

The Provision and the Responsibility of the Levites

Numbers 3

Numbers 3 – *“Now these are the records of Aaron and Moses when the LORD spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. ² And these are the names of the sons of Aaron: Nadab, the firstborn, and Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. ³ These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the anointed priests, whom he consecrated to minister as priests. ⁴ Nadab and Abihu had died before the LORD when they offered strange fire before the LORD in the Wilderness of Sinai; and they had no children. So Eleazar and Ithamar ministered as priests in the presence of Aaron their father.*

⁵ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ⁶ “Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him. ⁷ And they shall attend to his needs and the needs of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of meeting, to do the work of the tabernacle. ⁸ Also they shall attend to all the furnishings of the tabernacle of meeting, and to the needs of the children of Israel, to do the work of the tabernacle. ⁹ And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are given entirely to him^[a] from among the children of Israel. ¹⁰ So you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall attend to their priesthood; but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.”

¹¹ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ¹² “Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be Mine, ¹³ because all the firstborn are Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I am the LORD.”

¹⁴ Then the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, saying: ¹⁵ “Number the children of Levi by their fathers’ houses, by their families; you shall number every male from a month old and above.”

¹⁶ So Moses numbered them according to the word of the LORD, as he was commanded. ¹⁷ These were the sons of Levi by their names: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. ¹⁸ And these are the names of the sons of Gershon by their families: Libni and Shimei. ¹⁹ And the sons of Kohath by their families: Amram, Izebar, Hebron, and Uzziel. ²⁰ And the sons of Merari by their families: Mahli and Mushi. These are the families of the Levites by their fathers’ houses.

²¹ From Gershon came the family of the Libnites and the family of the Shimites; these were the families of the Gershonites. ²² Those who were numbered, according to the number of all the males from a month old and above—of those who were numbered there were seven thousand five hundred. ²³ The families of the Gershonites were to camp behind the tabernacle westward. ²⁴ And the leader of the father’s house of the Gershonites was Eliasaph the son of Lael. ²⁵ The duties of the children of Gershon in the tabernacle of meeting included the tabernacle, the tent with its covering, the screen for the door of the tabernacle of meeting, ²⁶ the screen for the door of the court, the hangings of the court around the tabernacle and the altar, and their cords, according to all the work relating to them.

²⁷ From Kohath came the family of the Amramites, the family of the Izharites, the family of the Hebronites, and the family of the Uzzielites; these were the families of the Kohathites. ²⁸ According to the number of all the males, from a month old and above, there were eight thousand six^[b] hundred keeping charge of the sanctuary. ²⁹ The families of the children of Kohath were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle. ³⁰ And the leader of the fathers’ house of the families of the Kohathites was Elizaphan the son of Uzziel. ³¹ Their duty included the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the utensils of the sanctuary with which they ministered, the screen, and all the work relating to them.

³² Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest was to be chief over the leaders of the Levites, with oversight of those who kept charge of the sanctuary.

³³ From Merari came the family of the Mahlites and the family of the Mushites; these were the families of Merari. ³⁴ And those who were numbered, according to the number of all the males from a month old and above, were six thousand two hundred. ³⁵ The leader of the fathers' house of the families of Merari was Zuriel the son of Abihail. These were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle. ³⁶ And the appointed duty of the children of Merari included the boards of the tabernacle, its bars, its pillars, its sockets, its utensils, all the work relating to them, ³⁷ and the pillars of the court all around, with their sockets, their pegs, and their cords.

³⁸ Moreover those who were to camp before the tabernacle on the east, before the tabernacle of meeting, were Moses, Aaron, and his sons, keeping charge of the sanctuary, to meet the needs of the children of Israel; but the outsider who came near was to be put to death. ³⁹ All who were numbered of the Levites, whom Moses and Aaron numbered at the commandment of the LORD, by their families, all the males from a month old and above, were twenty-two thousand. ⁴⁰ Then the LORD said to Moses: "Number all the firstborn males of the children of Israel from a month old and above, and take the number of their names. ⁴¹ And you shall take the Levites for Me—I am the LORD—instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the livestock of the children of Israel." ⁴² So Moses numbered all the firstborn among the children of Israel, as the LORD commanded him. ⁴³ And all the firstborn males, according to the number of names from a month old and above, of those who were numbered of them, were twenty-two thousand two hundred and seventy-three.

⁴⁴ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ⁴⁵ "Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of their livestock. The Levites shall be Mine: I am the LORD. ⁴⁶ And for the redemption of the two hundred and seventy-three of the firstborn of the children of Israel, who are more than the number of the Levites, ⁴⁷ you shall take five shekels for each one individually; you shall take them in the currency of the shekel of the sanctuary, the shekel of twenty gerahs. ⁴⁸ And you shall give the money, with which the excess number of them is redeemed, to Aaron and his sons."

⁴⁹ So Moses took the redemption money from those who were over and above those who were redeemed by the Levites. ⁵⁰ From the firstborn of the children of Israel he took the money, one thousand three hundred and sixty-five shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary. ⁵¹ And Moses gave their redemption money to Aaron and his sons, according to the word of the LORD, as the LORD commanded Moses."

Background Notes

In Numbers 1 and 2 we had the record of the military census of Israel. The tribe of Levi was not numbered in this military census because the Levites were to take care of the Tabernacle and its furnishings.

We also had the placement of the various tribes in reference to the location of the Tabernacle, both for camping and for marching. The Levites were to camp right next to the Tabernacle, inside the circle of the other tribes, with Moses, Aaron and Aaron's sons on the east side in front of the Tabernacle. The Levites were placed in this inner circle in order to protect God's dwelling place from desecration. In Numbers 3 the Levites were numbered and given their detailed placement and duties regarding the Tabernacle and their function in Israel.

It's important to understand the distinction between the **Levites** and the **priests**. Levi was one of Jacob's sons, and Levi's descendants, the Levites, were one of the tribes in Israel. Levi had three sons: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. Thus the Levites had three divisions: the Gershonites, the Kohathites, and the Merarites.

All priests were Levites, but some Levites were not priests. Moses and Aaron were from the tribe of Levi, and they were descendants of Kohath, or Kohathites. God designated Aaron and his descendants to be the priestly line in Israel. Thus

all priests were Levites, but most of the Levites were not priests. The non-priestly Levites were to help the priests with the work of the Tabernacle, and later the work of the Temple. Thus most of the Levites were Tabernacle or Temple servants.

The total number of male Levites from one month old and upward was 22,000 (v39), and yet the subtotals of the Gershonites, Kohathites, and Merarites (v22, 28 & 34) add up to 22,300. Where did the extra 300 come from? One explanation is that Hebrew lettering for the 8,600 is very close to the Hebrew lettering for the number 8,300. Some ancient manuscripts read 8,300. The original Hebrew text may have been 8,300, which would be in perfect agreement with the 22,000 in verse 39.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord provides the laborers for His work.

Caring for the Tabernacle and the sacrificial system of the Old Testament involved a lot of work. The priests were to offer the many sacrifices and direct the worship and other activities at the Tabernacle, but the work involved was more than the priests could handle by themselves. Think of the preparation of all of the sacrifices, and the setting up and taking down of the Tabernacle as they traveled in the wilderness! Think of the work involved in collecting the tithes and the offerings. A lot of work was required, so God provided the Levites as a labor force to help the priests with the work of the Lord.

At the time of the Exodus, after all the firstborn in Egypt died in the tenth plague, we read, *“The LORD spoke to Moses: “Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine” (Exodus 13:1-2).* All the firstborn children and animals were set apart for the Lord. In Numbers 3 the Levites were “substituted” for the firstborn. *“The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ...I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn... Therefore the Levites shall be Mine, because all the firstborn are Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I am the LORD” (v11-13).*

The Lord provided the Levites as workers for His service, and this is still true today. Our doctrinal point is “The Lord provides the laborers for His work.” However, there’s a lot of work going on in the name of religion that is not the Lord’s work – it’s actually “**man’s**” work! Even true Christians can get involved in various ministries that are not the **Lord’s** work. This work is done for the glory and pride of man, not for the glory of God. So be careful where you get involved!

However, if the ministry in which you’re involved is truly serving the Lord, and your ministry needs help to do the Lord’s work, you can ask and receive! You can seek and find! You can knock and the door will be opened! The Lord provides laborers for His work. Most of you know of our ministry, “Growing Christian Ministries,” right? Over the years, the

workload has grown significantly, but God has always provided the extra helpers and funds when needed. Whether it’s the radio ministry, or the recorded ministry, or the website ministry -- God has always provided just what was needed when it was needed for the ministry! The Lord provides the laborers for His work.

2. The Lord divides the laborers for His work.

This chapter gives us God's division of labor. The three groups of Levites were given different duties. The Gershonites were responsible for the covering of the Tabernacle and the courtyard hangings. The Kohathites were responsible for the Tabernacle furnishings, and the Merarites were responsible for the boards and pillars of the Tabernacle, and the posts and sockets of courtyard. So the Lord divided up the workers, and the work was done efficiently and with organization.

This is true in the church today: the Lord divides up laborers for His work. 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 says, "*There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.*" There are different gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different ministries, but the same Lord. And there are different activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.

The bottom line and reason for the different ministries, activities and gifts is edification and growth of the body of Christ. You can imagine the chaos and disorganization that would result if there were no division of labor in the body of Christ. Some of the work would never get done, and other work would be confused or ruined by too many workers trying to do the same job! The Lord is efficient in His sovereign division of labor. The Lord divides the laborers for His work.

Practical Application

Watch out for strange fire!

Leviticus 10 gives us the account of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, that is referenced in verse 4. These men offered "*strange fire*" before the Lord. We don't know what the strange fire was. It may have been coals from their own campfire, rather than fire from the bronze altar. They may have burned an improper mixture of incense. They may have made an offering at the wrong time or the wrong place. In any case, their "worship" was not according to God's prescribed way. These were sins of disobedience and idolatry, and they "*died before the Lord.*"

Idolatry, you see, is not only the worship of false gods -- it is also the **false worship of the true God!** For example, worship of God that is not Christ-centered is idolatry. It is "strange fire." Cults that call themselves "Christian," but don't acknowledge the deity of Christ, are "worshipping" with "strange fire."

So don't tolerate heresy in your fellowship, and don't be drawn into it yourself. Watch out for strange fire!