

# Bethel Live! Sunday 16th June 2024

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[ 0 : 00 ] Yes, we'll stand on every promise of God's word, including numbers, won't we? I want you to imagine with me that you grew up in another country.

You've come to a rather barren land, a bit like the Pilgrim Fathers sailing for America. You need to set up your own culture. You need to learn new ways to live. You need to have rules for justice. You need to work out how you're going to worship.

Well, that's what happened to the Jewish people when they left Egypt. They were steeped in Egyptian culture. Now, together, having left Egypt, they are to form the new people of God. How should they live? That's what the book of Numbers is really all about. The Jewish people have left Egypt. And now they're about to walk for quite a number of years, although they don't know it at the time, through the wilderness to get to the promised land of Canaan.

[ 1 : 25 ] And those two incidents are the fixed marker points in the book of Numbers. The leaving of Egypt, goodbye to slavery, and the welcome into the promised land, the future.

We're rescued from the past, and now we're preparing for the future. We're not there yet. Like many of us, we too have been rescued from slavery, from our past, and we're being led by God into a future planned for us.

All the Jews knew was life in Egypt, or most of them, life in Egypt. They needed to learn how to be a people. In fact, the people, the people of God.

So pagan ideas have to be put away, and new ways have to be learnt, to be God's holy, separated people. Numbers explains what that means.

At least for them, as they walk in the wilderness towards the promised land. And the early chapters that we're looking at, and going through at fair speed, are preparatory. Getting ready to be God's own people.

[ 2 : 34 ] And one thing, one thing above everything else is crucial for them. God must be with them.

They must have God in the centre of their camp, of their midst. And this is seen practically in what they set up called the tabernacle, or tent of meeting.

You see it in chapter 7 and verse 1. If you come there with me. Chapter 7 and verse 1. The aim is to try and get through chapter 7 and 8, and I think I will fail in my aim.

When Moses finished setting up the tabernacle, he anointed and consecrated it and all its furnishings. He also anointed and consecrated the altar and its utensils.

That was important. God in the centre. God in the centre. The tabernacle signifies it, the place of worship. And it was set up according to God's plans. How would they meet with God and how would they worship him as his pure and holy people?

[ 3 : 40 ] So chapter 7 is their preparation for worship. And it comes just after that fabulous prayer. Fabulous prayer at the end of chapter 6.

Remember that prayer at the end of 6? That great blessing that was given to the people? In chapter 7 it's their preparation for worship. In chapter 8, although I'm not sure we'll get that far, we meet the Levites.

They're the officials in the tabernacle. And we're told how they're to prepare themselves for temple worship and temple duties. And their details, their requirements are very precise.

Everything is to be done properly and dedicated to God. And that's true here in chapter 7 as well.

So let's start in chapter 7 and see how far we get. The tent is in place.

It must now be furnished and consecrated with objects and leaders. And all of this set up is part of their worship. Worship doesn't begin when we just gather together on a Sunday morning.

[ 4 : 45 ] You know that, don't you? Romans 12. All of our life is worship. This is the sort of high point when we meet with God. But we can meet with God at any point. This was true for them as

well.

Their preparation comes just after this great prayer of blessing. And then, as I say, in chapter 8, the officials, the Levites, are instructors as to what to do and how to prepare themselves for temple duty.

Requirements very detailed, very precise. Worship means sacrifice. So, straight away we learn in verse 2 that they come with their offerings.

You see that? The leaders of Israel, the heads of the families, who were the tribal leaders in charge of those who were counted, made offerings.

And they brought as their gifts before the Lord these various things. Their gifts. Offerings.

[ 5 : 46 ] Worship is giving. Worship is sacrifice. Worship is offering to God the best that we have for him. And what they have to offer is not cheap.

Look what they present to God. Jump down, say, to six. They present carts and oxen. They gave them to the Levites. There were two carts and four oxen for one group called the Gershonites.

Four carts and eight oxen to the Merorites, another group. All under the direction of Aaron the priest. But none were given to the Kohathites. We'll look at them in a moment.

And each tribe was to do this. Their carts and their oxen. When you get down to verse 11, the Lord said to Moses, each day one leader is to bring his offering for the dedication of the altar.

And the one who brought his offering on the first day was this chap of the tribe of Judah. But then that is repeated. I don't know if yours is laid out in a sort of poetry form.

[ 6 : 54 ] When you get down to verse 18, on the second day, another leader of the tribe of Ishikah brought his offering. And there is the offering given.

It's the same offering or the same content in the offering. On the third day, verse 24, a third group. So we go around all the tribes. In fact, Numbers is given.

So it's read out verbally for people who probably couldn't read for themselves. And there's a repetition every time. Twelve times they bring their gifts. They bring their gifts. And these are the gifts. These are the gifts. These are the gifts. And each gift has in it a silver plate.

Take verse 13. A silver plate. Heavy. A silver sprinkling bowl. Heavy. A gold dish. Filled with incense.

A silver plate. Plus all these various animals from 15, 16 and 17. Now that was pretty costly. That was pretty costly.

[ 7 : 52 ] And every tribe had to bring that to the tabernacle. And doesn't that tell us straight away that worship is costly? If you want to worship God, it'll cost you something.

It's not cheap. Okay. This is a whole tribe that brought it. And they did it together. But nevertheless, it costs something. Now we today are so, so infatuated with our consumer society.

That we always ask, well, what do I get? Why don't you come to church with me? Well, what will I get out of it? Or people leave a church. I didn't get much from that, they say. Didn't get anything from it. We're so, so infatuated by our consumer society.

Is it really worth me giving to church? I can't give very much. But is it worth me giving? If we measured our spiritual life by what we gave, I wonder how we would score.

I once met a Christian worker who came from a church in Northern Ireland. He told me that once they set him apart for Christian ministry, they promised him that they would support him full time for as long as he needed it.

[ 9 : 10 ] They fully financed him. One church. I was really shocked. Because most Christian workers have to go around getting friends to support them or a number of churches to support them.

But one church, one church, put all the money in and covered its costs. Would we do that? Worship is costly. When we come to God, he calls us to lay all of our life for defeat on the line.

And that's our finances. That's our time. Notice that what they brought was on carts. Did you notice that? The carts were specially mentioned in verses three to eight.

They brought as their gifts before the Lord six covered carts, twelve oxen, an ox for each leader, and a cart for every two. And they presented them before the tabernacle. The Lord said to Moses, accept these from them that they may be used in the work of the tent of meeting and give them to the Levites as each man's work requires.

So Moses took the carts and oxen, gave them to the Levites, and he gave them around the groupings as well as we've just read. Six covered carts and twelve oxen.

[10:19] First presented to the tabernacle and then to the Levites. But one group, one group, the Kohathites, down at verse nine, this is the one group that do not get the carts.

Why? Because whenever the altar is carried or the parts of the tabernacle are carried, as they move on, the tent is carried, it's always on their shoulders, never on carts. It's one group.

This is the task allocated by Moses. The carrying of the Ark was especially important. Some of you might remember that David, King David, got into terrible, terrible trouble when he tried to put the altar on wheels.

No, no, you shouldn't do that. It must be carried on shoulders. This is very precise. Now, the Kohathites are a most interesting group. They are one of the four major divisions of the Levites. The others being the ones that are mentioned here, the Gershonites, the Merorites, and the Aaronites, the Kohathites. They were descended from Kohath, a son of Levi.

[11:23] The Levites were not given land in Canaan. Everybody else had land allocated, but not them. Rather, what they were going to be given were certain cities. They were going to be given the pasture land around the cities, but they were to look after the cities of refuge, as it was called.

And this showed that they were separate from worldly activities. They were going to be concerned for spiritual work. They were going to be responsible for offering sacrifices, for teaching the law, for assisting the priests in their worship.

The priests were known as Kohanim. Kohanim. Kohin. Kohins today, I know them well. Well, my aunt made dresses for Kohins.

They were the partners and directors of Tesco. Kohins. Kohins claimed to be descended from the Levites. This is where we get it from. I'd be jolly proud if I was a Kohin, wouldn't you?

Sadly, we're not. We're just poor, meagre, Greek Gentiles. Well, you are, but I'm not. But I'm still not a Kohin.

[12:34] See, sacrifices were not one-offs. This was a regular pattern that was being set up here. Regular repetition. And it's very clever to repeat it and repeat it and repeat it and repeat it twelve times for each tribe as the pattern of numbers lays out.

That's why I'm really cross with myself for using a handheld Bible like that because I can't see the whole text. I wish I had a scroll and I could see all the twelve repeats in the text.

Even a book doesn't really help me as much as I would like it to. Everything on a subsequent day. Do you notice that at twelve?

The first day. Notice that at eighteen? Second day. Notice that at twenty-four? Third day. Notice that at thirty? Fourth day.

And so on, and so on, and so on. Now wonder when you get to the end of chapter seven, which you'll be pleased to know I'm not going to cover the bits in between, when you get to verse 89, when Moses entered the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the atonement cover of the Ark of the Covenant of the Law.

[13:46] In this way, the Lord spoke to him. They heard Moses speaking because the people had been obedient. Each group had brought their costly sacrifice.

Now, our New Testament control over the Book of Numbers is the Book of Hebrews. And the Book of Hebrews tells us that sacrifices had to be made on a regular basis in the Old Testament for Jews. except when you come to Christ. His sacrifice, his one sacrifice, is never to be repeated. It's the final sacrifice, the ultimate sacrifice.

Look at this from Hebrews 10. Day after day, every priest stands and performs his religious duties again and again. He offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

But when this priest, Jesus, had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down, not on the right hand of God, as I learned in Sunday school, but at the right hand of God.

[14:54] And since that time, he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, everybody else to fall down. For by one sacrifice, he has made perfect forever those who were being made holy.

Fabulous, isn't it? Just fabulous. We do not have to keep repeating the sacrifices. Worship is not just a matter of coming with our gifts, coming with our gifts, coming with our gifts. Worship is a matter of receiving that gift that Christ has made for himself.

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is final. It's all we need. All the Old Testament sacrifices pointed to him. So to come to God means that we come to him via Christ.

He's our ultimate sacrifice. We come on his coat tails, as it were, to God. We trust that what he did on the cross for us, the ultimate sacrifice for sin, is all that we need to put us into a perfect condition

before God.

So I think we can say, secondly, worship is costly, but we can say, secondly, worship is coming to God through Jesus, and it's one sacrifice, isn't it? Now, I hope you've come there. May I say it to myself?

[16:01] I hope I'm there as well. I hope that's where we are. We've come to Christ, the one sacrifice. Have you? Have you come to Christ?

Have you come to Christ for yourself? You see, if you want to know how to come to Christ and how to find that one sacrifice for yourself, then you need to read what Jesus says about himself.

And you'll see by the doors, you can either get a rather nice Gospel of Luke, like that, or you could pick up a cheaper version like that, and you could read for yourself.

Or there's a Matthew's Gospel there as well. You could read for yourself a biography of Jesus and see if he is that one sacrifice that you need. Once we've come to God, our calling is to obey him.

And that's what Numbers 8 now is all about. Here are instructions for Aaron, the priest. Look at verse 1. Aaron said to Moses, speak to Aaron and say to him, when you set up the lamp, see that all seven light up the area in front of the lampstand.

[17:04] Aaron did so, so he was obedient. He set up the lamp so they faced towards the lampstand, just as the Lord commanded Moses. And so on. And then you see the heading before verse 5, the setting apart of the Levites.

The Lord said to Moses, take the Levites from among the Israelites and make them ceremonial clean to purify them, do this, that, the other, sprinkle water of cleansing on them, have them shave their whole bodies and wash their clothes.

And so they will purify themselves, take a young bull and so on, the offerings we go through. It is important that the Levites are pure, are clean, are ceremonially clean with their clothes, their bodies, even shaved.

And they bring their offerings, verse 12. Then the Levites are to lay their hands on the heads of the bulls, using one for a sin offering to the Lord, the other for a burnt offering to make atonement for the Levites.

They bring their offerings. They are set apart for the work in the tent. Now I was going to tell you that some churches have a regular confession spot in their services.

[18:11] But the good man who led the service this morning saw my notes and he cheated. So we've had a time of confession. Some churches do that on a regular basis. There's always a prayer of confession.

It's a regular thing we do. Why? Because we must be clean people. We must have uncontaminated hearts.

We're told that Israel did just as the Lord commanded. Look at verse 20, 820. Moses, Aaron, the whole Israelite community did with the Levites just as the Lord commanded Moses.

And that's repeated again at 23. 23. This applies to the Levites, men 25 years and so on. They did as commanded by Moses, end of 22. They were obedient people at this stage, obedient people. They were doing what God instructs. Now I think that's our final point this morning, isn't it? That worship involves both listening to God and doing what he says, obeying him.

[19:11] What I think is rather interesting in these two chapters, which we haven't done much on eight, is the little bit in between, the little link.

Because in much of early writings, the punch was not at the middle, the punch was in the middle of the sandwich. There were two bits either side and then there was the main thing.

And I think the punch in our text today is at 789. See what you think. Here's the punch. The punch of the text at the end of 7, 789, says this.

When Moses entered the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the atonement cover on the ark of the covenant law. In this way, the Lord spoke to him. See? Three times, three times, speaking, speaking, speaking. At this point, they are obedient people.

[20:11] Moses has entered the tent, the tent of meeting. He is speaking with the Lord and he hears the Lord speaking, speaking. Now, all through these chapters, the Jewish people have been listening and obeying.

They want to do what God has said. They're in a good condition at this point. They won't be forever, but they are at this point. And, I wonder if you've ever thought why we finish our services, as we call

them, gatherings like this, with a sermon.

Why do we finish them with a talk? Why is this the longest bit of the service, unless we have a long children's talk? I want to suggest to you that this is the most important thing we do in the week.

The most important. Not my preaching, not Johan's preaching, don't worry about the person who's speaking, but listening to God. It's more important, I suggest, than even singing God's praises, more important than even praying to him, certainly more important than notices, I would suggest.

The high point of our gathering, the high point, the highest point, is that the voice of God is heard in the scriptures. He speaks to us through the scriptures. A friend of mine used to use this illustration, which I rather like.

[ 21 : 30 ] Sorry, I'm chuckling because I think of my friend who also chuckles. He said, when you visit granny, you don't do all the talking, do you? This is brilliant. When you visit granny, you listen to what she says.

You don't do all the talking, do you? Well, that's the way it is for us. The Bible is God speaking to us. Yes, even through the book of Numbers, the most ancient book with rituals that we don't ever do today.

Listening to God is the most important thing we can do as human beings. puts us in our right place under God. Puts God in his right place as the one over us. And then we try and practice it.

And we find that hard. By the way, that's the same reason, I think, as the lectern, as we call it, or the pulpit, whatever you want to call it, is in the centre. Because in reformed churches, from the Reformation onwards, the word of God came into the centre, and the altar was pushed back, as it were.

Previously, it was the altar, the table, a bit like the Old Testament, the place of sacrifice, that was at the centre, under 15, 16 centuries of worship.

[ 22 : 40 ] At the Reformation, the lectern came into the centre, it was a word centre church. It's hugely important that we hear what God has to say, before we ever go and do anything else.

Have you ever thought, secondly, and lastly, don't you think it's fabulous living AD and not BC? Sorry, this isn't politically correct. I don't think you're meant to use AD and BD, you're meant to use BCE and something else.

But isn't it good that we live after Christ, not before? Haven't you ever thought about that? I mean, our Old Testament brothers were always hoping, always wondering, were their sacrifices sufficient? Yes, they kept walking towards their final destination, that is true, and so to a certain extent do we. Yes, they look forward to a rescuer to come, yes, and in a sense, so do we to Jesus' return, but we know something that they don't know.

We know that our rescuer has already been here. We know that he's paved the way to glory for us. So we run our race knowing that Jesus has run it for us, and run successfully for us.

[ 23 : 47 ] We run, therefore, in Jesus' slipstream. In other words, we are much more confident than our Jewish forebears were. We have much greater certainty than they did, and much greater joy.

If you want to go to a synagogue service, please put on a miserable face. Nobody smiles. It's all done for you up front by some rabbi, and you chat in the back row.

This is true, you chat in the back row about, you know, have you seen Mrs. Jones lately? She's got a very bad foot this week. Do you know about that? It's a miserable service. There's no joy. Jewish people sing in minor keys most of the time.

We ought to occasionally for laments, but most of the time they do. Yes, we run in Jesus' slipstream. We have much greater joy than they did.

But we like God, we like them, hear from God. They constantly brought their costly sacrifices. sacrifices. We look back to the most costly sacrifice, Jesus on the cross, given for us.

[ 24 : 54 ] And boy, do we feel relieved. What a relief. We haven't got to go through those sacrifices time and time and time and time again. What a relief. The price has been paid. We can enter in.

We can go free. We can keep walking. That's something to smile about, isn't it? Is that the sort of joy that you possess? Let's pray together.

Dear Father God, thank you for planning our rescue and showing it to us through the Jewish people. Thank you for speaking to them so clearly and to us.

But above all, thank you for Jesus our rescuer who makes all worship productive. Yes, we bring him our gift and our service, but not to buy our rescue, rather as a response to his rescue on our behalf.

Please cleanse us again from our many, many sins, we pray, and make us useful in his service, we ask. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen.