

February 6

Numbers 3 & 4; Leviticus 10:1-11 (also referenced Feb. 3 & 4)

This morning you read Numbers 3 and 4 and Leviticus 10:1-11. This first section of the Book of Numbers takes place as Israel is preparing to leave Mt. Sinai on its trek toward the Promised Land. There is a very simple, but very important principle operating here - before you can move toward the goal, whatever that goal might be, you have to get organized for the trip. That is what is going on here. God is organizing Israel for the trip. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, whenever God gives us new goals, we need to recognize that a certain amount of reorganization is going to accompany those goals.

Numbers 3 and 4 are given over to a description of the work that God has planned for the Levites on the trip. "Chapters 3 and 4 contain two censuses of the Levites. Chapter 3 counts all male Levites more than one month old, whereas chapter 4 numbers all male Levites between 30 and 50 years of age." So both these censuses are working on a different basis from the censuses of the secular tribes recorded in chapters 1 and 26, which list the number of men over 20 years of age. The reason for these different age groupings is quite clear. The secular tribes were being organized into fighting units, but the Levites had a different function. Their primary task was the service of God: All the men in the tribe of Levi took the place of all the firstborn men in Israel. The purpose of the census in Numbers 3 was to check that the number of Levites tallied with the number of firstborn children among the other tribes. It was found that in fact the number of male Levites fell short of the number of firstborn Israelites. So the extra Israelites had to be redeemed in a different way: by paying money." (1. Gordon Wenham; Numbers; IVP; p. 69)

"The census in Chapter 4 served a quite different purpose: to distribute the work of dismantling, transporting and erecting the tabernacle among the Levitical clans. This work was dangerous, because it involved handling sacred equipment, and it was heavy" (2. Gordon Wenham; Numbers; IVP; p, 69). Perhaps it was because of the seriousness and the severity of the work that it was restricted to the sober and solid men between the ages of 30 and 50. It may also have been given to this group only because the years between 30 and 50 are clearly the most productive years of a man's life. In any case, this principle carried over into later Judaism. You could not be a Rabbi unless you had attained the age of 30 years. That is one of the reasons why Jesus did not begin his public ministry until he was 30 years old.

Now there are three ideas implicit in what I have just said that need to be explored a bit more fully. The first is that all the Israelites all had specific jobs to do. One older commentator says that there were three groups of people in Israel - warriors, workers and worshippers. All the men 20 years of age and older in the 12 tribes listed in chapter 1 were warriors. The Levites from the clans of Gershon, Kohath and Merari were the workers. And Aaron and his sons - the priests - were the worshippers. Having already read the Book of Exodus, with its incredibly detailed instructions with regard to the construction of the Tabernacle, it probably was no very great surprise to you to note here the extremely specific assignment of tasks to

these three groups of Levites. The Merarites got the heavy work - carrying the pillars, the boards and the bars, right down to the pins that held everything else together. The Kohathites got the dangerous work - carrying the sacred articles of furniture (we'll talk more about that later) and the Gershonites came off with the easiest job, carrying the curtains, coverings and cords.

The theme, of course, is that each Levite had a specific assignment and that by working together the group was able to flawlessly carry out its assigned task. Whenever the pillar of cloud began to move, everyone knew exactly what his job was. First Aaron and his sons would go into the Holy Place. By releasing the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, it could be lowered over the Ark without Aaron having to actually enter the Holy of Holies, which he was allowed to do only one day a year, when he went to sprinkle blood upon the mercy seat on the Day of Atonement. Then with his sons to help him, Aaron would cover the Ark with its special coverings. When all the special furnishings were carefully wrapped, the Kohathites were given the responsibility of transporting them. When the curtains had been taken down and safely packed for travel, the pins would be removed and the pillars taken down and stowed on carts for the journey. The tabernacle furniture was carried on poles by the clan of Kohath.

It seems to me that the principle lying behind this organizational scheme is found in the New Testament as well - in the teaching of the Apostle Paul about the body of Christ. Each member, we are told, has a different function and when everyone does his or her job as given by the Spirit of God, the work is easily accomplished.

The second idea that I'd like to briefly explore with you concerns the distinctiveness of the Levites - they had been set apart for the exclusive work of tending to the Tabernacle - the Lord's work. That idea also carries through into the New Testament in the teaching that we, as a kingdom of priests, have been set apart for the exclusive use of the Lord of the church. The big difference is that this is not an exclusive task, or a single tribe. All of us have direct access to God - we are a kingdom of priests. We are the 'holy ones' - the saints - who have been set apart and we are henceforth to be preoccupied with the work of the King.

The third idea implicit in our earlier remarks is that the work of the Levites - especially the Kohathites - was dangerous because the objects they were handling were sacred, and the God for whose use they were intended was holy. This is, of course, what lays behind the tragic story of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron. In the book of Numbers, Moses simply says that their deaths came as a result of offering "*unauthorized fire*" before the Lord. The passage in Leviticus 10 which actually records the event gives only a little more information, and does not tell us exactly what happened; it is in conjunction with the response to the death of Nadab and Abihu, however, that God prohibits the consumption of wine or fermented drink by priests, leaving us to infer that maybe the sin of these priestly brothers was the result of drunkenness. It is only a conjecture, but it does fit the little bit of evidence that we have before us. Whether or not there was an alcohol problem in Leviticus 10, it is quite clear that Nadab and Abihu's deaths came

because they failed to understand that because God is holy, it is very wrong to think that He can be approached or served in any way that we choose. Because God is holy we can only approach Him in the way that He has chosen.

Whatever was wrong, they hadn't followed the specific instructions of God. They had presumed that He could be worshipped in any way they chose. This is the big problem with much of modern society today. Having failed to understand what it means to worship God in obedience – *"in spirit and in truth"* - there are huge numbers of people who are carrying the fatal belief that God will be pleased with anything we might choose to 'throw Him.' Just as His anger burned against Nadab and Abihu, God's anger burns today against those who worship Him with cavalier attitudes and who are *"treasuring up wrath against the Day of Judgment."* God wants to be worshiped, but it is on His terms, not ours, that we are invited to come.

This is Mark Ashton reminding you to worship a God who is awesome and Holy!