see Study 1). Then the Lord spoke to Moses about taking a count on the first day of the second month. The tabernacle was set up on the first day of the first month (Ex. 40:17) followed in the next few days by the passage of our study.

Verse 2

“Make the Israelites celebrate the Passover at the appointed time.

The instruction concerned the celebrating of the Passover. This feast was to commemorate and remember the nation’s coming out of captivity in Israel. The word “Passover” came from the way in which God brought the final plague upon the firstborn of the Egyptians. To avoid this plague, every Israelite family was to take a lamb, slaughter it and take some of the blood and put it on the side and tops of the doorframes. When the Lord went through the country that same night, all houses marked with the blood were passed over and the firstborn survived. All the homes not marked with the lamb’s blood suffered the death of their firstborn.

Verse 3

Celebrate it at the appointed time, at twilight on the fourteenth day of this month, in accordance with all its rules and regulations.”

The month in which the event of the Passover took place was to be counted as the first month of the year (Ex. 12:2). The animals they were to use for the Passover were to be taken on the tenth day of that month (Ex. 12:3) and looked after until the fourteenth day (Ex. 12:6). They were to kill the animals and mark their doorframes with the animals’ blood on that day, for on that same night the Lord would pass over. On that evening of the fourteenth day they were to roast the meat of the animal with bitter herbs and eat it with bread without yeast (unleavened). All the meat had to be eaten and nothing could be left over. They were to eat the meal with their cloaks tucked under their belts and with sandals on their feet, ready to leave Egypt. This day was to be commemorated for the generations that followed. A full year had passed since that first Passover meal and the Lord gave Moses this instruction to celebrate the Passover again. It was thought at the time of

the first Passover that the next celebration would be in the promised land (Ex. 12:25) and there was not a requirement to hold a Passover feast between leaving Egypt and coming into Canaan. God required the Israelites to celebrate the Passover now, in accordance with the regulations given at the time in Egypt (Ex. 12:43-50).

Verses 4-5

So Moses told the Israelites to celebrate the Passover, ⁵ and they did so in the Desert of Sinai at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month. The Israelites did everything just as the LORD commanded Moses.

The people did not need to celebrate hastily as they had done in Egypt, but in the evening when the day's work was done. This may have been the reason for the Passover to be celebrated one year on. At the time in Egypt the meal had to be eaten hastily (Ex. 12:11). Now, whilst they had been camped at Sinai, they received instruction in the laws and regulations they were to follow. In taking more time and with the benefit of instruction, the Passover could be celebrated with due solemnity and understanding. They did everything just as the Lord commanded Moses. As far as the records show, the next Passover celebration took place in the promised land (Josh. 5:10-12).

Part two: The question

Verse 6

But some of them could not celebrate the Passover on that day because they were ceremonially unclean on account of a dead body.

A difficulty arose. Since the first Passover the laws and regulations were introduced. Amongst them was the law concerning defilement, uncleanness. This included being close to or touching a dead body (ceremonially unclean). The law said that if anyone who was ceremonially unclean ate any of the offering meat they had to be cut off from the people (Lev. 7:20). In the daily routine of life people died and their bodies had to be touched to be moved and buried. Under the law those who came into contact with a dead body had to undergo a period of seven days of cleansing. During that time they could not eat of any offering. So they were prevented by the law from taking part in the Passover celebration.

So they came to Moses and Aaron that same day

Those who were ceremonially unclean now faced a dilemma. The whole community was to take part as prescribed by the Passover regulations, but those who may have had a death in the family could not take part because of the Levitical regulations. What were they to do? The only answer was to speak to the spiritual leaders to seek their advice.

Verse 7

and said to Moses, “We have become unclean because of a dead body, but why should we be kept from presenting the LORD’S offering with the other Israelites at the appointed time?”

Their situation was legitimate, not being their fault. A death had taken place for which they could not be accountable and they wanted to take part in the celebration of God’s goodness to the nation. They were not complaining about the rule; they simply came to Moses and asked his advice.

Verse 8

Moses answered them, “Wait until I find out what the LORD commands concerning you.”

Moses was not hasty in his answer. He did not say the first thing that might have come to his mind. The situation he faced was of one rule seeming to work against another rule, so depriving men from attending to spiritual duties. Moses needed time, not to try and resolve the matter by himself, but by turning to God. He needed to know God’s mind. He did this by going over the instructions he had received from God and meditating upon them (praying).

Verse 9

Then the LORD said to Moses,

God is gracious and is pleased to answer the prayers of his people. Moses received instruction from the Lord on this difficult matter.

Verse 10

“Tell the Israelites: ‘When any of you or your descendants are unclean because of a dead body or are away on a journey, they may still celebrate the LORD’S Passover.

Moses received more information than he had requested. Not only did God give instruction about those who were ceremonially unclean, but also about two other groups of people. The first group is mentioned in this verse. They are those who happened to be absent at the time of the celebration. It is believed that being away on a journey meant being out of the country. The second group appears in verse 14. The ceremonially unclean and those absent were still to celebrate the Passover. The clarification given applied to all subsequent generations. God was giving Moses not just an answer to the problem raised, but a law to be followed.

Verses 11-12

They are to celebrate it on the fourteenth day of the second month at twilight. They are to eat the lamb, together with unleavened bread

and bitter herbs. ¹² They must not leave any of it till morning or break any of its bones. When they celebrate the Passover, they must follow all the regulations.

The ceremonially unclean or those absent had to celebrate the Lord's Passover exactly one month later. This delay gave those who were ceremonially unclean time to cleanse themselves in the way prescribed by the law. It also allowed those away from home to return and get ready. Those taking part in the deferred Passover were to follow exactly the same procedure as if they had been there for the main celebration. It was to take place as darkness fell; they were to eat a lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. No meat was to be left over. It had to be eaten or else burnt (Ex. 12:10). The Passover restrictions were to be followed for no bones of the animal were to be broken (Ex. 12:46).

Verse 13

But if a man who is ceremonially clean and not on a journey fails to celebrate the Passover, that person must be cut off from his people because he did not present the LORD'S offering at the appointed time. That man will bear the consequences of his sin.

In giving the original regulations for the Passover to Moses and Aaron (Ex. 12:43-49), God required the whole community of Israel to celebrate it. In answering the question concerning the ceremonially unclean, the Lord emphasised the necessity of all taking part in the Passover. Provision was made for those who were unclean or out of the country to celebrate one month later. Anyone else in the Israelite community had to participate at the appointed time in the first month. Any person who failed, without good reason, would be committing a sin (disobeying God) and had to be cut off. This was a judgement of God and could have resulted in sudden death (not execution but God's acting upon that person's life).

Verse 14

“An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD'S Passover must do so in accordance with its rules and regulations. You must have the same regulations for the alien and the native-born.”

The second group of people that God mentioned in his answer to Moses was the Gentiles (people who are not Jews). This verse is a beautiful illustration of an alien's being invited to the Passover celebration if he were present in Israel at the time. The same rules applied to the stranger as to the native-born Israelite. The stranger had first to be circumcised, including all the other males in the family (Ex. 12:48).¹ Afterwards the alien was treated as an Israelite.

¹ Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants.

Footnote 1 continued on page 122



Summary

The Lord God reasons with his created human beings (Is. 1:18). We are created in God's image and God has given man a mind to understand something of God's character and his ways. The worship of God is not an ignorant ritual, but is an expression of the soul and heart that comes from a knowledge and understanding of who God is and of his gracious acts of mercy and love. The Israelites were released from captivity in Egypt in a remarkable way. The hardness of Pharaoh's (Egyptian king) heart had to be broken and this was finally done through the last plague. God passed over Egypt and all the firstborn, in houses not marked by the blood of a lamb, died. The Israelites marked their doorframes because God told them to. Part of the whole event was a special meal with a lamb, bread without yeast and with herbs. The blood for the doorframes was taken from the slaughtered lamb. This meal was to be celebrated by the Israelites in the promised land to mark the release from captivity and to teach this to all future generations. The meal was eaten in a hurry with everybody dressed ready to leave. Now, one year later, the Passover meal was to be commemorated again. On this occasion they had time and the people had been instructed in the law. Their appreciation and understanding of what took place would be greater. All were to take part. The question arose out of the law concerning participation in the meal whilst ceremonially unclean. God gave a further law that covered not only the unclean but also those who were away. They were to celebrate the meal exactly one month later. Foreigners living in Israel also could take part if they were circumcised. There was no excuse for the nation not to follow God's ways – they remembered how God saved them from bondage.

Footnote 1 continued from page 121

Uncircumcised males could not be included in God's people (Gen. 17:14), so could not eat the Passover. In Joshua 5 we read that all the generation born in the desert was not circumcised. Joshua had to arrange for the whole nation to be circumcised. After that the Israelites celebrated the Passover. The Israelite had to be circumcised in order to celebrate the Passover and so had any other male.



Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes

One scholar has suggested that one year after the exodus from Egypt the people were already forgetting God's miraculous action of rescuing them and preserving their firstborn. Therefore God instructed Moses to have the Passover meal to remind the people of what God had done for them. The New Testament's breaking of bread and drinking of wine (Lord's Supper, Lord's Table, communion) is rooted in the Passover meal. Jesus Christ instituted this ordinance for his followers in remembrance of Christ's sacrificial work on the cross. It is a special celebration for those present to remind them of what Christ means to them personally, how he gave his life for them. Jesus was called the lamb of God by John the Baptist. Jesus had to die if he were to fulfil his mission to save his people. The sign of his death was the pouring out of his blood. The picture symbol is that the blood of Jesus covers the confessed sins of those for whom he died. The blood is often described as washing sins away, cleansing a person.

Whilst the Passover meal was to look back in remembrance of God's rescue, it was also a way of God's teaching the people of the future, to the coming of the Messiah. The rescue from Egypt is a picture of spiritual truth, that of being rescued from the kingdom of darkness. The slaughter of the lamb and the use of its blood to mark the doorframe, so that the Lord would pass over, was pointing to the Messiah, Jesus. The Lord's Supper also points forward for we are to celebrate it until the Lord comes again. When the Lord Jesus Christ returns he will do so as Judge and not Saviour (John 12:47-48). He will "pass over", i.e. spare from judgement, those who have trusted in him for salvation. The blood of Jesus, the lamb of God, marks them just as the blood of the lamb marked the doorframes. The language of Numbers is all picture to teach us spiritual truth.

The whole of the Israelite community was to take part in the Passover celebration. The same principle applies to Christian believers. Where a professing believer neglects to attend the celebration of the Lord's Supper, then they are disobeying the Lord's command. Continued absence would suggest that the person might not be spiritually healthy and should receive pastoral help.

Those ceremonially unclean were not permitted to attend the Passover meal. The apostle Paul instructed the Christians in Corinth that a person needs to examine himself before attending the Lord's Supper.

Taking part is not to be done in an unworthy manner; otherwise it is sinning against the Lord. For this reason the Lord's Supper is used for church discipline when a person is in open sin and unrepentant. The church may exclude that person from the Lord's Supper because he would be guilty of attending in an unworthy manner. When the situation is put right, the person is then allowed to attend again.

The apparent conflict between the Passover regulations and the Levitical law provides useful instruction for the Christian believer. The answer that Moses received from God showed that God does not contradict himself. There can be times when a person thinks that two different passages in the Bible conflict with each other. The Bible, as God's Word, does not contradict itself. It is only our interpretation that leads to contradiction. When we find ourselves in such a situation we must conclude that we do not have a proper interpretation of the two texts concerned and must seek a correct understanding. The people turned to Moses, who in turn meditated upon the instructions he had received. We also need to meditate upon God's Word, to pray that God will show us the true meaning. We can turn to our spiritual leaders for help.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – Only those affected can remember

This sermon centres on the Lord's Supper to challenge the unconverted as to why they are excluded from taking part and the believer as to why they must attend.

1. The Passover meal instituted

Historical setting of the Jewish nation's being in captivity and slavery in Egypt. The background detail to be developed will depend on how much people know.

- Pharaoh had resisted all the plagues God had sent, because God had hardened his heart. The tenth and final plague was sent - the Lord passed over with death.
- When the Lord passed over the land all the firstborn died. The only way of rescue was to follow God's way, his instruction.
- A lamb had to be slaughtered, its blood marked on the doorframe.
- That night where there was blood on the doorframe, there was no death; the firstborn lived.

- This act of God's goodness was to be remembered by all future generations through a meal that followed the same format as the Israelites ate on that night.

Application

Only by following God's way can we be rescued. Any other way will result in eternal death. Jesus said, "I am the way."

Those who follow the Lord Jesus also remember the way that Jesus rescued his people, through his death on the cross. The symbols used are bread (body) and wine (blood).

2. A question that arose

The celebration of God's rescue of the nation was to be solemn and honest. All the people were required to attend, but had to come in the right manner and attitude.

- The law Moses received from God on the mountain was clear. Those who were ceremonially unclean could not eat meat that was brought as an offering.
- This conflict raised a question, because people were ceremonially unclean through no fault of their own. Someone in their family may have died and they had been near or touched the body.
- The problem was brought to God. He gave an answer that also covered those who were away. They had to celebrate one month later.
- Anyone who could attend and did not committed sin in God's eyes.

Application

Remembering God's acts of mercy can only be remembered by those who have been affected by that mercy. A person who has not trusted in Christ is not permitted to take part in the remembrance service of the Lord's Supper.

It is necessary for believers to attend because it is a command of Jesus and is part of the believer's relationship with God.

If a believer has not repented of sin they should not attend until they have confessed and put things right with God. That will inevitably mean putting things right with the people who have been wronged.

3. It is open to all

In giving an answer to the question about the ceremonially unclean, God made provision for the alien living amongst them.

- The Lord's Supper is not limited to one race of people. The alien could celebrate the Passover provided he complied with God's criteria.
- Anybody can attend the Lord's Supper provided they comply with God's criteria. That is that they have trusted by faith in Jesus Christ

as being God's Son, sent by God to be the Saviour, and in his death on the cross as a punishment for the sins of all who believe.

Application

If you are not a Christian then in God's sight you are an alien, not a member of his family. There is a way you can become a member of God's family. It does not require anything physically to be done, nor anything magical. It is to believe that Jesus Christ has acted on your behalf in rescuing you and you will want to thank him and continually to remember his great act of rescue. That is where the Lord's Supper will serve that purpose.



Focus Point:

The Passover

The Passover was one of three annual festivals at which all men were required to appear at the sanctuary. The original Hebrew word comes from a verb meaning to “pass over” or to “spare”. The Passover was the centrepiece of the exodus from Egypt. The first Passover marked the saving of the firstborn from the death of the tenth plague. The term used is that the firstborn were **redeemed** because they were rescued and the price paid was that of a lamb and its blood. The redeemed firstborn was a sign for the nation of Israel that they were also redeemed and belonged to the Lord. The nation then observed the Passover to celebrate the mighty act of God in showing his love for his people by saving them from the captivity in Egypt. This love was first shown to Abraham, the father of the nation. The exodus was a continuation of this love and showed that God kept his promise (covenant) made to Abraham. The Passover festival was a looking back in remembrance of deliverance from Egypt and a looking forward to the promises of God's covenant (the coming of a Messiah – Gen. 15:4).

The Passover was a family observance. In the case of small families neighbours were invited to share the meal. This overcame the problem of no meat being permitted to be left until morning. A lamb could be shared between two or more families as they came together.

The initial instructions concerned the preparation for the exodus meal. They received further instructions for when they reached Canaan, the promised land (Ex. 13:5). The commemoration of their exodus from Egypt was to be celebrated over a seven-day period with two feasts combined. The first was the **Passover** and the second feast was that of

Unleavened Bread. The Passover was to celebrate God's goodness by saving them from death and captivity, whilst the Feast of Unleavened Bread was the consecration of the firstborn to God. The firstborn were spared if the doorpost were marked with the lamb's blood when God passed over Egypt. The two festivals were therefore closely linked. The Passover was celebrated on the fourteenth day of the first month, which was also the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This first day was to be treated as a Sabbath and no work was to be done except for the preparation of the meal. On the following six days no yeast was to be used or kept in any house. The seventh day was also to be kept as a Sabbath. On both the first and seventh days the people gathered for a special assembly.

The Passover continued to be celebrated throughout the Old Testament times. Jesus celebrated the Passover when he was young (Luke 2:41-42). It was on the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb was to be sacrificed, that Jesus celebrated the meal with his disciples in the upper room (Luke 22:7-8). From this meal Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as a remembrance of his own sacrifice and rescue of people from the kingdom of darkness.



Over to you

From the study in this passage of Numbers, what would be the important lesson you would draw from the requirement of the Passover to be passed on from one generation to another?

How do you resolve questions that people may bring to you? Has this study given you any guidance? As a result of this study do you need to rethink how you deal with people's questions in the future?

Do you celebrate the Lord's Supper (Lord's Table, communion)? If so, on what basis? Do you permit anyone to attend?



Numbers 9:15-10:10

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes
- 📁 A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: God's will
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

The Israelites had camped for nearly a year at the foot of Mount Sinai. During this time God had revealed his law. This included the Ten Commandments, plans for the Tent of Meeting and detailed regulations for sacrifices. All the details of events and God's instructions are contained in Exodus chapters 19-40 and the book of Leviticus. The Tent of Meeting had been set up and dedicated. The tribes had been counted and all the men available for conquering the promised land established. The Levite tribe had been assigned to assisting the priests in caring for the Tent of Meeting, both when camped and when on the move. The people were ready for departure. The final preparation was the Lord's guidance. When were they to begin their move? Where were they to go, in which direction? How were they to move so many people? It was a huge logistical task. In this concluding study of our first volume of studies in the book of Numbers, we discover that God gives clear guidance; firstly, through observing the cloud and, secondly, through the call of silver trumpets.

What these verses mean

Part 1: The Cloud

The first ten chapters of Numbers are not set out in the order of time (chronological) in which events took place. The first chapter began on the first day of the second month of year two. We start our present study on the day that the tabernacle was set up. This was on the first day of the first month of year two, one month before. Moses, who is the attributed author of the first five books of the Bible, was looking back as he was writing his record. He organised his material, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to help the reader to understand clearly God's actions. If Moses had written in strict chronological sequence, it would have been more difficult to follow clearly the workings of God. In the first part of our study Moses writes about the cloud above the tabernacle. The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting on the day it was set up. The whole section (verses 15-23) is taken up with an explanation of the cloud. The cloud was therefore present during the events we have recorded in Numbers chapters 1-9, but the detail about the cloud is included now, because it fits in neatly to inform us of the part the cloud would play in the journey of the Israelites to the promised land. This was not the first time that the cloud is mentioned. Reference is made in Exodus 13:21-22 and 40:34-38, describing the cloud as being the glory of the Lord. The information in Numbers 9 repeats some of the information already given in Exodus.

Verse 15

On the day the tabernacle, the Tent of the Testimony, was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire.

The day on which the tabernacle was set up was another important day in the life of the Israelites. With all the preparation and instruction completed, the time had come for the tabernacle to be used. On that day God came and made his presence known, through the cloud above the tabernacle. In the evening the people saw the cloud looking like fire. The cloud could be seen by day and night. This was a demonstration to the people that God was present with them. This cloud had appeared above the camp since the Red Sea crossing (Ex. 13:21). The tabernacle was the spiritual centre of the camp. God dwelt above the Tent of Meeting, which contained the ark of the covenant, altar and other holy furnishings.

Verse 16

That is how it continued to be; the cloud covered it, and at night it looked like fire.

Throughout the whole journey God was present with the people. During the day, when it was bright sunlight, they could see God's presence because that was represented by the cloud. When it was dark and the cloud could not be seen, God showed his presence through what looked like fire. This change of appearance took place every evening and morning.

Verse 17

Whenever the cloud lifted from above the Tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped.

The Israelites relied entirely on the movements of the cloud to know if they were to camp or move elsewhere.

Verse 18

At the LORD'S command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp.

The cloud was to the people a visual aid of God's purposes for them. They knew that if the cloud stayed over the tabernacle then they remained where they were.

Verse 19

When the cloud remained over the tabernacle a long time, the Israelites obeyed the LORD'S order and did not set out.

There was no set time as to how long the Israelites would camp in a place. It could be a long time. They had to watch the cloud and if it remained over the tabernacle, they had to stay put. From one day to the next they did not know when it was time to move. Their patience may well have been tested, but they did not move if the cloud stayed above the tabernacle.

Verse 20

Sometimes the cloud was over the tabernacle only a few days; at the LORD'S command they would encamp, and then at his command they would set out.

When they had set up a new camp, reconstructed the Tent of Meeting and all the furnishings, together with all the tents of the tribes positioned around the tabernacle, the cloud sometimes moved on after only a few days. The people then had to pack up the whole camp, including the tabernacle, and move to a new location.

Verse 21

Sometimes the cloud stayed only from evening till morning, and when it lifted in the morning, they set out.

There were occasions when they camped only overnight. As the cloud descended they set up camp not knowing how long they would be in that location. After a night's sleep they would wake up and see the cloud lifted. They packed everything and moved on again.

Whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud lifted, they set out.

Their journeys were not only done in daylight. The cloud could lift at midnight and the Israelites would pack and set off in the dark. Which-ever, day (cloud) or night (fire – see verse 15), the guidance of God was visible.

Verse 22

Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out.

This verse re-affirms the varied length of the Israelite encampments and their obedience to move only with the cloud. When the cloud moved the Israelites moved and when it stayed they stayed.

Verse 23

At the LORD'S command they encamped, and at the LORD'S command they set out.

The movement of the cloud was God's showing his will as he acted with a specific purpose. The Arabians called the whole region the wilderness of wanderings. This is what may have appeared to them to be the movements of the Israelites, as they journeyed aimlessly over a long period. The Israelites were not lost in their wanderings, for they acted in accordance with God's will. They camped where the Lord instructed and set off at his command.

They obeyed the LORD'S order, in accordance with his command through Moses.

The Lord's commands were obeyed without question. The cloud was visible to all, yet it was through Moses that God spoke to the people. The packing up of the camp and moving out was not a spontaneous reaction to the cloud's stirrings. People may have observed the cloud moving and beginning to lift, but they waited for instructions from Moses. Moses, Aaron, the priests and the Levites all served in and around the tabernacle. Their observance of the cloud was far more accurate than for the other tribes set further away. God communicated to Moses the details of his will. This would have included timing and the direction in which they were to set off.

Part 2: The silver trumpets

Chapter 10

Verse 1

The LORD said to Moses:

We are not told when God gave the instructions to Moses concerning the trumpets. This is a convenient point at which to record the making and use of the trumpets. This is background information that is relevant for the many years of wandering and for the conquering of the promised land.

Verse 2

“Make two trumpets of hammered silver, and use them for calling the community together and for having the camps set out.

The instructions for making the trumpets and their purpose are clear. The trumpets were made of silver, not cast in a mould, but hammered into shape. Human effort and skill was required to construct this means of public address equipment. Silver was a precious metal and a trumpet made out of it would have a distinctive sound. The trumpets were the means of calling the people together and also signalling the setting out of the Israelite camp on their journey. There were five different purposes of the trumpets.

Trumpet signal 1

Verse 3

When both are sounded,

The first signal was an even and continuous sound by two trumpets.

the whole community is to assemble before you at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

At the sound of this signal the whole community was to gather at the door of the tabernacle.

Trumpet signal 2

Verse 4

If only one is sounded,

The second type of signal was with only one trumpet. Again it was to be an even and continuous sound.

the leaders—the heads of the clans of Israel—are to assemble before you.

The one trumpet was blown for the leaders to gather. It was easy to distinguish between the two (for the whole community) and the one trumpet call (for the tribal leaders).

Trumpet signal 3

Verse 5

When a trumpet blast is sounded,

The third type of signal was a blast on the trumpet. This would be a broken, uneven and quavering sound.

the tribes camping on the east are to set out.

The trumpet blast was a signal for setting off from the camp. On the first blast the tribes to the east of the tabernacle were to move off. These would be the tribes of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun.

Verse 6

At the sounding of a second blast,

The trumpet blast was part of a series of blasts. The second blast was not a repeat of the first one, but a signal for something else to happen.

the camps on the south are to set out.

The second trumpet blast was the signal for the tribes camped to the south of the tabernacle to begin to move out. These would be the tribes of Reuben, Simeon and Gad.

The blast will be the signal for setting out.

The third and fourth signal blasts are not specifically mentioned. The reference to the blast's being the signal for setting out indicates that there would have been a third and fourth blast, for the tribes encamped to the west and north of the tabernacle. The trumpet's call marshalled the tribes, so that an orderly procession moved away at God's command.

Verse 7

To gather the assembly, blow the trumpets, but not with the same signal.

Gathering the people together at the door of the tabernacle was to be a different signal from the one for setting off from camp. It was to be an even, continuous sound to gather the people and a blast for the camp to begin to set out.

Verse 8

“The sons of Aaron, the priests, are to blow the trumpets. This is to be a lasting ordinance for you and the generations to come.

It was the priests who blew the trumpets. There were two sons of Aaron and two trumpets. It was not considered too low a task for the priests to be trumpeters. All work done in the tabernacle (God's service) was honourable and was not to be belittled or mocked. This continued down the generations.

Trumpet signal 4

Verse 9

When you go into battle in your own land against an enemy who is oppressing you, sound a blast on the trumpets.

When in Canaan, the promised land, the silver trumpets were to be used as an alarm for battle. This called the soldiers together, encouraging them to fight. The journey will have been completed and the blast on the trumpets now was for a different purpose from that of moving camp.

Then you will be remembered by the LORD your God and rescued from your enemies.

The battle cry call of the trumpets was also a cry for help from God. The sound brought strength to the soldiers, assuring them that God was on their side. The blast was a promise that God would not forget them and would come to their aid.

Trumpet signal 5

Verse 10

Also at your times of rejoicing—your appointed feasts and New Moon festivals—you are to sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, and they will be a memorial for you before your God.

The silver trumpets were to be part of the life of the Israelites. At times of rejoicing, when they were happy and offering thanksgiving, the sound of the trumpets was to echo across the camp. This could have been after a victory over the enemy (and there would be plenty of those), or on feast days such as the Passover. The trumpets served as a reminder of the joy that should accompany worship. One of the feasts given by God was called the “feast of trumpets” (Lev. 23:23).

I am the LORD your God.”

The Lord (Yahweh - see page 6) was their God and he had a right to appoint such things to be observed by them. As part of the agreement (covenant) made with Abraham, confirmed through Isaac and Jacob, worked out in more detail through Moses, the people were obliged to follow these instructions.



Summary

Our study contains two pieces of background information that sets the scene for the journey that the Israelites are about to continue. They had come out of Egypt more than a year previously. They had crossed the Red Sea with the Egyptians in close pursuit, but there the waters swallowed up Pharaoh and his army after all the Israelites reached the other side safely. After three months of journeying they came to the foot of Mount Sinai. There they set up camp for nearly a year. During this time God revealed his laws to the people through Moses. The tabernacle was constructed, made and set up in accordance with God's regulations. Aaron, the brother of Moses, and his sons were consecrated as priests. The Israelites and Levites were counted, the camp arranged and duties assigned. They celebrated the Passover. The Israelites were now ready to continue the journey to the promised land. The Bible reader is given information about how God would guide the Israelites on their journey. First of all they will know of God's presence through the cloud. They will know when to pack the camp and move, where to go and when to stop by the movement of the cloud. The cloud was visible both by day and night. The detailed instructions came through Moses. In addition to the guidance which the cloud gave, the Israelites were given signals through the sound of two silver trumpets. The differing signals called the people together, the leaders for a meeting, signalled an orderly departure out of the camp, sounded an alarm for battle and asked for God's help and lastly were to be used at times of rejoicing and feasts. The nine months of preparations were over, all was in place and the people were ready for the departure.



Looking at the passage through New Testament eyes

Our study highlights two important matters that are relevant to the Christian living today. The first is God's showing himself to his people. The second is responding to the call of God.

God reveals himself

God was with the Israelites, his chosen people, all the time. This was demonstrated by the cloud, visible both day and night. The cloud was not God, but God as a spirit showed his presence by the cloud. God had

shown his presence to Moses many years before through a burning bush. More recently, when Moses led the people out to the foot of Mount Sinai, God descended upon the mountain in fire. It is not possible for a sinful human being to see God. Jesus himself said that no man has seen God. God as a spirit is everywhere. But on occasions he has made his presence known through visible means such as cloud and fire. People could not depend on their eyes for physical proof, but had to exercise faith to believe that the cloud was God's making himself known.

Jesus said that he will be with us to the very end of the age (Matt. 28:20). His promise is to guide and keep his people. God no longer shows his presence through physical means as in Old Testament times. One of the reasons is that we now have the full revelation of God through the Bible. At the end of the Bible the closing verses warn that nothing is to be added or taken away from the Scriptures. With the Bible we have the complete revealed will of God for the present time. Those who lived in Old Testament times did not have the complete Bible. That is why God revealed his will and purpose to his people in very special ways. God does not appear to us as a cloud because we have his Word and the Holy Spirit present to help us understand what is written.

God communicated his will to the people through the movement of the cloud. God communicates his will to his people as they meditate upon his Word and pray. The two go together, hand in hand. We pray about a certain situation, it may be a problem we are facing and we do not know what to do. The Christian prays believing that God will answer. How does God answer? Usually through his Word. The person may be reading the Bible and meditating on it. Then suddenly out of the text the answer comes so clearly. In the case of the two people on the road to Emmaus their hearts burned within them (Luke 24:32). The person experiences a clear conviction. This is the Holy Spirit at work. An answer may come through something the preacher says in a sermon. The preacher will have no idea that God is giving a specific answer to someone through his preaching.

The call of God and human leadership

The making and blowing of the trumpets was a human responsibility. Also the action that followed the blowing of the trumpets required the people's obedience. The blowing of the trumpets was done by the priests as a result of their meditation upon God's will and what was revealed to them. The trumpet call was the conveying of God's will to the people. Our understanding of the trumpets is therefore to be the faithfulness of human leadership, under God. The people may have

observed the cloud lift and knew God's will in general, but they did not know what God had revealed in detail. They waited for instructions from their leader, Moses.

Local church leaders mobilise the community of Christian believers into action. The trumpet they blow and the signal that is clearly given comes through the preaching of the gospel. Paul in writing to the Ephesians says that Christ, as the Head of the church, has given the church pastors, teachers and evangelists. Why? To prepare God's people for works of service (Eph. 4:11-12). It is through the clear trumpet sound of God's Word being preached and taught that God's will is made known. In God's purpose there is clearly an element of human responsibility and action. When things got very busy in the early church, the danger for the apostles was that they would be distracted and neglect the ministry of the Word of God (Acts 6:2). As leaders they had to give attention to studying God's Word, so as to know God's will in order that it could be declared to the believers (making of trumpets and then blowing the right signal). The danger today is that Christian believers may think that God reveals his will to them in some mystical way and they pay little attention to biblical teaching that is given in the local church through its leaders. The instructions given by Christ to his apostles were a lasting ordinance for them and the generations to follow.

All Christians should be able to give a clear trumpet signal of God's will to the rest of mankind. They do this through the testimony of their lives and by being a personal witness for Christ. This is the will of God, revealed through his Son before Jesus ascended into heaven. "Go and make disciples of all nations," were his parting words. This requires human participation and responsibility, just like the making and blowing of the trumpets.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme – God cares for his people

1. God dwells amongst his people

God guided the people after their escape from Egypt by the pillar of cloud. Once they reached Mount Sinai, Moses was instructed about the construction of the tabernacle. Once the tabernacle was set up, the cloud settled above it to show that this was the spiritual home where God would meet with his people. The altar, ark and furnishings were

all part of the way that sin had to be dealt with in order that the Israelites could come and meet with God.

Application

- God is amongst his people today through his Spirit indwelling every believer.
- Wherever his people gather together, there God will be with them.
- It is not a building or place that matters, but the community of local believers coming together. That is where God dwells amongst his people.

2. God gives guidance to his people

God revealed his will for mankind immediately after man's fall in Genesis 3. He gave further revelation to Abraham and subsequent generations. The Israelites knew of the promises given to Abraham that through him the nations would be blessed. As part of that promise they knew of Canaan, the promised land. Within this general purpose God revealed to the Israelites his detailed will affecting their daily lives. He did this through the cloud, so that they knew when to move, when to camp and in which direction to travel.

Application

- God's will, revealed at the fall (Gen. 3), was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ and the sacrifice of his own life on the cross. That which was out of order was put right, so that the original relationship between man and God could be restored.
- God revealed further that his Son, Jesus Christ, will return a second time, only this time as Judge. He will come as Saviour to those who have trusted in him and are waiting for him to come.
- Within the general revelation God reveals his will and purpose to his children (those who have trusted in Christ) in the detail of their individual lives. How should I serve God, whom should I marry, what should be my work? etc. are the details of life for which Christians should be seeking God's guidance. They know that it would not be God's will if the detail contradicted the general revelation of God's purpose. Daily reading of the Bible, prayer, gathering with the Lord's people for worship at every opportunity, are the means by which a person will be open to God's Spirit speaking to him.

3. God uses his appointed leaders to make his will clear

The people could observe the cloud, but it was through Moses that God gave his instructions. Aaron and his sons were responsible for making the trumpets as prescribed by God and were to signal to the people as

commanded. The details of God's purpose were made known to the spiritual leaders, who were to instruct the people accordingly.

Application

- Christ appoints those who are to be our spiritual leaders (pastors and preachers). They reveal to the local congregation God's will through the preaching and teaching of God's Word.
- Pastors and preachers have to be faithful messengers. They cannot say what they think, only what God says. To be true to God's Word they have to study and pray that God will reveal his will to them through the Scriptures. They will know this when they have a clear understanding of the Bible passage and can instruct the people clearly.
- Leaders must be careful that they are faithful to God's Word and not try to please people with what they would like to hear. God's Word is not always pleasant for the listener, for it shows up our weaknesses and sins.



Focus Point:

God's will

God's will has to do with deciding and approving the things that God is and does. God approves and determines to bring about every action that is necessary for the existence of himself and all creation. The will of God concerns his choices of what to do and what not to do. His will is final and the ultimate reason for everything that happens.

All things were created by God's will (Rev. 4:11). Human governments come about according to God's will (Dan. 4:32; Rom. 13:1). The events connected with Christ's death were according to God's will (Acts 4:27-28). As individuals we are encouraged to see all the events of our lives as subject to God's will (James 4:13-15).

God's revealed will

God makes known some aspects of his will for the purpose of his laws to be followed (Deut. 29:29). This is known as **God's revealed will**. This is usually in the form of commands for our moral conduct, what we should do or what God commands us to do. When the Bible instructs us to pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10) it is referring to God's revealed will. The person praying in this way is expressing the desire to obey God's will that he has generally made known.

God's secret will

God governs the universe and determines everything that happens by hidden decrees (Deut. 29:29). God does not reveal these decrees to us and they are known as **God's secret will**. We do not find out what God has secretly purposed until it actually happens, except for some prophecies concerning the future. Even then we are informed of the principle without any of the detail. We cannot take the instruction to pray for God's will to be done in Matthew 6:10 as being God's secret will because we would be praying for something to happen that is going to happen. We do not pray and ask for God to send Jesus a second time because God has already decreed it. We may express our heart's desire in prayer for the Lord Jesus to return quickly. When James tells us to say, "If the Lord wills" (James 4:15) he is referring to God's secret will. When we plan to do something in the future (tomorrow I will go and do such and such a thing) we do not know what is in God's plan for tomorrow. We then have to trust in the secret will of God that what we plan still has to fit in with God's sovereign control over the events of our lives. Such an attitude stops us being arrogant and proud, showing that we are dependent upon God.

The interplay between God's secret and revealed will can be seen when we take the example of Joseph and his brothers in the book of Genesis. The brothers sold Joseph into slavery. God's revealed will in this instance was that they should love Joseph, not steal from him or sell him into slavery. Years later when the brothers appeared before Joseph in his high position in the government of Egypt, Joseph told the brothers that what they did was evil but God meant it for good (Gen. 50:20). God's secret will was that in the disobedience of Joseph's brothers a greater good would be done through Joseph's being in a position to save his family.

Both the revealing of the good news of the gospel to some and the hiding from others is according to God's secret will (Matt. 11:25-26). God's revealed will is that all come to salvation (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). That some are not saved and some have the gospel hidden from them must be understood as happening according to God's secret will. This is unknown to us and we are not to try and pry into these matters.

God's will and evil events

There is a danger that we may look upon evil events as being God's will. God takes no pleasure in evil (Ezek. 33:11) although he can use evil for his good purposes. God cannot be blamed for sin. People are responsible for their evil actions. The Bible does not hesitate to bring God's

sovereign will and man's wickedness into the same verse. In Acts 2:23 we read of God's plan for Jesus to be crucified but carried out by lawless men. God's secret workings do not free men from their responsibility for evil.

Source: Bible Doctrine Wayne Grudem (IVP)



Over to you

In your culture, how do Christian believers seek to know God's will? Can you find a biblical principle for it?

How would you respond to a person in your congregation who came to you and asked for your advice about an important issue they are facing in their life?

Have you preached a series of sermons from an Old Testament book before? If not, are you prayerfully considering the chapters of Numbers we have been studying? What would be your main purpose in doing so?

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