

Numbers 3&4

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[0 : 00] Let's drop your Bibles to Numbers 3, Numbers 3, Numbers 3 and 4.!

Numbers 3 and 4.

But what is it like? Well, it's exactly like the camp in the wilderness. It's organized in the same way, Revelation 20 says. Except there's no tabernacle. Because it's all tabernacle.

And God is in the midst of his people. The dwelling of God is with man. That is where I had him. And that's why Numbers is actually quite a challenging book. It's a challenging book for the preacher and for the congregation.

There are some fantastic passages out there. Really super dramatic stories. And we've not got to them yet. But there are also long chapters where there's a list of names. And it's not necessarily an easy book.

[1 : 39] It's not an easy book to preach from. Or is it an easy book to read? And so I want to say to you, it would be really helpful to me. And I hope to you if you'll come prepared. Next week we're going to look, I think, at chapters 5 and 6.

But today we're going to look at chapters 3 and 4. Most of your jobs are not exactly life or death, are they?

There's lawyers here. Some teachers. Maybe you're a shop assistant. Fast food operator. If you go to McDonald's and you ask for a Big Mac, your life is at risk, is it?

Or is it? There are other jobs out there where people take their lives in their hands. And they take the lives of others in their hands. So if you're a pilot, I don't think we've got any.

Or if you're an air traffic controller. If you're a brain surgeon. If you're a bomb disposal expert. Or a Levite. And according to these chapters in the book of Numbers, the ministry of the priests and the Levites was a do or die ministry.

[2 : 48] It's a life and death job. I don't know whether you picked that up. And all I want to say this evening really is quite simple. It's that we still need someone to perform the task that the Levites did.

We still need someone to perform that do or die ministry for us. Now let me give you three reasons for that. We need someone to perform this do or die ministry for us.

The first reason is because our God is a consuming fire. Our God is a consuming fire. Do you know where that verse comes from? From the New Testament or the Old Testament?

From the New Testament. From Hebrews. Chapter 12 of Hebrews verse 28. Writing to a bunch of Jewish believers. He says, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Let us be thankful. And so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire. That's the New Testament Christianity. Our God.

[3 : 49] The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God of Christians. Our God is just like the God that we meet here in Numbers chapter 3. Look at the opening verses of Numbers 3. We are told about the sons of Aaron.

These are the generations of Aaron and Moses. At the time when the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. These are the names of the sons of Aaron. Nadab, the firstborn. Abihu, Eliezer, Ithamar.

These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the anointed priests. Whom we ordained to serve as priests. But Nahab and Abihu died before the Lord when they offered unauthorised fire.

Before the Lord in the wilderness of Sinai. And they had no children. So Eliezer and Ithamar saved as priests in the life of Aaron and their father. And these four sons, they were carrying out this do or die ministry.

Two of them died. Two of them did. And what happened was, and Nahab and Abihu, you can read the full story in Leviticus 10. It says in these verses that they offered unauthorised fire.

[4 : 50] Or strange fire. They approached God in ways that they weren't supposed to. They didn't take the fire from the altar of God.

They made it up as they went along. They approached God in some sort of unauthorised way. And what we're told in Leviticus is that fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them. And the writer of the Hebrews says, that is not the God of the Old Testament. That is God. That is our God. Our God is a consumer of fire.

And so we serve him with reverence and awe. Now let's just pause to think about it. Let me try and apply it. Our God is an awesome God. Our God is an awesome God.

But I think that's very difficult because we live in a culture when words, Augustine Paul's words, does need precious cups of meaning. It's a brilliant expression. It's a good definition of a word. What is a word?

[5 : 51] A word is a precious cup of meaning. And yet we live in a culture where those precious cups of meaning are being emptied. Isn't that right? So you have an awesome cup of coffee.

England's second half performance, according to some yesterday, was awesome. Let me tell you, no rugby team is awesome. And no cup of coffee is awesome.

And if you talk about an awesome cup of coffee or an awesome performance, what word are you going to use to describe the God who really is awesome? That's a problem in our culture.

Neil Postman, he wrote a book, it's now, nearly 30 years ago, about losing ourselves to death. And it's really a book about what TV has done to American culture. It's a brilliant book. And Neil Postman says in that book, you can get second half really cheaply, that TV has trivialised our culture.

So it's trivialised public affairs, and politics, and education, and journalism, and news programmes. And so there's not so much information you get, it's kind of infotainment, that's his big point.

[7 : 00] And there's a chapter, an interesting chapter about the church, you see particularly the church in America, and the title of the chapter is Shuffle Off to Bethlehem. It's an interesting chapter. But that's the culture of today.

Everything is sort of trivialised. There's nothing sacred anymore. Anything that entertains, anything that communicates, anything that gets people attention, well that is what matters.

And so we make it up as we go along. And so people talk about it in church circles. I was asked to speak at a student meeting, in a few months' time, I'm not doing it, where they asked me to speak, and they were going to have an experimental worship evening.

I don't know why they thought, I'd be the man for that. But they asked it. New expressions of church. It's a phenomenal phrase. New expressions of church.

As though we've got the right permission, as though we've got permission from God to make it up as we go along. But our God is a God who has put certain protocols in place.

[8 : 10] He is a holy God. He is an awesome God. He is a God who wants to travel amongst His people. Who wants to live amongst His people. But as we see here in Numbers, for God to live amongst His people, there's got to be certain protocols that are put in place.

And no one else can approach Him apart from the priests and the Levites on pain of death. Our God, that's our God, is a consuming fire.

So let's serve Him, says the letter to the Hebrews, with reverence. Let's serve Him exactly with fear. Have you ever seen a teenager rolling her eyes at her parents?

Have you ever seen that, Andrew? Have you ever seen that? A teenager rolling her eyes? Her eyes, I should say, also. And so is it. You know what it's like, isn't it? You ask someone about computers, about a computer.

Or I ask Donald about a computer. And partly he's thinking to himself, what do you know? What on earth do you know about computers? It's not in every culture, but it is in our culture, isn't it?

[9 : 20] Older people, what do they know? On the other hand, there's the opposite extreme to that. You don't understand what it's like to be a teenager. As if you've never been young yourself.

As if you came out of the womb at 50 or 60 years old. We were teenagers, and so we roll our eyes, don't we? My parents are here tonight, so I need to be careful on that. But it's so easy, isn't it, for us to roll our eyes at God?

To forget that our God is an awesome God, and he is omniscient, and he knows everything about everything. And God has been around. And he's omnipresent, and he's omnipotent, he can do what he likes.

There's a verse in the Psalms that says, you thought, that God, you thought, that I was such a one as you are. But he's not.

God is transcendent. He is high, and he is lifted up. He is holy, he is different, he is powerful, he is all-knowing. And yet, at the same time, he's been there.

[10:28] He's been here, and he's done that. And he remembers, doesn't it, Psalm 8, he remembers that we are dust. How can he remember? Because he's been in the dust. He's been tempted at every point as we are.

He's been in the wilderness, just as the people are in the wilderness. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness at every point as we are, yet without sin. It's a lovely verse, Isaiah 57 verse 15, which reminds us who our God is.

So there's great verses, paradoxical verse. This is what the high and lofty one says, he who lives forever and whose name is holy, I live in a high and holy place.

And also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to receive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. And so do you see that?

He is lofty and he is lowly. So let me ask, is your view of God balanced? You don't find that in any other religion.

[11:36] The God of Muslims is lofty, he is distant, he is detached. The God of the Buddhists, he is the ground of our being, he is everywhere.

They've all got it wrong. Either he is too high, or he is too part of us, part of the creation. The God of the Bible is lofty and lowly. He is transcendent and he is imminent.

And so I want to ask you, is that your understanding of who God is? He is altogether different from us. He is not the harmless, haven't left figure who you can approach any old way, any old time.

Good old Father Christmas, that's not who he is. And yet at the same time he is the one who lives amongst us and he is touched with our infirmities in the person of his son. That is a wonderful thing.

Do you remember when they got out of the wilderness and they went into the promised land and David took Jerusalem as his capital city and he wants to build a temple, he wants to build a house for God. And he's a bit embarrassed, David is living in his palace, panelled with cedar and decorated with gold and so on.

[12:47] David is the king in his palace and they've still got the tabernacle, that rickety old tent in the city. What are they going to do about it? It doesn't seem right. But the king should live in a palace and God should live in a tent.

And David is exercised about it and he prays about it and God sends Nathan the prophet to him. And Nathan says to him, or rather God says through Nathan, who told you that I need a house to live in? See this high and holy and lofty God doesn't need a tent, he doesn't need a house made with hands.

He loves to live amongst his people in the wilderness and that is the picture here. And so really, first of all, the book of Numbers, in the book of Numbers, what God is doing is preparing his people to travel, to travel on.

And the first thing he's teaching them is about the priority of worship. Numbers is really a call to worship God acceptably. That it's more important than anything else in your life or in mine.

What is going to happen to these people in the wilderness? Well, the fact is they are called to worship God. And he's making sure that they get that priority right here in the opening chapters. It's priority, the commandments.

[14:08] The first four commandments are all about the worship of God, aren't they? I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me. You don't worship anyone else.

You don't make for yourself a graven image. You don't take the name of the Lord your God in vain. You worship the name of the Lord your God. And when do you do that?

You remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. You have a day when you gather corporately to worship God. The ten commandments prioritize the worship of God. And the next six commandments really flow out of the first four.

And that's what's happening here in the book of Numbers. The Levites are set apart. What for? To guard the worship of God. Shall we pick that up again? And again it comes in those first few verses

of chapter 3. To guard, to guard, to guard.

To make sure that when the people approach him and worship him, they do it acceptably and reverently. That is their role. Look at verses 5 to 10 of chapter 3. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, bring the tribe of Levi near, set them before Aaron the priest so that they may minister, serve to him. [15:11] They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent and meeting as they minister at the tabernacle. They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent and meeting and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle.

And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons. They are wholly given to him from the people of Israel. And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons and they shall guard their priesthood. And if any outsider comes near, put him to death.

It's a matter of life's death. It will make or break the people in the wilderness, the extent to which they guard the worship of God. God is not a talisman.

God is not a rabbit's foot. God is not a lucky child. It's amazing, people come up to me and they say, I want you to pray for me because I've got exams.

It's like they only want me to come and pray for them when they've got exams. As though God is some kind of lucky child. No, we should pray for exams. I'm not saying we shouldn't.

[16:10] We should work out for exams as well. That's another point. But it's not like God is someone that we polish and hate press upon. Yes, so it is. No, our God is a scary God, an awesome God, a holy God.

And we are in the wilderness and we have enemies to face, yes, and battles to fight. And we have to pass our exams and the same principle applies. But if we're to expect God to be with us in our lives, we cannot just tag him on.

We can't polish him up as a lucky charm. If we want him to travel with us, if we want him in our lives, then we must prioritise the worship of God. We must guard the worship of God.

Jesus said, seek first the kingdom of God and all these other things, well, they'll fall into place.

Exams, you might pass them and you might not. Who cares? Put God first, that's the thing that matters.

And then everything else will be added. But seek first the kingdom of God, guard the kingdom of God. No one, no one ever missed out by putting God first, if you believe that. No one ever gained anything by neglecting him.

[17:20] So let me ask you, is that your top priority, the worship of God? The Levites start to remind us of that, to guard the holy place and to remind us that our God is not a God to be played with, our God is a conceited fire.

But secondly, if we want to approach this holy God, if we will have this awesome holy God traveling with us, living amongst us, if we are to approach the awesome God, if we're to worship him acceptably, then we need someone to take our place.

That's the second point, we need someone to stand in for us. Look at verses 11 to 14 of chapter 3. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, behold I have taken the Levites from around the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel.

The Levites shall be mine. For all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast.

They shall be mine. I am the Lord. God's people were redeemed out of the land of Egypt. How? Do you remember? By substitution. The path of the lamb died in the place of the firstborn.

[18:29] The blood was to be daubed on the doorposts. And whenever the angel of death passed over, whenever the blood was on the doorpost, the angel of the Lord passed over that house.

And the firstborn in the house was saved. And that was the principle on which the Lord brought the people out of slavery, out of Egypt. It's the principle of substitution, of one taking the place of another.

And so because of that he is saying that the firstborn belonged to me. But instead of taking them, do you see what he's done? He has substituted the Levites for the firstborn.

Now it sounds quite involved, but it's a double substitution here. There's a substitution in death and in life. Someone has died for them. The parcel of the lamb has been sacrificed so that the firstborn could be saved.

someone has died for them. And now someone has to live for them. Someone has to serve God for them. The Levites. Can you see that in these verses? Not only does someone have to die in place of the firstborn, the parcel of the lamb, but somebody has to live in place of the firstborn.

[19 : 37] And that was the role of the Levites. They were the ones who were to be given completely over to God. Let me try and illustrate it. It's not an easy thing to illustrate it.

So we were burled. It may have happened to you. It's pretty unpleasant. You come home, somebody's been in your house, they've been through your stuff. And that's bad enough, isn't it, that somebody's been in and been through your stuff.

But when they've taken something precious from you, something valuable, and it may not be of any monetary value to the robbers, but it might be something of great value to you.

It's been taken, they've stolen it, you've been robbed, and there are two things instantly, two things that you want instantly you get onto the police, you're in the police, and you want something done about this.

You want the burglar to be caught, the perpetrator, you want the culprit to be punished, who's violated your home, they've come into your private space, you want the culprit to be caught. You want justice to be done.

[20 : 42] You want the penalty to be paid. But you also want your valuables back, don't you? let's say it's a painting that they took, you want that picture back, don't you?

And it's the same with God, God has made us in his image and in his likeness. We are in a sense his picture. He made us for himself, and when we sin and we rebel against him, the image is marred.

We rob him of his own picture. And that's how serious sin is, he wants our sin to be punished. He wants justice to be done. His law must be upheld, his holiness must be vindicated.

And in the death of the Passover lamb on the cross, Jesus has done that for us. Jesus has satisfied the justice of God. Jesus has vindicated the holiness of God, the price is paid.

But God wants his picture back. He doesn't only want the crime punished, he wants his picture back. He wants back what wonderfully belongs to him.

[21 : 53] And Jesus does that. So we say where's eternal light, eternal light, how pure the soul must be when placed within his searching side, and so on.

But it goes on to say this, there needs to be an offering and a sacrifice. This is the verse, there is a way for man to rise to that sublime abode.

An offering and a sacrifice, a Holy Spirit's energy, an advocate with God. The death I deserve to die, yes, Jesus has died in my place for me on the cross as the Passover lamb.

And the life that I cannot live, the life that God requires of me, Jesus offers up his life. Do you see this double substitution? It's not just sacrifice, it's an offering and a sacrifice.

Upon a life I could not live, upon a death I dare not die, another's life, another's death, I rest my holy journey. Do you understand that? It's not just his dying, it's his living.

[23 : 01] In which he substitutes himself for us. He is, isn't he, according to Colossians 1, he is the icon of the invisible God. He's the only one who ever fully lived out what life was meant to be.

The life that God required of us. And he's completely devoted. And if you notice in these verses, it's not just a general, vague kind of substitution. It's a very particular one. Look what we're told God said to Moses.

Count the Levites. Count them in verses 39 of chapter 3. It's a really interesting detail. I don't know whether you saw it. Verse 23, all the Levites from a month old and upwards were 22,000.

And then you get to verse 43, where the first one accounted. Chapter 3. And we find there, don't we, that all the first four males, according to the number of names from a month old and upwards, are listed as 22,273.

And so that's a bit of a problem, isn't it? And the Lord said in verse 40, list all the first four males of the people of Israel from a month old and upwards, taking the number of their names.

[24 : 11] And you shall take the Levites from me, I am the Lord, instead of all the first four among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites, instead of all the first four among the cattle of the people of Israel. So God wants the Levites to take place in the first four.

He wants the Levites, these are the men whose whole life is committed to serving God in the tabernacle. And they are doing that instead of the first four, but there's a problem, isn't there?

There's 22,000 Levites, but there's 22,273 first four that are to be redeemed.

What do you do with the leftovers? Well, we're told, aren't we, they are to be redeemed at five shekels per head, verse 46. The redemption price for the 273 of the first four of the people of Israel, over and above the male Levites, you shall take five shekels per head.

You see, near enough is not good enough for God. It might be for us.

I mean, 22,000 or 22,273, big deal. Near enough, isn't it? But not as far as God is concerned. You see, unless the blood is applied to the doorpost, the first four will die.

[25 : 27] if the Israelites had not sacrificed the parcel of the lamb and applied the blood to the doorpost, they would have lost their first born son. And unless there is a Levite to take the place of the first born in Israel, then he cannot be atoned for.

Without substitution, there can be no redemption. And unless there is personal, particular redemption, there is no salvation. And that is right at the heart of the gospel.

substitution, redemption, the payment of a price. Someone standing in for me is the heart of the gospel. I don't know whether you get emails, sometimes you get letters, you open it up and it says, Dear Paul and Claire, or Dear Mr.

Levy. But as you read it, you realise it's just a template letter, isn't it? You think you're getting a personal letter from a missionary, but they've just sent it. Out of their thousands of lists and managed to somehow get your name on it.

It's just a template with blank spaces. And they put your name in it. It's not a personal email. It's just blank spaces and you can fill in the details. I want to say Jesus did not die for blank spaces.

[26 : 46] But when Jesus died on the cross, when he substituted himself on the cross, Jesus in his life and in his death, he didn't substitute himself for no one in particular.

It was very particular on the cross. It was very personal on the cross. The apostle Paul said, the son of God loved me and gave himself for me.

I had an explanation of the gospel recently where somebody said, the offer of the gospel is like a blank check. You've got to write your name on the check. As if Jesus died for kind of blank humanity and you fill in your name there, but that's not what happened.

Faith is not fill in the blank, it's a ridiculous concept. Jesus did something on the cross and you can put your name down and hey presto, he becomes your saviour. No, when Jesus Christ died on the cross, he knew who he was dying for.

The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me. It's personal, it's particular, what is the outcome of that?

[27 : 57] What is the outcome of that? This is my last point. It's always terrible when you've got to tell people what your points are again and again. It's not very clear. First, God is a consuming fire. Secondly, how can I approach him unless we have a substitute someone who stands in for us, both in his life and in his death?

So, third point is what is the outcome? And remember what the New Testament tells us in a number of places. The book of Revelation, to him who loved us and has freed us from our sins by his blood. What is the consequence of that? Jesus standing in for us and setting us free by his own shared blood. We are redeemed. Not by silver or gold, not by shackles, but by the blood of the lamb.

The blood over the lamb, of the Passover lamb. What is the consequence of that? Well, unto him who has loved us and freed us some sins by his blood. And has made us into a kingdom of priests. To serve his God and Father, to him be glory and power forever and ever. Or remember what Peter says in 1 Peter chapter 2. He says, you are a chosen race tonight.

[29 : 02] You are a royal priesthood, a holy nation. A kingdom of priests, that is what we are. God is a God of God of the people.

They are the guards in chapter 3. They guarded the tabernacle in chapter 3. And they are the porters, aren't they, in chapter 4. Every Levite, we haven't got time to look at chapter 4, but every Levite, between the ages of 30 to 50, in the prime of life, every Levite was given something to carry. And they had to be in that age bracket because they didn't realise it at the time, that they had to carry heavy furniture around in the wilderness for the next 40 years. They thought it was only going to be a couple of days, but it was 40 years.

And in chapter 3, they are given the task of guarding the tabernacle. And they stand guard for hours on end, but in chapter 4, they carry the different bits of the tabernacle through the wilderness. And the different divisions are given different responsibilities.

The Kohathites carry holy things, the furniture from the holy of holies, and the ark of the covenant itself. The Gershonites were to carry the tent and the curtains, the Levites were to carry the tent bags and the frames, and the crossbars and the posts.

[30 : 16] No one's got all the gifts. No one's got a monopoly on ministry. And we all need to work together. We are a kingdom of priests. We need to work together with the gifts that we have.

And we have very different gifts, don't we? There are a variety of gifts, and a variety of ministries, and a variety of works of service. We are a kingdom of priests. Before I close, let me speak to us. I was reading this week on the parable of the sheep and the goats, and I saw something I'd not seen before. That in Matthew 25, where the son of man comes, and the king says to those on his right hand, come, you who are blessed by my father, take your inheritance, and the kingdom prepared you before the foundation of the world.

For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, and I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, and I was a stranger, and you invited me, and I needed clothes, and you clothed me, I was sick, and you looked after me, and I was in prison, and you came to visit me, and then the righteous will answer, when did we do that?

When did we see you hungry, and feed you? When did we see you sick, and minister to you? When? And I've not seen it before, they are blissfully unaware, that they're actually serving Jesus by visiting the sick, and feeding the hungry, including the naked, and those who are poor, and visiting those in prison.

[31 : 39] And what I've not noticed before is the contrast between the Pharisee and the tax collector. Do you know what the Pharisee says? The Pharisee says, Lord, I want to remind you of what I've been doing.

I've given you a tenth of all that I've earned. I fast twice a week, just remember Lord, it's what I do. Can you see the difference? Can you see the difference between Phariseeism and real Christianity?

Between false service and real service? Between religion and grace, religion says, I obey, therefore I ought to be accepted. Lord, remember what I've done for you.

I've always thought so misrule. I've given up my time for you, Lord. Don't you know how hard I serve? I was an elder, Lord. Remember what I've done for you. That was religion. Grace says, I'm accepted.

The holy, awesome God has come to live in my life because of Jesus' death. Because Jesus stood in for me. I'm accepted. And therefore I obey.

[32 : 44] and I want to serve. And those who've done the most will say, Lord, when did I do that?

I've done nothing. And those who are our Lord's best servants will say on that day, we're only unprofitable servants. We've only done what we were commanded to do.

We've done that badly. And the Lord will say, well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen.