

Numbers 8

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[0 : 00] I started looking at Numbers 8 on Monday and Tuesday and thought, to be honest with you, I don't really understand it so I'm going to skip it.

! And then of course I began to study Matthew 5 and what I preached on this morning that there's nothing in the Old Testament. That is an important one. And so here we are in Numbers chapter 8 and I feel that tonight it might feel like a little bit of a lecture rather than a sermon.

But by the end we will get to some application. It's not an ET passage. I don't know whether they've ever done this. There was a space rocket about to launch somewhere in America, I suppose.

And we were all crammed into the school assembly hall and you were there to watch the rocket launch. You can do it at 7 on the internet, isn't it?

It's supposed to launch, I don't know, about 12 o'clock. So we were all getting there about quarter to 12. But for the next hour, it went through all the various checks. I don't know whether you've seen that. So it goes through the different checks of, is, I don't know, is the landing light working?

[1 : 21] Or is the, I don't know anything about rockets, is the fire working? Is, I don't know, is the fridge? All these things. And I suppose if you're really into rockets and you're preparing for a rocket launch, you'd be really excited about that, wouldn't you?

It's quite important to do. And if one fails, the whole rocket launch is off. In some ways, that's what you've got in the book of Numbers. You've got the kind of launching of the tabernacle.

You know you watch a film or TV program and there's a flashback to years before? And in Numbers you've got a flashback and it's the setting of the tabernacle. And so what you've got in Numbers 8 is the drama of watching the countdown to the tabernacle launch.

And that is the kind of drama that the audience of Numbers is supposed to experience as they hear this read. We're not in that situation, so we don't see it so easily. We're in this flashback situation.

We're watching the initial launch of the tabernacle. And various tabernacle systems are turned on one by one prior to the launch. And they depart from Sinai.

[2 : 25] To the uninitiated, you read Numbers chapter 8, you think, well, it's just technical jargon. It's just Old Testament tabernacle law. It's different sacrificial contributions.

You've got the voice of the mercy seat being heard. You've got this weird shaving and washing and installation of the Levites. It's just typically Old Testament on this.

But what you're watching in the book of Numbers is you're watching the key systems of the tabernacle being switched on. And as you hear them describe and see them functioning, you see that the system of atonement, the system of being right with God, will carry the people safely and victoriously to the promised land.

So in chapter 7, if you can remember that, the wagons are in place and they're ready to go. The sacrifices have started to come. And the central item of the inner sanctum, the mercy seat, it's been installed properly and successfully.

And the central object of the outer sanctum, which is this thing, the lampstand, it is switched on and it's shining and it's working. And so tonight you come to the service personnel.

[3 : 35] Tonight you come to who is going to run the tabernacle. And the non-sequence, if I can put it like that, there's four parts. Let me give you an interim.

First of all, there's the five-step installation process. That's in verses 5 to 13. And then you've got the meaning of the process in verses 14 to 19, where God explains it.

And then verses 20 to 22, you're told that the process is implemented properly. And then in verses 23 to 26, instruction is given in how it will be used in the future.

Let me run that back again. First of all, the five-step installation process, verses 5 to 13. The meaning of the process, which is explained by God, 14 to 19. We're told that the process is working

properly, verses 20 to 22.

And how it will carry on, verses 23 to 26. Now I hope this is not just a historical lecture. It's not just for our curiosity tonight. This is a service of worship, isn't it?

[4 : 34] And what you have here, I hope you might be able to see by the end, is a window to the love of God. And what the Levites' service teaches us about our atonement. So the first section, verses 5 to 13, this installation process for the Levites is outlined by God.

As you read from Numbers and Leviticus, you find that Moses would have loved Ikea. He would have absolutely loved Ikea, because Moses loves a flat pack instruction.

That's what the Levites' numbers are. He's given instructions. And the instructions are read to him first. And they're gone over with him. And Moses does it right.

And so in verses 5 to 13, God goes over the instruction leaflet with Moses. And then he explains the reason for the process. In verses 14 to 19. And then, and only again in verse 20, does Moses actually perform the installation.

And so in this part, you've got the steps of how they're going to be installed. Five steps. The first step in verses 6 to 7 is to ritually cleanse and separate the people. Now what you're going to see is you're going to see a chiasm.

[5 : 43] If you don't know what that is, don't worry. It's basically that there's five things. The fifth matches up with the first. And the second matches up with the fourth. And the middle one's the big point. Alright. I should have done it in a diagram.

So, verses 6 and 7. They are to take the Levites from among the people of Israel. And they are to cleanse them and separate them. That's the first step. Three stages in there, verse 7.

Sprinkle with the water of purification. Shave them from head to toe. Wash their clothes. They're the steps in the ritual transition. Or if I can put it this. These Levites, they are being de-installed before they're installed.

And they're being de-installed from the mass of the people of Israel. And it's a change of identity. It's obvious. A transition is taking place. The sprinkling with water is a clear symbol of washing of the old.

And the washing of the garments, the third step, is really obvious, isn't it? It's, again, being washed for service. But it's the shaving from head to toe that is puzzling, isn't it? Why shave them?

[6 : 48] What does shaving mean in the Bible? I'm getting shaving at the moment. What does shaving in the Bible mean? Well, let's think about it. The Nazarite. You know the Nazarite vowed with the long hair?

They shaved their head after a period of service. And so they reintegrated to normal life that way. The leprosy rites, when somebody was cleansed from leprosy, involved the shaving of the body. And reintegration from isolation back into the camp. And in Deuteronomy chapter 21, there are instructions for foreign women that they are to shave their heads as part of their leaving behind the old nation and the old people.

And they are taking on a new identity. And so the sign of that was the shaving on the head. Hair represents, in the Bible, a person's time. We'll say the same thing in a different way.

Hair represents a person's strength. Their years of life, because hair is always typically growing, ordinarily. It represents life and strength.

[7 : 53] And the passage of time. And in many ancient rituals, shaving represented a shadow of the past. Past stage of life and identity.

And you are transitioning into a new one. And all three of these steps of cleansing were about separation. Sprinkled with water. Shaving, washing of garments. They began the process of the Levites transitioning, if I can put it like that.

And installing them from the people of God, people of Israel, and being prepared to take on a new identity in God's house. Second step of the process is in verse 8.

In verse 8, there are two sacrifices they're brought. They're not sacrificed yet, and yet they're brought. One bull is for a whole burnt offering, with a grain offering, and another is a sin offering. And if you remember the series on Leviticus, which I doubt, a whole burnt offering is an atonement sacrifice.

[8 : 55] It is atonement for sin, so that you can get right with God again. The sin offering really should be translated a de-sin offering.

It represents the cleansing of the temple from the offence that sin brings on God's house. God is holy, and you can't bring anything sinful into his house. And the destruction is not here, two bulls for two Levites, but two bulls for all the Levites that have been chosen, and are in transition.

And so at this point, they simply bring the two bulls to have them ready. The third step is in verses 9 to 11, and it's the centrepiece of this sequence. It's the middle point.

It's the focus of the installation process. The point is at which the Levites are presented. So you'll see it happens in two steps.

First in verse 9, the whole congregation gathers outside the tabernacle, that is outside the fence of the courtyard, and those outside the entrance, the whole congregation, lays hands on the Levites.

[10:02] Again, it's not helpful language. They press their hands upon them. It's not the laying on the hands of all the nations. It's not like when the elders kind of gently, tentatively put their hand on someone's head.

It's not like that. It's the language of sacrifice. It's the same word that is used when a sacrifice is set before you. And the priest pressed his hands on the animal and said, let this be a sacrifice in my place.

It's not like it would have been the first one from each house being the ones to represent the whole congregation. It would be very difficult to get into the whole congregation. You know what it's like when there's too many elders and not enough people in the ordination service.

And so the first one probably set forward each to lay a hand, to press a hand on the Levites. And so you might remember the sacrifice of the Levites in chapter 3. And there was great care given there that it's a one-to-one ratio of Levites to first four of the houses of the other tribes.

But here it's the whole congregation of Israel through the first one of each house. They are pressing their hands on the Levites. And the language is clearly that of sacrifice.

[11:20] You see that when you come to the second part. Look at verse 11. The Levites are now brought inside the temple courts. That is before the Lord. And they were offered, the Levites were offered as a kind of sacrifice.

As a human wave offering. And what on earth is that? Do you remember? We've seen wave offerings in the past. It's named that because normally the priest literally waves the offering in front of the altar.

He takes a portion of the sacrifice before the altar. It's a motion that represents the action of placing the sacrifice on the altar. But the wave offering isn't left on the altar.

It's a motion that is placed on the altar and then it's pulled back. Now I doubt that the priests lifted up the Levites one by one and waved them back and forth and then put them on the altar and then put them back.

I don't think that was literally what's happening. But the wave offering portions that are in motion they are given to God and then God gives them back to the priests.

[12:31] So with the sacrifices they were given to God. They were waved in front of the altar and put on the altar and then God gives them back to the priests so that they could eat. But in this case it's not meat it's not a bull it's not a cow it is actual people it is the Levites and they are given to God and God gives them back to the priests.

They are the ultimate expression of divine re-gifting. That's what a wave offering is. So can you get this? I know it's really hard work tonight alright but the Levites are substitutes for the firstborn of every household.

And they are brought as a sacrifice to God and then they are re-gifted by God back to the priests for their service. That is the heart that's the centrepiece. The fourth and fifth steps mirror the first two steps on the fourth step in verse 12 can you see it's the offering of the two bulls that have previously been brought in step 3.

This is the atonement of the Levites themselves. And the fifth and final step is the installation of the priests of the Levites. And it mirrors doesn't it the separation that they have from their old life in the camp of the people of Israel.

The first step do you remember it was to be uninstalled. The last step is for them to be installed as tabernacle personnel serving the priests. It would be a tremendous privilege.

[13:54] Their mothers and dads would have been so proud. Parents living in a subsistence society it would be a great cause of joy to see your child granted enrolment in the kind of palace staff of the king.

Here an entire tribe is uninstalled from the outer circle of tents. Do you remember those circle of tents? And they are installed reinstalled into the inner circle of the tents of the priests. There are five steps to the ritual process appointed for the installation of the Levites. And the heart of the passages that's set to stop. Now what's the meaning? I love it when the Bible does this. The meaning gives you an act and then it gives you the description of what's going on in the act. So look at verses 14 to 19 because God explains the meaning of this ritual. Let me try to give you an illustration.

It's not a perfect illustration by any means. I suppose there's a guy in the community who is deeply deeply in debt. And the harder he tries the deeper he gets into debt.

[15:02] And his whole family bear the burden of his debt. And then the king arrives in town. He's the king over the debtor and he's the king over the oppressive creditor, the man that the guy owes the money to.

And he is filled with wrath and anger and the terrible interest that this debtor is being charged by the oppressive creditor. And so the king acts to correct the injustice.

And he frees the slave from his oppressor. And then as a perpetual reminder of what he's done to make them remember it, remember that he is king and sovereign over all.

And so both this oppressive creditor and the redeemed debtor will remember the king goes into the creditor's house, the man who's charged all that interest into one of his houses.

And he tears it down. All of that creditor's houses, the various houses he has, deserve in many ways to be flattened. But the king tears one of them down.

[16:10] But at the merciful warning, only one is left in ruins. And as the debtor returns to his own farm, the king requires him to dedicate one of his barns as a chapel.

All of this former debtor's property belongs to the saving king. That's the only reason he's got it. But as a gracious reminder, one is to be set up as a chapel in the king's honour. Now that's not a very good illustration.

I stole it from somewhere else, so take issue with that. But this passage is pointing you and I back to the Passover in Egypt. When God judged Egypt.

Egypt. All of Egypt was judged, wasn't it? But because of his mercy, only the firstborn was killed. All of Egypt was represented through the firstborn, wasn't it? Of the house of Egypt. And at the same time, he redeemed all of Israel out of Egypt. But as a reminder of that redemption, he said, consecrate, give to me your firstborn of each house to serve in the temple.

[17:19] The firstborn of Egypt, the cattle and the sons, they suffered. But the firstborn of the Israelites and the firstborn of the Israelite cattle were to be tribute offerings.

They were to be given to God from that point forward. From that point forward, Israel was to devote the firstborn of all cattle in praise to God to redemption. And so also their firstborn sons. The firstborn sons would not be slain on the altar.

Instead, like the wave offerings, the firstborn sons of every household would be presented at the altar and devoted to service in the temple as God's property.

But the Lord reminds Moses here in this text that in lieu of taking all the firstborn sons, it was appointed that Israel bring redemption payment when they present their firstborn sons at their birth. And that redemption payment, it would go to support the Levites. So that the whole tribe of Levi, firstborn, secondborn, thirdborn and so on, would serve in the place of the firstborn of every household.

[18:27] And they would represent all of Israel. It's rather complicated, isn't it? It's really layered. But this is the meaning of the ritual. Centering on the congregation the firstborn of each house, laying hands on the head of the Levites, and they are sent into service, presented them as substitutes in offering for the tabernacle service.

That's the meaning of the ritual as explained in verses 14-19. Put simply, this ritual installed the Levites in the tabernacle as representatives of the firstborn, who were themselves representatives of the house of Israel.

Now you might find it a little bit complicated, but there's three layers on the head. The Levites represent the firstborn, the firstborn represent the whole of the people of Israel. It's a bit like we elect representatives, don't we, each parliament, who represent us.

And the Levites are there to represent the firstborn, who themselves represent all of Israel. But the reason why the Levites serve in the tabernacle is the real gem in the chapter.

Look at verse 19. Look at verse 19. The whole chapter builds up to verse 19. And it ends in this way.

[19 : 48] I've given the Levites the gift to Aaron and his sons from among the people of Israel to do the service for the people of Israel at the tent of meeting, to make atonement for the people of Israel, that there may be no plague among the people of Israel, when the people of Israel come near the sanctuary.

The Levites, they are critical to the work of atonement. the Levites are there to maintain the tabernacle equipment. The Levites, they will clean the vessels that are stained by blood. The Levites will repair the holy furnishings when they become damaged. The Levites will restitch the curtains as the threads become loose. They will look at the schedule of offerings for the days set up by the priests, and they will make sure that the stock of required grains for the animals is adequate.

And they'll get their proper sacrifices from the storage rooms and fields, and they will have it ready for the right point. And the Levites will keep the wagons in repair.

And when it comes time to move, Moses will tell the Levites, and they will be the ones that will disassemble the tabernacle, and they will be the ones that will pack it up and transport it, and they will reassemble it on the other side.

[21 : 00] And in any mercy ministries of the tabernacle, the Levites will be active. And they will go with the priest who inspects the house, and they'll go with the priest who inspects it for mould, we read about that in Leviticus.

And it will be the Levites that will do the tearing down and the rebuilding work, in particular. And as the daily services for public prayer gather, and as individuals, some look through day by day, and throughout the day by worship, Levitical guards will stand at the gate.

Not to keep the people out, don't take that. But to make sure the people are properly prepared. And to make sure the people are richly cleansed with acceptable offerings to guard the people.

Because they don't want people to enter ill prepared into worship. And so when you study the Levites, I think you see that in some ways, like the deacons, they are like the deacons of the New Testament.

Though the deaconsburg is much broader. their role is not the work of preaching and worship service, the Levites, that's overseen by the priests, which are roughly equivalent to the elders in the New Testament.

[22 : 17] But their work is that of guarding and preparing and transporting, carrying and managing. And it's essential, isn't it, to the ministry of atonement in the tabernacle. And the focus of their labour is to ensure that everything in the tabernacle is working properly.

So that when the people enter the sanctuary to worship, there will be no plague of God's wrath breaking out against them. So the Levites, they are like nurses and technicians in the operating room.

The surgeons perform the operation like the priests at the altar. But the nurses and the technicians make sure, don't they, the tools are sharp. But the machinery is in prime condition and the theatre is properly clean.

You can't do an operation without them. The patient itself is cleansed and prepped for surgery. And the Levites ensure the safety of the people, that everything is in proper order for their worship.

And so the audience is on pins and needles at this very important set of instructions as they're recounted. And they wonder, will this system turn on smoothly? And so far you've only heard the instructions.

[23 : 28] And so now in verses 20 to 26, Moses implements these instructions, the equipment is turned off. And there's great rejoicing to see it running smoothly. In verse 20 to 22, they simply recount in summary things outlined in the instructions.

They tell us what happened. They tell us that they happened. They've been reviewing the instruction manual with God at the start of the chapter in the previous paragraph. And then here Moses and Aaron get going.

And praise be to God the tabernacle is fully staffed and it's ready for the Passover. That's just around the corner. The countdown to launch continues. And the final paragraph in verses 20 to 26 assure us that the system is not only running but that it's stocked to continue.

It's like the stocking of the sacrifices in chapter 7. It's like the continual lighting and filling of the lamp in chapter 8. And so the inauguration of the Levites is described with particular concern for its ongoing work by its continuation.

So verses 23 to 26 describe the enrolment and retirement instructions for the continuation of this office. I don't think it is retirement for those who get excited that it's retiring at 50.

[24 : 50] Because we're told that the new Levites entered into their duty for service when they reach 25. And that, as I said in the reading, that means heavy lifting. Hard labor. The younger Levites, teens, they might be serving in other capacities in the tabernacle, but the heavy lifting they're not assigned until they get to 25.

In fact, if you're really observing if you're about to chapter 24, there's a different age range. When the Levites are organized into teams for organizing, transporting the tabernacle parts, there the Levites are counted through the ages of 30 to 50.

In chapter 4, but here is 25. Why? It's even more surprising when you go to 1 Chronicles 23-24, in the days of David, the Levitical duties are from 20 to 50.

So there's lots of different starting points of Levitical service. And I think the most obvious answer to that is different kinds of service are reserved for different ages.

I don't think there's a contradiction at all. And the general heavy lifting in the tabernacle is for those 25 and up. And the actual transporting duties of chapter 4 are for 30 and up.

[26 : 02] And when it comes to the choirs and the musos in David's time, well, it's 20 and up. The starting age varies according to the duties. But the age of transfer to God's duty is always consistent.

And it's 50. So the Levite kind of cycles out of the duty of service, which is heavy, manual labor tasks, and they continue service now, but they keep guard.

It's not retirement. The Levites are not retiring at age 50, but they're being free from the heavy lifting duties. And they're being transferred into that most essential duty of keeping guard.

And they are the ones now, the wiser and older men who stand at the gate to make sure that people come to worship prepared properly, lest the wrath of God break out against them. And so we find that the operation of this important system of the tabernacle and atonement is now up and running, and it's perpetually provided for.

And so what on earth has this got to do with us tonight? Well, three points of application. One, although the Levites are not exactly the same thing as the deacons, just as priests are not exactly the same thing as Albers, there is an organic development from one to the other.

[27 : 26] It is, if we can put it like this, the gospel serving management duties of the Levites. And that certainly seems to carry over, doesn't it, to the New Testament office of deacon.

And so now you've got that classic account of the New Testament apostles appointing deacons in Jerusalem. And there the importance of the role is really shown clearly, because without deacons, the mercy ministry of the Jerusalem church, number one will take over the church, but number two, it was being carried out in a way that is contradictory to the gospel.

The Jewish widows were being shown favoritism over the Greek widows. And the deacons were not just to be appointed to be stewards and managers, they were to be spirit-filled, doctrinally wise deacons.

And they were appointed to ensure that the church's mercy ministry operated in a consistent way with the church's message. That what they gave in their mercy giving matched up with the gospel that they were proclaiming.

And that calling, it seems to me, finds its roots in this Old Testament text about the Levites, who oversee, don't they, many of the logistics of the tower and its ministries.

[28 : 46] And they've got an eye on kind of gospel fidelity so that there may be no playing on the people. The New Testament diacons is not a one-for-one kind of straight line.

I don't think it is that continuation of the Levites, but there is a development and change, but there is a real and genuine organic link, I think. And so as we go to appoint deacons, we'll be having an election hopefully later this month.

It is helpful, I think, to think about what deacons do. They keep the ministry of the church going. They serve in mercy, but they also serve practically.

This passage is helpful when thinking about deacons. Secondly, as complicated as it is, there's a beautiful reason for the layers of substitution. The Levites are the substitutes for the firstborn of

each house, and the firstborn of each house are representative for the whole houses. And woven into this kind of really complex system of representatives is the message that though there is one tribe serving in the temple, ultimately we will one day all dwell in God's house. [30 : 03] One day all will be in the temple, and God will dwell with us, and we will eat at his table. We'll do that tonight, won't we?

But it's a foretaste of what is to come. And we will be counted as members in our house. And so the saints of old would say, in Psalm 84, blessed are those who dwell in your house, the Levites, ever singing your praises.

But that will let them be us. And they referred to the symbol of the Levite choirs that sat before all of our houses that hold. And so we sing Psalm 23, don't we?

Surely goodness, have mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. And this enrolment of the Levites into the tabernacle as representatives of each household sets before us to hope for all of us who trusted in Christ that one day we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

In God's presence one day. And thirdly and lastly we see over and over and over again in the book of Moses passages like this. And they show to us the immensity and the complexity of the atonement.

[31 : 21] To be brought near to dwell in God's presence is no simple undertaking. When we say let us draw near to God in prayer, that is not a little thing.

There's a huge burden of issues that need to be addressed to make your worship and your entrance into God's presence possible. And the complex tabernacle system shows you and I that the fact that God set it up and God provided for its functions, it assures us that atonement has been provided by God and it works.

And so with a satisfaction that is far greater than seeing a rocket launch, the tabernacle's mission processes assure us that God faithfully provides all that is necessary.

all that is necessary for your forgiveness, all that is necessary for your washing and for your presentation with joy into his presence in such a way that there will be no plague of his judgments that breaks out against you.

Because it is, isn't it, in the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ that all of these shadows and provisions were once and for all secured. words that are and so the four most important words that you hear every week, which I say to you occasionally are, let us worship God.

[32 : 50] And let us draw near to him with confidence and not with fear in Christ. and let us serve him with gratefulness for his greater salvation.

let us go and use the Lord in prayer. Let us pray.