

Numbers 18

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[0 : 00] I'm Jane, I'm in Huelton Numbers, chapter 18, the passage that was read. And I do want to show you, when we get to Numbers 20, it is a little bit easier. I'm on safer ground in Numbers 20.

At the end of chapter 16, you might remember there was a great plague that broke out. Do you remember 14,700 people died. The wrath of God broke out against the camp of Israel. There was a flood of water, but of God's wrath.

And so what you have in chapter 18 is really what I want to call flood protection. It's to guard the camp from God's wrath breaking out ever again. Look at verse 5 of chapter 18.

And you shall keep guard over that sanctuary and over the altar, that there never again be wrath on the people of Israel. This is 1-7, outline the system of priests and Levites, and their kind of jobs that they were given. And then the rest of the chapter tells us about how they're to be provided for.

So financing of the priesthood, and then the financing of the Levites. So verse 1-7, their job, and then the rest of the chapter from 8 to 22, how they're paid.

[1 : 23] And then I want to try and draw some threads together. So let's look at the jobs of the priests and the Levites in verses 1-7. And so there's a plague in chapter 16, and do you remember how chapter 17 ended?

Now chapter 17, with that budding staff, shows us that only the tribe of Aaron was promised life in God's presence. And the rest of the people cried out, didn't they? Does this mean that we're lost? Are we all to perish? That's the clear arrow of chapter 17. And the first seven books of chapter 18 are God's answer to that. And God's answer is no.

No, you're not all going to perish. No, you're not all going to be lost. Because God receives the priesthood, so that they might intercede for the rest.

God brings life to Aaron's tribe. And so that they will intercede for the rest. The rest of Israel will be spared the flood of God's anger and God's wrath, because the priesthood will stand in the gap.

[2 : 26] Verses 1-7 introduce the basic areas of responsibility. It's like the job description of the people who would look after the tabernacle and the temple, the priests and the Levites.

So you think of a family tree, and the tribe of Levi is a family tree. It's got all sorts of branches coming off it. There are cousins and second cousins.

There are distant relatives. But the central trunk of the family tree is the house of Aaron. And the house of Aaron is the one that provides the priest for the tabernacle.

The priesthood of the Old Testament is the direct line of Aaron. The rest of the tribe of Levi, it's as if they provide the support team for the priests.

And they're called Levites. First seven verses describe the charge of these two groups. Now if you look at verses 1-7, you will notice, I'm sure already, that it is a chiasm.

[3 : 24] What's a chiasm? It's a posh word preachers use for a sandwich. Alright? It's really obvious. If you look at verse 1, that is the charge to the priests. And then verses 2-4 give you the charge to the Levites.

So that's the bread. The meat in the sandwiches, verse 5. That's the purpose statement. And then you've got the other bit of bread. Revisiting the Levites' charge of verse 6.

And then revisiting the priest's charge of verse 7. So the charge that was assigned to the priests, they were to look after the inside of the sanctuary. They were to look after the sacrifice altar in the courtyard.

And only priests were to enter it. Only priests were allowed to kind of mount the ramp of the altar where sacrifices were offered. Those were the areas that the priests were assigned to guard.

They were to maintain purity and holiness for the sake of the people. And with those specific areas of the tabernacle, there were tasks that they were to be performed.

[4 : 25] And they were to be performed in holiness because God is holy. And the practices are described as your priesthood. Look at verse 1. It talks about that. And then it talks about that in verse 8-2.

In short, the priests were to guard and to carry out sacrifices in holiness. Inside the sanctuary and at the sacrificial altar.

That was their job. They were to guard the tent. And they were to maintain the purity of the whole structure. They guarded the activity of the priests. The Levites, and they stood guard at the gates of the tabernacle.

They were the bannermen. They ensured that nobody was allowed in who shouldn't have been allowed in. Without proper membership of Israel's faith.

They stopped people. Because their name wasn't on the list. And if your name's not on the list, you're not coming in now. They stopped people who have prepared for worship. And so, it's stated in verse 6, they do their service in the tent of meeting.

[5 : 29] They manage the crowds. They coach the people. This is how you are to approach God. And they made sure that people brought the proper vessels ready to the priest.

And they did repairs. And they did restoration. And they did transportation. They looked after the upkeep of the tabernacle. They were, if you like, really, the deacons of the tabernacle.

Best way I can think of it is like a hospital. The priests are like the surgeons. The big men. Alright? And they enter the surgery or theatre.

To save lives. That is what the priests are. The Levites. Well, who are they? They are, well, they're the anesthetists. They are the essential nurses. They are the radiographers.

They are the porters. They are the caretakers. They are the human resources. Because there is a lot of work that goes in to maintain the fabrics and the functioning of the tabernacle.

[6 : 33] It takes a whole lot of work. A whole lot of organising of people. And so, there is an awful lot going on in the tabernacle. I don't know whether you picked it up as Lawrence read it. And that is meant to portray to the readers and to us the beauty of salvation.

The beauty of the salvation and the complexity of salvation that God has provided. So, you remember, we saw it last week, didn't we? The priests and the Levites, they are a shadow here on earth.

For the Old Testament people. Of the heavenly promises. And they are given the privilege and the awesome responsibility to do this task.

That's the kind of general distribution of the charges. And the life of the camp depends on these people maintaining purity and holiness. In their approach to God.

Because God is holy. And we must be very careful how we approach God. We must think, tonight, that God is somehow fragile.

[7 : 40] And we must think that they need to be properly cleansed. To avoid bringing bad germs into the tabernacle. That might harm God. No, it's the reverse.

It's the people who are at risk. Because having a holy God. Dwelling in the midst of the camp. It's like having a nuclear power plant.

In the middle of a freezing cold town. The power and the blessings of the nuclear power plant would be phenomenal, wouldn't they? But the dangers are mind-boggling. If they don't follow proper procedures.

So the purpose statement is given in verse 5. Verse 5. And you shall keep guard over the sanctuary and over the altar. That there may never again be wrath on the people of Israel.

Here is a statement of God's mercy. You need to sit back and absorb it. With all the talk of priests and Levites and altars and temple courts.

[8 : 40] It's so far removed from our daily experience. It's alien, isn't it? But the underlying principle of these words. Let it sink into your soul.

Because God is the one whose honour and holiness is offended by our tendency to selfishness. And self-justified sin. And yet the God who is greatly offended is also the one who provides a means to secure for you and I.

Pardon and mercy. And life instead of death in his presence. We're going to note that in a little bit. He even provides for the financing.

And the maintenance of this whole project. So look at how the role of the priesthood is introduced in verse 1. The Levites support the priest. And the priesthood as the linchpin of the whole plan is

introduced in verse 1.

They shall bear iniquity. That's their duty. That's the job of the priest. They will bear the iniquity connected with the sanctuary. And bear iniquity connected with the old priesthood.

[9 : 53] So let me try and remind you of what we learnt in Leviticus a few years ago. We learnt, didn't we, that the tabernacle actually is really a theology of sin. There's something of a kind of magnet about the tabernacle.

When people dwell around the tabernacle. The tent of God. And they sin. That sin causes a stain on God's house. The tabernacle functions like a magnet.

The purity and the holiness of God's house attracts and draws all the infection and filth and sins of the nations dwelling around it. It's like dust that gets into every nook and cranny no matter how clean the house is.

And Leviticus teaches us to think of certain sins as causing stains on the altar or the courtyard of God's house.

And Leviticus teaches us that there are more severe sins portrayed really as if they are a stain on the very throne room of God. They infect even the most holy place.

[10 : 59] And we are at risk dwelling around the house of such a holy God. And that helps us to think of the role of the priest.

The tabernacle, it rests right in the middle of the camp. And it's like sins are growing and accumulating constantly before the face of God. Justly deserving the wrath and anger of God. And the priesthood is there to stand in the gap. There you take responsibility for the nation's sins. That house which God has blessed, which he accepts, stands in the gap and takes the responsibility for the judgment we deserve.

The priesthood exists to do the job of atonement. To deal with the things of the tabernacle and the rituals that were to take place. It's an elaborate, acting out testimony to the nature of God's grace. God does not forgive by ignoring sin. He provides a perfect priest who takes responsibility for all our iniquities.

[12 : 05] So that there never may again be the wrath of God upon the people of faith. We know that, won't we? We will gather around this table and we will rejoice. But tonight there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

And Paul can say that to us because Jesus is the true and eternal high priest. Who has borne our iniquity and he entered into the courts of heaven itself.

And there he continues tonight to intercede for us before the throne of God. And the Old Testament people, they saw this in shadows, in drama.

The drama of the priest. Of heaven's court being mirrored in Aaron's work below. That's the meat of the passage. Secondly, let's look at the financing of the priesthood.

And the financing of the priesthood is in verses 8 to 20. And the financing of the Levites, the larger group, is in verses 21 to 32. And so here's the big issue here.

[13 : 09] Here's the big deal. God himself, in his love, pays these officers in his house. I think it's really important.

It's not a democracy. It's not a democracy where they still hire their own representatives to go and work in God's house. It's the other way around.

It is a monarchy. Where God hires his ministers to represent him to the people of his kingdom. And so notice the language of many different tithes and offerings.

And every single one of them is describing tithes and tributes and offerings that people bring to God. And again, the language is really interesting.

The people bring their money to God. The people bring their offerings to God. The people never pay the priest.

[14 : 05] The people never pay the Levites. Rather, the people worship God as grateful servants in the land. And they prosper in his kindness.

They bring appointed tokens of worship. They bring their offerings for the worship of God. And then God, in his love for the people, turns around and he uses the income that he's gathered.

And in his mercy, he appoints and he employs priests for the benefit of the spiritual care of his people. Now, notice how this works. Look at what it's late to 20.

You've got the financing of the priests. And the priests are provided for from special offerings. That people bring on special occasions. So, and people bring an offering for a personal sin.

Or there's a festival day. And in Ephesians 9 and 10, a portion of that is assigned for the priest to eat the most holy things. And only the priest may eat it.

[15:09] And only in the temple courts. He can't take it home. When people bring a wave offering. As a contribution to the Lord. It's a sign that they are given holy to God.

And then God turns around. And he gives some of that offering to the priest. Verses 11 to 20 list the wave offerings. And they're called that because they are brought to God at the altar.

Though they're not placed on the altar. It's a ritual system. It's a system that's showing devotion to God. They leave the ownership of the offering. And it is transferred into the ownership of God.

And then you see the movement of God again. You see it. He takes what has been given to him.

And he pays his priests. Most of it is food. The first food is the first food of verse 12 and 13 of crops or animals.

In verses 15 to 19. And the human firstborn. Or the firstborn of unclean animals. Was never to be sacrificed. They were redeemed with cash.

[16:13] in verse 14 you've got this broad category of devoted things so for example in Exodus 25 they brought fabrics and precious metals they were a regular gift, they were brought to the people of God and he in turn receives their gifts and God turns around and gives it to his priests and out of these offerings they would make sure the temple is funded and provided for and operated we shouldn't I think imagine free for all all the waiting offerings are brought into the back hall and the priests walk in and say take what you want I don't think that's what happens but God pays his priests and the income of his people is through their regular giving and sacrifices now verses 21-32 I know this isn't easy but you've got the financing of the Levites to support the Levites and that's where the tithe was put in place to support the Levites and their ministry and the Lord emphasises again that the ministry of the Levites is funded by God out of love for his people that's the opening word in this section and look at verses 21-22 21-22 so the Levites are given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance in return for their service that they do their service in the tent of meeting so that the people of Israel do not come near the tent of meeting lest they bear sin and die and so in addition to the irregular gift and the festivals and those special occasions

God requires that his people support the ministry and livelihood of the Levites the word tithe actually means tenth in other nations of the royal tax you see it was Samuel 8 Samuel gives a tithe to the king and God is basically in this chapter setting up his temple he is setting up the palace of his kingship as a royal court and it is supported by a tax rate of ten percent this is a very encouraging way to look at it nobody likes taxes and we're sceptical aren't we of governments being able to use our money well and of course in the Bible there are times when people like Eli's sons don't handle funds very well but what's happening here is that God in principle is setting up what it means to live under his kingship under his reign and the people of God will fall to bring a tenth it was not given by the people to the Levites remember that the Levites were to the people's ministers to God rather the people brought their tithes to God to worship him and God gave those funds to the Levites and then the Levites tithed the tenth of what they received and if you can understand this they gave one percent of the economy to the priests and so Numbers 18 is simple and it's elaborate it's a way for God's tabernacle and temple to be preserved and it is funded by God himself for the good of the nation the other 11 tribes you remember them from last week they have farms and businesses and means of income but the priests and the Levites were not allowed that they were forbidden that they need not be involved in such farms and businesses for incomes the Lord takes away from his priests and Levites any such business or land instead they are to devote themselves to the ministry of atonement for the life of a nation and God pays the love of his inheritance so what on earth does this mean for you and I today now let me be up front

I think there's lots of disagreement and uncertainty on the subject of church financing and to be frank I am not particularly comfortable about preaching on this tonight and I wouldn't be preaching on it unless it was in this book but it is in this book and it is here in this book of numbers because of God's love for his people I would want to argue that the biblical tithe of intent is the bare minimum really in our giving you might say that nowhere in the New Testament is the tithe reiterated which again I think is normally a very bad argument and I would come back to you on that and say well in the Old Testament they gave about 26% if you want to work it out I think we also need to be clear that worshipping God part of worshipping God is what we do with our money and I think our gifts are part of the worship service because we are giving them to God so to put it bluntly

I am your minister but I don't work for you and you don't pay me as one minister I know famously says to his elders and maybe your servant but you will never be my master and you and I we bring our gifts and our tithes and our tributes to the Lord in our worship of him and it is in his love for you that he gives presbyteries and elderships and diacomates to oversee the maintenance of those funds and the payment of his servants I think there are major questions today on how this works out practically and I don't think we as a congregation are perfect in this either one of the things I want to say to you is in a day of online and digital giving and I think we should be thinking and planning about our giving and doing it as efficiently as we can we should still use Sunday offerings as part of our worship and use it to give over and above in our giving

I was having a break enough to say but I used to like it at TVU do you remember TVU when we met the golden days and we did a TVU and there was a cash point wasn't there in the building quite biblical I never said it but I would have loved to have said it really during this we'll take a break but we're going to have five minutes where you can go and get money out of the cash point and give over and above and the reason I think that's helpful we could have thought about it in a new building it's because I think this giving at tithe and giving as part of our worship is so important people say when it puts outsiders off I don't agree with that I think it shows that what we give is part of our public worship and so that means you and I need to think on a Saturday what am I going to give the following day instead of rustling around in the change jar before we come to church now let's close with three things I do

[23 : 25] I am aware that the main point of this passage is that you and I need a perfect priest and you and I need a perfect priest who takes responsibility for our iniquities and you and I need a perfect priest who secures our life and blessing in God's presence priest who takes and in Aaron God showed his promise to provide such a priest in the real temple but in Jesus we have that perfect priest and so tonight as we come to the Lord's table we rest in Christ for our acceptance with the Father but secondly it's not only God who gives us a perfect priest but it is God who establishes and maintains the ongoing ministry of his house the church for your good the structure of the New Testament has changed dramatically hasn't it from the Old Testament church so many of the rituals that we read of in the book of Numbers have been realised in Christ but I think we do still need to maintain that God still calls leaders and ministers apart he raises up men to preach the gospel and to minister his word and he is the one who pays his ministers and he does that by establishing and maintaining his church out of love for you his people so that you might know you're bringing my priest and remain in good standing with Jesus the third thing is this when you bring gifts into worship or when you set up your direct debit remember that you are giving to God you are bringing gifts to the king the church is not a social club in which the members pull together and then they form a committee and decide what are we going to do with that money now we must get back to this point isn't it that the church is created by God and is governed by God and is a court of

God's house and we together must seek to be wise stewards of his funds they are his funds that he has given us instructions of how to use out of mercy and of proclamation they are not matters of church logistics they are matters of faith our faith our faith in God's reign and God's church so let us rejoice that God has given us the ministry of his church in our land pray for your ministers and elders and deacons pray for those who labour in local congregations and in the widest nomination and let us worship God together in thanksgiving because we no longer need fear wrath for our sin because God has provided the perfect mediator in Christ and in his church he ministers to us the blessings of that priest day after day let's pray
God