

Message #4

Numbers 3:1-51

Back in 1970 the United States Department of Labor came out with what they called the “Occupational, Safety and Health Act,” commonly known as “OSHA.” The purpose of the law was to provide Employees with working conditions that were free from danger. It was concerned with the welfare of the people going to work. Depending on the type of work situation, the rules of safety varied. For example, a construction worker faced different threats than a dental hygienist. An electrical worker faced different threats than an airplane pilot or truck driver. One of the common denominators of all OSHA regulations was the employee needed to be warned about the danger on the job.

When it comes to ministry, we would have to say that most of them are not “do or die,” “life or death” occupations. If you mess up in ministry, you may lose your job, but typically you don’t lose your life.

I do think, however, that there are those who are in ministry who are heading to very serious judgment. James said that not many should be teachers, knowing they will receive a stricter judgment. Paul told Timothy to study to rightly divide Scripture and give attention to reading of it and if some minister doesn’t do that, there will be serious consequences.

But back in the time of the book of Numbers, if you were in ministry, you did not want to mess up. Because if you did, or, as one writer said, it would lead you “straight to the morgue” (Iain M. Duguid, *Numbers*, p. 47).

What we see here is this:

GOD’S MINISTRY IS VERY SERIOUS AND SACRED AND IF THOSE RESPONSIBLE DO NOT DO THEIR JOB CORRECTLY, GOD WILL KILL THEM.

This is about as serious a warning that can ever be given. You would not necessarily think this but being in ministry was a very dangerous job.

SECTION #1 – The selection by God of the Levites. 3:1-13

Some have said the Levites are really the “thirteenth tribe.” They were descendants of Moses and Aaron. When Jacob decided to include the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, in the tribal land distribution, the Levites did not receive a land grant.

They had a very unique role to play. They were to be supported as ministers to take care of worship matters at the Tabernacle and take care of the sacrificial system that was established. This was a very serious and sacred job and it was to be taken very seriously.

In **verses 1-4** we are introduced to the generations of Aaron and Moses at the time when God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The names of the sons of Aaron who were singled out to be anointed priests were Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar (**v. 2**). According to **verse 3**, these were the priests ordained and authorized by God. These were the “anointed priests.”

But **verse 4** introduces us to something important. Two of Aaron’s sons, who were supposed to be these anointed priests, were dead. Nadab and Abihu were dead because they offered a “strange fire” before the Lord. The story of what they did is found in Leviticus 10. They had offered some offering to God that was not authorized or sanctioned by Him and God killed them. The language would seem to suggest God may have sent a lightning bolt and struck them both down (Lev. 10:2). They both died and had no children and Eleazar and Ithamar became the permanent priests in the lifetime of Aaron.

There is an important principle to see here. It is a very serious thing to make up your own idea of worship. It is true that usually God does not strike down a minister today with a lightning bolt, but there will be serious judgment that God will give to the minister (James 3:1). You do not want to do your own thing when it comes to worship. We must be very careful to take God’s Word and work very seriously. It is no light matter to God to be a leader when it comes to worship.

Now according to **verse 4**, we learn that the two sons of Aaron who were left, Eleazar and Ithamar, could not possibly carry out all tabernacle ministry matters on their own. So what God did, according to **verses 5-6**, was to speak to Moses and assign the entire tribe of Levi with the responsibility of helping Aaron and his two sons in regard to worship matters.

The job of the Levites was to “serve” Aaron and perform duties for him and for the whole congregation in regard to tabernacle matters (**verses 6-7**).

According to **verse 8**, their job was to take care of all of the furnishings of the “tent of meeting” and to do all the service of the tabernacle. They would be responsible to see to it that God’s Word was followed in regard to all Temple matters, including various sacrifices and cleanliness matters.

The Levites were specifically selected by God to be given to Aaron and his sons to help them take care of priestly matters (**verse 9-10**). **Only Aaron and his sons were to perform the sacred priestly duties.**

But **verse 10** makes it very clear that if any layman other than Aaron or his sons attempted to serve in these sacred matters, they would die. The Levites were responsible to put a layman to death.

In **verses 11-13**, God reiterates that the Levites have been chosen by Him to do this work. Not the firstborn son anymore. This is significant. When God first called Israel, every firstborn son and even every firstborn animal was set apart unto Him (Ex. 13:2).

The firstborn sons were to be given to the Lord for His service and use (Ex. 22:29-30; 34:19-20). All firstborn sons had to perform sanctuary service and all firstborn animals were the sacrifices. **Here God implements a new structure that really begins to develop the idea of substitution.** The Levites would now become the firstborn substitute. The substitutionary concept of a relationship with God is seen in Numbers 3:12-13—God would have a substitute firstborn priest (v. 12) and God would have a substitute first born sacrifice (v. 13). The firstborn all belong to God, but now there is a substitutionary priesthood. **God selected the Levites and their animals to take the place of the entire nation's firstborn.**

There are five very important principles to see from this text:

- 1) True leaders of God do not appoint themselves; they are chosen by God, called by God and gifted by God.
- 2) Those who are true leaders in ministry have a responsibility to submit to those over them.
The Levites were to submit to Aaron and his sons.
- 3) Those who have been truly called by God have different ministries and different assignments.
- 4) It is a very serious and dangerous thing to attempt to minister when not chosen to minister.
- 5) Any relationship with God will be based on the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ.

SECTION #2 – The numbering and naming of the Levites. 3:14-20

Now the numbering and naming of the sons of Levi was to be done from sons who were one month old and upward. We may recall that the minimum age for military service was 20. This lower age would allow for larger number of Levites that would coincide with the number of first born from Israel.

Now in **verse 15**, God commanded Moses to number the sons of Levi and **verse 16** says that Moses did exactly what he was commanded to do.

Now Levi had three sons: Gershon, Kohath and Merari (v. 17).

The sons of Gershon were Libni and Shimei (v. 18).

The sons of Kohath were Amram; Izhar; Hebron and Uzziel (v. 19).

The sons of Merari were Mahli and Mushi (v. 20).

SECTION #3 – The duties and responsibilities of the Levites. 3:21-39

They were responsible to take care of and transport the Tabernacle. They were not numbered for war, but they were for service. Everyone had a job to do. There are three specific assigned responsibilities:

Responsibility #1 - The responsibility of the Gershonites. **3:21-26**

The total number of male Gershonites, one month old and up, were 7,500 (v. 22). They were to camp on the west side of the tabernacle, opposite the entrance side (v. 23) and their job was to take care of the tent coverings and curtains (v. 25-26). **We could say it was their job to take care of all of the software items made of soft material.**

Responsibility #2 - The responsibilities of the Kohathites. **3:27-32**

The total number of male Kohathites, one month old and up, were 8,600 (v. 28). **We want to make mention here that the Greek Septuagint reads 8,300.** They were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle v. 29. Their job was to take care of the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars and the utensils (v. 31). **So their job was to take care of all the furniture and utensils.**

Responsibility #3 - The responsibilities of the Merarites. **3:33-38**

The total number of male Merarites, one month old and up, were 6,200 (v. 34). They were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle and their job was to serve as building contractors responsible for taking care of bases, posts, frames and equipment needed to set up and take down the tabernacle (v. 35-37). They were to maintain the physical structure of the tabernacle. **They took care of the hardware necessary to the tabernacle structure.**

According to **verse 38**, Moses and Aaron and his sons were to camp on the east side of the Tabernacle and they were to oversee everything pertaining to the sanctuary.

According to verse 39, the total number of Levites, one month and older, were 22,000.

Now if you add 7,500 plus 8,600 plus 6,200, the total is 22,300. Many believe there is a scribal issue in the Hebrew text because when the Lucian Greek copy of the Septuagint says 8,300, the exact number turns out to be 22,000. six -שש three -שלש

We believe that 22,000 is the accurate number. Some Hebrew manuscripts and the Peshitta and Latin Vulgate read 8,300. Also **verse 43** says that the number of the firstborn of all the tribes was 22,273 and he specifically said in **verse 46** that this was 273 more than the total number of Levites.

Levi is obviously the smallest of the tribes.

- 1) Judah - 74,600
- 2) Dan - 62,700
- 3) Simeon - 59,300
- 4) Zebulun - 57,400
- 5) Issachar - 54,400
- 6) Naphtali - 53,400
- 7) Reuben - 46,500

- 8) Gad - 45,650
- 9) Asher - 41,500
- 10) Ephraim - 40,500
- 11) Benjamin - 35,400
- 12) Manasseh - 32,200

Then we see the total number for the Levites is 22,000.

SECTION #4 – The exchange of the firstborn sons of Israel for the Levites. **3:40-51**

What God commanded Moses to do here was to total the number of firstborn from all the tribes of Israel, who were one month and older. The total number was 22,273. So there was an excess of 273 unredeemed firstborn males over the number of Levites. **There was to be some form of substitutionary surplus redemption payment made as a ransom price. This was regarding the firstborn.**

The price was to be “five shekels” (v. 47) per head. It has been estimated that this would be about two ounces of silver for each person and the total for all 273 would be about 35 pounds. Now an ounce of silver is worth \$16.68 and there are 12 troy ounces to a pound. So one pound of silver is worth \$200.16. Thirty-five pounds of silver is worth \$7,005.60.

The word “redeem” or “ransom” (peduye) refers to a payment that was made as a redemption fee. The firstborn males could now be redeemed by making a substitutionary payment of five shekels. This was a one-for-one redemption price.

The money was to be given to Aaron and his sons and there is no specification as to how the money was to be used by them.

In any redemption there is a cost factor.

According to **verse 51**, everything was carried out exactly as God demanded.

At this point things are going well.

Now here is one key application to all of this. In order for one to live, one must be redeemed. A firstborn Son must come to pay the ransom price to save sinners. In order to be saved, there will be a substitutionary priest and sacrifice.