

THE SERVICE OF THE LEVITES

BIBLE TEXT : Numbers 3:5-17, 21-45; 4:1-15, 24-33

LESSON 90 Junior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men" (Colossians 3:23).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Numbers 3:5-17 (KJV)

⁵ And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,
⁶ Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister unto him.
⁷ And they shall keep his charge, and the charge of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of the congregation, to do the service of the tabernacle.
⁸ And they shall keep all the instruments of the tabernacle of the congregation, and the charge of the children of Israel, to do the service of the tabernacle.
⁹ And thou shalt give the Levites unto Aaron and to his sons: they *are* wholly given unto him out of the children of Israel.
¹⁰ And thou shalt appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall wait on their priest's office: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death.
¹¹ And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,
¹² And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn that openeth the matrix among the children of Israel: therefore the Levites shall be mine;
¹³ Because all the firstborn *are* mine; *for* on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto me all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast: mine shall they be: I *am* the LORD.
¹⁴ And the LORD spake unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, saying,
¹⁵ Number the children of Levi after the house of their fathers, by their families: every male from a month old and upward shalt thou number them.
¹⁶ And Moses numbered them according to the word of the LORD, as he was commanded.
¹⁷ And these were the sons of Levi by their names; Gershon, and Kohath, and Merari.

Numbers 3:21-45 (KJV)

²¹ Of Gershon *was* the family of the Libnites, and the family of the Shimites: these *are* the families of the Gershonites.
²² Those that were numbered of them,

BIBLE REFERENCES:

NOTES:

Help for the Priests

God had appointed Aaron and his four sons to be priests, and to serve Him in the Holy Place of the Tabernacle. But two sons, Nadab and Abihu, had died before the Lord because they offered strange fire in their worship. Only Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar remained; and they could not possibly do all the work that needed to be done in taking care of the Tabernacle and offering the many sacrifices, let alone taking down the entire Tabernacle and setting it up again every time the Israelites moved. All the sacred furniture — the Ark of the Covenant with the cherubims, the golden altar, the golden candlestick, the table of shewbread, the brazen altar, and the laver — had to be carried. It would take many men to carry such heavy equipment. And although they had wagons to carry the gold-covered boards, and the curtains of the Tabernacle, it took many men to handle carefully all the parts of that holy sanctuary.

God could see that the priests needed help so He gave them the tribe of Levi to do this service. This tribe had showed a willingness to serve God that day when Moses challenged Israel: "Who is on the LORD'S side?" The people had committed a great sin by worshiping the golden calf, and God wanted to destroy all the people because they had disobeyed Him. But Moses prayed long and hard for them, and God let them live. The tribe of Levi had evidently had no part in worshiping the calf, and they were chosen of God to do special work for Him at the Tabernacle.

Levites Set Apart

God told Aaron to purify the children of Levi and offer special sacrifices to consecrate them for service. They were told to camp around the Tabernacle, near where God dwelled. They were to be as a guard, because if a stranger came too near he would die. God wanted His Holy Place to be kept holy.

The Tabernacle was in the middle of the camp of Israel. It was the center of the life of the Israelites. Their worship of God was to be the most important thing of all. It should be so with us, too. It is more necessary that we do the work God has given us to do than that we please ourselves or our friends. God wants us to love His service with all our hearts; and if we do that, we will want to do His will always. In the morning, when we start our day, we pray to Jesus to keep us through the day and help us not to do anything He would not want us to do. If anything unexpected comes up during the day, we ask Him if it is His will for us to do it. Then at night we can thank God that we have lived to please Him.

A Place for Each Tribe

At the east end of the Tabernacle, at its entrance, camped the tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. Something special was expected from the tribe of Judah because Jacob had prophesied: "Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise:... The sceptre shall not depart from Judah nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be" (Genesis 49:8-10). That was a

according to the number of all the males, from a month old and upward, *even* those that were numbered of them *were* seven thousand and five hundred.

²³ The families of the Gershonites shall pitch behind the tabernacle westward.

²⁴ And the chief of the house of the father of the Gershonites *shall be* Eliasaph the son of Lael.

²⁵ And the charge of the sons of Gershon in the tabernacle of the congregation *shall be* the tabernacle, and the tent, the covering thereof, and the hanging for the door of the tabernacle of the congregation,

²⁶ And the hangings of the court, and the curtain for the door of the court, which *is* by the tabernacle, and by the altar round about, and the cords of it for all the service thereof.

²⁷ And of Kohath *was* the family of the Amramites, and the family of the Izecharites, and the family of the Hebronites, and the family of the Uzzielites: these *are* the families of the Kohathites.

²⁸ In the number of all the males, from a month old and upward, *were* eight thousand and six hundred, keeping the charge of the sanctuary.

²⁹ The families of the sons of Kohath shall pitch on the side of the tabernacle southward.

³⁰ And the chief of the house of the father of the families of the Kohathites *shall be* Elizaphan the son of Uzziel.

³¹ And their charge *shall be* the ark, and the table, and the candlestick, and the altars, and the vessels of the sanctuary wherewith they minister, and the hanging, and all the service thereof.

³² And Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest *shall be* chief over the chief of the Levites, *and have* the oversight of them that keep the charge of the sanctuary.

³³ Of Merari *was* the family of the Mahlites, and the family of the Mushites: these *are* the families of Merari.

³⁴ And those that were numbered of them, according to the number of all the males, from a month old and upward, *were* six thousand and two hundred.

³⁵ And the chief of the house of the father of the families of Merari *was* Zuriel the son of Abihail: *these* shall pitch on the side of the tabernacle northward.

³⁶ And *under* the custody and charge of the sons of Merari *shall be* the boards of the tabernacle, and the bars thereof, and the pillars thereof, and the sockets thereof, and all the vessels thereof, and

prophecy about Jesus who would come as the Messiah through the tribe of Judah.

At the south side of the Tabernacle camped the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Gad; on the west, Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin; and on the north, Dan, Asher, and Naphtali. Ephraim and Manasseh were the two sons of Joseph; and because of Joseph's faithfulness in Egypt, God promised him a double inheritance when the Children of Israel would arrive in Canaan. Ephraim and Manasseh were each to receive a share as Joseph's brothers did.

Surrounded by the rest of the Israelites, between them and the Tabernacle, camped the Levites, with Aaron and his sons right before the door of the Tabernacle. The Levites were God's special servants and lived nearest to His presence. They were always ready to serve when they were needed. The people who serve God best are the ones who live closest to Him. They are near enough to hear Him whisper His will to them, and they are ready to obey.

First-Born Claimed by God

The night God led the Children of Israel out of Egypt the death angel had passed over the land, and in every home the eldest son died — except where there was blood over the doors. God had given the Children of Israel a way to escape that death. If they took a lamb, killed it, roasted its flesh, ate it, and took of the blood and put it upon the doorposts of their homes, the death angel would pass by. It was the mercy of God that had spared the life of the eldest son of each family, and He said that from that time on, they belonged to Him "For all the firstborn of the children of Israel are mine, both man and beast: on the day that I smote every firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them for myself" (Numbers 8:17). They were to represent their families in worship at the Tabernacle.

Levites Instead of First-Born

But after Israel sinned, God chose the tribe of Levi to minister unto Him instead of the eldest son of each family. "And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn" (Numbers 3:12). Several times when God was talking with Moses about claiming the Levites for Himself, He said, "I am the LORD." He wanted the people to understand that He had a right to take these people for Himself. He is the God of Heaven and earth, and He has authority to appoint to sacred positions whom He will.

The Levites were to have no inheritance when they came into the land of Canaan except some cities in which to live. They were to be supported by tithes paid by the rest of the Israelites. They were given enough land to take care of their cattle and sheep which were also devoted to God, instead of the first-born of the flocks and herds of the Israelites.

The Numbering of the First-Born

There were three branches of the tribe of Levi: the Gershonites, the Merarites, and the Kohathites. If we add the number given for each family we find the total of 22,300; and yet in verse 39 the number is given as 22,000. The difference in the numbers could be accounted for by 300 of the Levites being also the first-born of their families, who would have belonged to God anyway even if the Levites had not been chosen for the tabernacle service. So they could not be counted as taking the place of the first-born of the other families. There were 22,273 first-born in Israel, and only 22,000 Levites, so the remaining 273 had to be replaced in some other way. God told Moses that the people could pay into the treasury a certain amount of

all that serveth thereto,

³⁷ And the pillars of the court round about, and their sockets, and their pins, and their cords.

³⁸ But those that encamp before the tabernacle toward the east, *even* before the tabernacle of the congregation eastward, *shall be* Moses, and Aaron and his sons, keeping the charge of the sanctuary for the charge of the children of Israel; and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death.

³⁹ All that were numbered of the Levites, which Moses and Aaron numbered at the commandment of the LORD, throughout their families, all the males from a month old and upward, *were* twenty and two thousand.

⁴⁰ And the LORD said unto Moses, Number all the firstborn of the males of the children of Israel from a month old and upward, and take the number of their names.

⁴¹ And thou shalt take the Levites for me (*I am* the LORD) instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel; and the cattle of the Levites instead of all the firstlings among the cattle of the children of Israel.

⁴² And Moses numbered, as the LORD commanded him, all the firstborn among the children of Israel.

⁴³ And all the firstborn males by the number of names, from a month old and upward, of those that were numbered of them, were twenty and two thousand two hundred and threescore and thirteen.

⁴⁴ And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,

⁴⁵ Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of their cattle; and the Levites shall be mine: *I am* the LORD.

Numbers 4:1-15 (KJV)

¹ And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying,

² Take the sum of the sons of Kohath from among the sons of Levi, after their families, by the house of their fathers,

³ From thirty years old and upward even until fifty years old, all that enter into the host, to do the work in the tabernacle of the congregation.

⁴ This *shall be* the service of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of the congregation, *about* the most holy things:

⁵ And when the camp setteth forward, Aaron shall come, and his sons, and they shall take down the covering vail, and

money to redeem each man who was not represented by a Levite. We do not know who paid the money; probably it was divided among the entire congregation.

Marching Orders

God sees that everything is kept in order in His church. He told the Levites just what their duties would be. They were to help the priests in the service of the Tabernacle and take care of all the furnishings. And when the Israelites marched, each group had their particular job to do in taking down the Tabernacle and setting it up in their next camp.

When the orders came to march, Aaron and his sons would go into the Tabernacle, cover all the altars and furniture with coverings provided for them, take down the veil that separated the Holy of Holies and let it cover the ark, and over that put a cover of badger skins. Then they covered the altars, the candlestick, the table of shewbread, and all the dishes, censers, and spoons. Everything was prepared for moving.

The Kohathites then came in and picked up all the sacred furniture, each man the load assigned to him, which he carried on his shoulders. The priests must be very careful to see that everything was covered, because if the Kohathites touched something uncovered they would die. Eleazar, one of the priests, watched carefully that everything was done in order and was well taken care of.

The Gershonites took care of the curtains and hangings. As soon as the Kohathites had moved out the furniture, the Gershonites began removing the linen curtains that surrounded the outer court and those that formed the doors. They took off the coverings which made the Tabernacle: the fine embroidered linen covering on the inside, the covering of goats' hair, the one of rams' skins dyed red, and the one of badgers' skins. Ithamar had charge of this work and took care that the curtains were handled reverently.

Ithamar also supervised the work of taking down the gold-covered framework of the Tabernacle. It was the Merarites who were assigned to this part of the work. Every board must be taken out of its socket, and each man knew just what piece of God's holy Tabernacle he must handle. Their burdens were heavy, but with every man doing his part the House of God was moved forward smoothly.

The Gershonites and Merarites marched behind the tribe of Judah, which was at the head of the procession. As soon as the Pillar of Cloud which led them came to a halt, showing that God wanted the Israelites to camp, they would immediately set up the frame of the Tabernacle and cover it with the coverings. By the time the Kohathites, who marched three tribes back, had arrived, the Tabernacle was ready to be furnished.

God Not Author of Confusion

Imagine the confusion there would have been in the camp of Israel when they started to move if they had not had particular orders about where to camp and where to march. God had appointed Moses and Aaron to lead the people, and they must obey in the things that might have seemed little: where to camp and where and when to move. But those "little things" kept the camp of the Lord in order.

God calls certain people to be His ministers, and they have a sacred work to do for Him. Sometimes people think they know better how to do things than their ministers do, but God is not pleased with their self-will. He wants His services and His work to be done in order, and He holds the person responsible whom He has placed in the position of trust.

cover the ark of testimony with it:

⁶ And shall put thereon the covering of badgers' skins, and shall spread over *it* a cloth wholly of blue, and shall put in the staves thereof.

⁷ And upon the table of shewbread they shall spread a cloth of blue, and put thereon the dishes, and the spoons, and the bowls, and covers to cover withal: and the continual bread shall be thereon:

⁸ And they shall spread upon them a cloth of scarlet, and cover the same with a covering of badgers' skins, and shall put in the staves thereof.

⁹ And they shall take a cloth of blue, and cover the candlestick of the light, and his lamps, and his tongs, and his snuffdishes, and all the oil vessels thereof, wherewith they minister unto it:

¹⁰ And they shall put it and all the vessels thereof within a covering of badgers' skins, and shall put *it* upon a bar.

¹¹ And upon the golden altar they shall spread a cloth of blue, and cover it with a covering of badgers' skins, and shall put to the staves thereof:

¹² And they shall take all the instruments of ministry, wherewith they minister in the sanctuary, and put *them* in a cloth of blue, and cover them with a covering of badgers' skins, and shall put *them* on a bar:

¹³ And they shall take away the ashes from the altar, and spread a purple cloth thereon:

¹⁴ And they shall put upon it all the vessels thereof, wherewith they minister about it, *even* the censers, the fleshhooks, and the shovels, and the basons, all the vessels of the altar; and they shall spread upon it a covering of badgers' skins, and put to the staves of it.

¹⁵ And when Aaron and his sons have made an end of covering the sanctuary, and all the vessels of the sanctuary, as the camp is to set forward; after that, the sons of Kohath shall come to bear *it*: but they shall not touch *any* holy thing, lest they die. These *things are* the burden of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of the congregation.

Numbers 4:24-33 (KJV)

²⁴ This *is* the service of the families of the Gershonites, to serve, and for burdens:

²⁵ And they shall bear the curtains of the tabernacle, and the tabernacle of the congregation, his covering, and the covering of the badgers' skins that *is* above upon it, and the hanging for the door of the tabernacle of the

Let us pray for our leaders and help them in their service for the Savior. If we are faithful in the thing God gives us to do, though we may think it is a very little duty, He will reward us in the day He comes to pass out the awards to His children.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Who were the Levites?
- 2 Why did God choose them for the tabernacle service?
- 3 Why did God claim the first-born for His own?
- 4 Name the three branches of the Levites.
- 5 What was the duty of each group?
- 6 Where did the Gershonites and the Merarites march? Why?

congregation,

²⁶ And the hangings of the court, and the hanging for the door of the gate of the court, which *is* by the tabernacle and by the altar round about, and their cords, and all the instruments of their service, and all that is made for them: so shall they serve.

²⁷ At the appointment of Aaron and his sons shall be all the service of the sons of the Gershonites, in all their burdens, and in all their service: and ye shall appoint unto them in charge all their burdens.

²⁸ This *is* the service of the families of the sons of Gershon in the tabernacle of the congregation: and their charge *shall be* under the hand of Ithamar the son of Aaron the priest.

²⁹ As for the sons of Merari, thou shalt number them after their families, by the house of their fathers;

³⁰ From thirty years old and upward even unto fifty years old shalt thou number them, every one that entereth into the service, to do the work of the tabernacle of the congregation.

³¹ And this *is* the charge of their burden, according to all their service in the tabernacle of the congregation; the boards of the tabernacle, and the bars thereof, and the pillars thereof, and sockets thereof,

³² And the pillars of the court round about, and their sockets, and their pins, and their cords, with all their instruments, and with all their service: and by name ye shall reckon the instruments of the charge of their burden.

³³ This *is* the service of the families of the sons of Merari, according to all their service, in the tabernacle of the congregation, under the hand of Ithamar the son of Aaron the priest.