

The Provision for Priests

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[0 : 00] And as you are seated, you might like to grab a Bible, although the verses will also be on the screen as we continue working through the book of Numbers.! Such a business acumen that she grew her wealth to today's terms \$2.5 billion.

In fact, she was so able to do it that it was like magic and she earned the rather unflattering nickname, the Witch of Wall Street, which is a bit mean really.

But yet despite her wealth, she ended up in the Guinness Book of Records not for earning so much money, but for actually being the stingiest person in history.

You see, while she bailed out the city of New York in 1907, I think it was, she gave loans to the city, but it was at a rate of interest, so she would make a return.

She refused to use hot water herself to save money. She refused to pay her maid any more than the minimum. She even argued with the butcher to get free bones for her dog because she didn't want to pay for the bone.

[1 : 30] And when her son Edward broke his leg, she tried to have him admitted to the free clinic, but they realised who she was and said she could afford to pay. But she refused, so she sought to treat his leg herself, but it got infected and had to be amputated.

Some people think that if we had lots of money, then I would be generous to others. But generosity is not a matter of loads of money.

It actually is a matter of the heart, isn't it? It's what's important to you. And in Hetty's heart, what was important to her was amassing money and keeping it, rather than giving it in generosity.

And as we come to the next part of Numbers today, it is about money and providing for gospel work, and that's just what we're up to today. But the big lesson is don't have a Hetty heart.

But first, the context. Last week, after grumbling again, Israel finally got something of God's holiness. We heard about God's holiness last week because, you see, they were taking it for granted, but they went from one extreme to the other extreme at the end of chapter 17.

[2 : 46] End of chapter 17, they then start crying out, anyone who comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die. Are we all going to die? And the answer, of course, is no.

Because God appointed Aaron and his sons from the tribe of Levi to be priests. They were the priestly Levites. And so it was actually quite helpful, Mavis, to read the first part of chapter 18, which gives the background, where they would stand between a holy God and a sinful people so they will not die.

They made atonement for their sins at the altar. So you might remember this diagram of the tabernacle around the outside is the curtain, and in the courtyard, that square is the altar of burnt offering.

And so the priests would offer sacrifices there, and they would go inside the curtain to the holy place. And once a year, the high priests were going to the most holy place, all to make atonement for people.

And the rest of the Levites, the non-priestly Levites, were to help the priests by preparing the animals and carrying the tabernacle and so on. But they couldn't make sacrifices on the altar nor go inside the curtain.

[3 : 56] But together, you know, the priestly and the non-priestly Levites, together, ensured that Israel will not die, that they will enjoy life with God instead. And so as we heard in the reading from verse 5 and 6, God says, You are responsible, Aaron and the priests, for the care of the sanctuary, that's the other name of the tabernacle or tent of meeting, and the altar in the courtyard, so that my wrath will not fall on the Israelites again.

So they will not die. I myself have selected your fellow Levites among the Israelites as a gift to you to help you do the work at the tent of meeting. And so this was really important work in the end, wasn't it?

It was life or death work, actually. For them, sorry, for with the Levites, Israel could enjoy life with God, but without them, they would face death for their sins before God.

But if these Levites are always working at the tabernacle instead of working their own land or herds and flocks and so on, how will they earn a living? How will they get food to eat?

Well, God will provide. And that's what today's passage is all about. So point one, verse eight to 10. God says to Aaron, I myself have put you in charge of the offerings presented to me, all the holy offerings the Israelites give me.

[5 : 22] I give to you and your sons as your portion, your perpetual share. Verse eight talks about the holy offerings generally.

And then verse nine and 10 talks about the most holy ones. You are to have the part of the most holy offerings that is kept from the fire on the altar of burnt offering. From all the gifts that they Israelites bring me as most holy offerings, whether the grain or sin or guilt offerings, that part belongs to you and your sons.

Eat it as something most holy. Every male shall eat it. You must regard it as holy. Now, if you remember from our series in Leviticus, there are five main sacrifices or offerings.

And the first one, only the burnt offering was completely burnt on the altar, hence burnt offering. And the others, only parts of them were burnt on the altar.

Either a part of the grain for the grain offering or a part of the animal for the sin and guilt offerings. And the fellowship one, which I'll come back to shortly.

[6 : 33] In fact, it was only the fat of the animals that were burnt up on the altar because it was regarded as the best bit. The bit that we know is unhealthy, but let's be honest, it's the most tasty, right?

You know, you think pork crackling, you know, we know it's not good for us, but joy, it tastes good. Not that the pork would be offered on the Israelite altar, by the way. But what makes Wagyu steak so good is all the marbling, the fat marbling, I'm told, that runs through it, you see.

It's the best bit. And that's why it was given to God and burnt on the offering. But where did the rest of the meat go? Well, God gave it to the priests. It's a lot of meat, right?

But because these three offerings are most holy, as it says there, and I've just highlighted it so you can see it, because they were most holy, only the priests could eat them and only at the tabernacle.

Can you imagine their work lunches? Pretty phenomenal, wouldn't it? But the fifth sacrifice, that is the fellowship offering, which I forgot to put back in, that was actually meant for everyone to enjoy in fellowship.

[7 : 48] That's why it's called fellowship offering. And so it's not most holy, it's holy, if you like. It's set apart for everyone to enjoy. And so the priest and his family as well could enjoy it, though they had to be ceremonially clean because it was still holy.

So verse 11 says, This also is yours, whatever is set aside from the gifts of all the wave offerings of the Israelites. I give this to you and your sons and daughters as your perpetual share.

Everyone in your household is ceremonially clean, may eat it. Now the wave offering is a bit of the fellowship offering that was dedicated to God, usually the breast and the right thigh. And it's a wave before the God as a way of saying, This is for you.

It's kind of like if we splurge and get drumstick ice creams for dessert, and then I pull one out of the packet and wave this in front of the kids, This one's yours, right? That kind of idea. Well, those bits were not just for the priests, but for the families as well, sons and daughters, your household.

Now it might sound at this point that the families didn't get much, you know, the breast and right thigh, and that's it. The things that were waved before God. But God provides even more. He gives them the first fruits that Israel bring to God.

[9 : 03] So verse 12, I give you all the finest olive oil and all the finest new wine and grain that they give to the Lord as the first fruits of their harvest. All the land's first fruits that they bring to the Lord will be yours.

Everyone in your household who is ceremonially clean may eat it. But wait, there's even more. God also gave every firstborn that was his.

Verse 14. Angus, sorry, Rufus, can you hit next? This is dying. Everything in Israel that is devoted to the Lord is yours.

The first offspring of every womb, both human and animal, that is offered to the Lord is yours. Now the background to this, just so you know, is that when there were slaves in Egypt, you might remember that God was going to judge Egypt for taking Israel and killing all their sons, throwing them in the Nile and so on.

And that judgment was taking their firstborns, both human and animal. But God saved Israel's by the blood of the Lamb, remember? And so because he saved Israel's firstborn human and animal, then they were devoted to God.

[10 : 17] They were his. Of course, God didn't want then humans to, the firstborn sons to be sacrificed. He hated human sacrifice, even though it was practiced in the ancient world.

And he didn't want unclean animals sacrificed either. So they had to be redeemed or brought back with money. And that's what the rest of verse 15 to 16 says. But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals.

When they are a month old, you must redeem them, buy them back at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekled. And so the priests, along with their families, received this money.

But if the animal was clean, then it was sacrificed. And the priests and their families this time received the meat, just like they did with the wave offerings that we saw before.

And so verse 17 goes on to say, you must not redeem the firstborn of ox, sheep or goat. They are holy, they're clean, they're set apart. So splash the blood against the altar to make atonement, burn their fat, you know, the best bit as an offering, an aroma pleasing to the Lord.

[11 : 27] But then verse 18, their meat is yours, just as the wave offering, the breast of the wave offering and the right thigh are yours. Whatever is set aside from the holy offerings Israelites present to the Lord, I give to you and your sons and daughters as your perpetual share.

It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord. It's yours. And so the priests and their families were well provided for, weren't they? Not just with lots of meat and money, but with the best of the best.

For these sacrifices were to be the best animals. The firstborn are the privileged ones that are redeemed or the animals sacrificed. We talked about the finest olive oil, the finest grain.

You know, think baker's delight bread. Do you ever splash out and get baker's delight bread every now and again? Or the finest wine. What's that? Penfolds Grange or something? But this is because the offerings were first and foremost for God.

That's why they were to be the best. You see, there's a principle here that Israel was to remember. They were not so much giving to the priests, but they were first and foremost giving to God.

[12 : 36] And God in return was then giving it to them. And that's why in verse 20, God goes on to say to Aaron, who's the representative of the priests and the whole Levites, actually, you will have no inheritance in the land, nor will you have any share among them.

I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites. You see, the Levites and the priests were given cities to live in with small bits of land so that they could have, you know, their goat and have some milk for breakfast and so on.

But they were not going to get a big share of the promised land like the other tribes. For they were set apart for God's work at the tabernacle. And later on, they were scattered throughout Israel to minister to the people.

So instead of having land as their inheritance to farm and provide a living, God was their inheritance who would provide for them and provide a living. Because God knew their work was important.

It was life or death work. Now, at this point, it would be very easy for church pastors to then say, so give your best to God because then it will come to me. And, you know, while I'll happily enjoy bakers of light bread from time to time, I am not the priest who makes sacrifices at the altar so God's wrath does not fall on us.

[14 : 00] Nor is Ricky or Helen or any of the staff. It's Jesus, isn't it? Jesus is the priest who sacrificed himself at the cross once for all time to pay for our sins.

Jesus is the one upon whom God's wrath fell so that it might not fall on us, but that we might enjoy life with God now in this world and life to the full in the world to come.

And so it's the gospel message about Jesus that is a matter of life or death. Indeed, a matter of eternal life or eternal death, isn't it? And so we are to give to God in order to provide for this gospel work wherever it is.

That this life or death message will go out everywhere. Whether it's to train gospel workers or support gospel workers, whether they're in universities or overseas as missionaries, like we heard from Lauren.

And yes, in churches too. Or we can even offer ourselves our time and energy to do gospel work by serving here at church. We're to give to God to provide for this gospel ministry, this life or death message.

[15 : 16] As we heard in our second reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul says, don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, just like we've seen. And those who serve at the altar share in what was offered at the altar.

And so in the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel wherever they are should receive their living from the gospel. And we're to give our best to God in terms of prioritizing this giving for gospel work wherever it is.

You know, the finest or best part of our budget is the first part, right? So that we give God what is right, not what is left.

I know of one person who sold their house because they had to move into an aged care place, a member of our church. And they gave us a generous bequest at that point.

They didn't want to wait until they passed because they wanted to make sure that a portion of their estate went to gospel ministry. That's prioritizing gospel giving for his life or death work, right?

[16 : 23] Of course, there are also the Levites who help the priests too. And so more briefly, point to verse 21. I should say verse 20 applies to the Levites.

God is their inheritance as well because all the tithes that Israel gave to God, he would now give to them. So verse 21, I give to the Levites, the non-priestly Levites, all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the tabernacle.

Now, a tithe is 10%, as you know, and Israel were to give a tenth of their wealth, which in those terms back then were their crops or herds or flocks, that sort of thing, each year.

And again, this was because the Levites would have no land or as an inheritance to work and earn a livelihood because their work was at the tabernacle or ministering to the people, like preparing the animals, carrying the tabernacle, and so on.

The Israelites were not to do any of that work. In fact, if the Levites let them, then the Levites would cop it. That's what verse 22 and 23 go on to talk about.

[17 : 37] I should point out in verse 22 where it says, the Israelites must not go near to the tent of meeting. It's not saying that they couldn't come to the tabernacle to worship God or to hear a word from God through Moses.

They were to do that. Rather, it's talking about drawing near to do the Levites' work because that's exactly what verse 23 goes on to talk about. Don't go near verse 22 because verse 23, it's the Levites who are to do this work.

But the point is in verse 24, it said, I give to the Levites as their inheritance the tithes that the Israelites present as an offering to the Lord.

That is why I said concerning them, they will have no inheritance among the Israelites. And I wonder if this more directly relates to those who work in churches amongst God's people because the church are those gathered together who are described in the New Testament as God's temple, God's tabernacle because God's spirit lives amongst us collectively as well as individually.

And the Levites were to do the work at the Lord's temple or tabernacle and minister to the community which is very similar to church ministers and so on.

[18 : 55] Now, our church financial year started this past week and as of July this year the national minimum wage in Australia not covered by an award is \$50,000.

We have about 500 adults who work full time, many who don't. But let's work on 500 across the two locations. If all 500 of us gave a tenth of the minimum wage, that's \$5,000 a year, if that happened we could actually literally double our church budget.

We could actually double it. Now, I know not every adult works full time or even part time. We have many retired people on a fixed income or pension and students who are studying and some looking for work and so on.

What's more, we're not actually under law, are we? And so the New Testament doesn't actually talk about tithing. It talks about giving in keeping with your income as a priority like we saw before.

So 1 Corinthians 16, on the first day of the week, so here's the priority bit, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income. And yet, at the same time, it still encourages us to give generously and cheerfully.

[20 : 14] And so this time, 2 Corinthians goes on to say, remember this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, but whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And so for us, it's not about a tithe, it's about our hearts.

We're to give what we have decided in our hearts to give. But notice the encouragement is not to have a hefty heart that gives sparingly or reluctantly, but a happy heart that gives generously and cheerfully.

Even if it's, you know, \$1, that might be generous for a pensioner who's struggling to pay rent each week or a student trying to pay for textbooks or someone who's out of work.

But we should all give in keeping with our income and give generously and cheerfully. And that includes me. I should be giving cheerfully and generously because even the Levites were to give as well.

[21 : 21] Verse 25. The Lord said to Moses, speak to the Levites and say to them, when you receive from the Israelites the tithe that I give you as your inheritance, you must present a tenth of that tithe as the Lord's offering to.

And your offering will be reckoned to you as grain from the threshing floor or juice from the winepress. You see, they are to tithe their tithe. They are to give a tenth of all they get too.

And it will be counted as, you know, their crops or wine even though they don't have land or a vineyard. And notice their tithe is also given to God.

And God will then give it to the priestly Levites like Aaron. Verse 28. In the same way you'll also present an offering to the Lord from all the tithes you receive from the Israelites and from these tithes you must give the Lord's portion to Aaron the priest.

You must present the Lord's portion the best and holiest part of everything given to you. And notice again it's about giving first and foremost our best to God who then gives it to his priests for their life and death work.

[22 : 35] And in verse 31 the Levites can enjoy the other 90% with their households but if they don't do that, verse 32, they will be guilty of defiling Israel's tithe because Israel set it apart as holy for God.

And so the Levites are to do the right thing with it which includes tithing it too. Michelle and I give to our church as well as to other gospel work but as I've worked on this passage this past week I've been convicted that we should really give more not because our church necessarily needs it but because we're giving to God.

Of course you may already be giving generously which is honouring God and you may not be able to give any more and that's okay. And let me also say that you know no one likes talking about money and when I realised the passage was going to head that direction this week I did not jump up and down with joy.

But the teaching is what matters is not having a heavy heart. I remember one day some people were paying for their church lunch at the 10.30 service and we have different costs for different people depending on whether they're working or kids and there's a maximum cost per family to make it affordable for everyone.

We rarely cover our costs because we're keen to encourage fellowship and people who are visiting are free to encourage the first time are free to encourage them to stay. And I remember two people two different reactions when they came up to pay by their phone on the kind of square machine one came up and said whatever's the cheapest I'll pay that.

[24 : 15] And then the person behind them came and said let me pay extra for the visitors that are here today. One had a kind of heavy heart one had a happy heart they gave generously and cheerfully.

Now it's not always easy especially when there are so many financial pressures in life and there are. I mean just before Michelle and I gave more yesterday one of our kids had a serious car accident on Thursday and rode off the car.

They're thankfully okay everyone's okay but that's going to be an expense for us now. And so it would be easy to use that as a reason to go well you know what we got to sort out the car now so we can't give any more but you know what really helped me not to fall into that temptation realizing that Israel's giving was first and foremost to God and so I didn't want to stop giving to God because of what he's given to us.

And so first remember that our giving is first and foremost to God before it's to gospel work or to church or anyone else. It's much harder to have a heady heart when we remember this I think.

After all God has been so incredibly generous to us in giving his son to die for us hasn't he? And so who wants to be stingy back to him? No one. And so if we remember that our giving is first and foremost to him it will encourage us not to have a heady heart but a happy one.

[25 : 44] And second remember that gospel work really is life or death work. Do you realize that? Do you believe that? Your giving can make an eternal difference to someone's life whether here in Melbourne or through Lauren over in Spain.

It's a better investment than Wall Street. And third remember God is also our share or portion now. You see unlike the Levites we will be given a share in our inheritance to come the world to come.

But like the Levites God is our inheritance now as well. As we'll sing at the end of our service I need no riches nor man's empty praise.

You God my inheritance through all my days. Which means God like he provided for them will provide for us so that we can give back to him.

In fact that verse I missed out before from 2 Corinthians 9 says and God is able to bless you abundantly so that in all things at all times having all that you need not all that you want but all that you need you will abound in every good work and the good work here in the context is giving like verse 7 before it.

[27 : 03] You see having God as our portion our inheritance now helps us to give and not have a heady heart and so remember we're giving to God first and foremost remember the gospel work is life or death work and remember God is our inheritance now providing for our needs so that we can give with a happy heart.

So let's pray. Our gracious Father we don't like talking about money but we thank you for this reminder from your word to us this morning.

We pray Father that you would help us to remember that we are giving first and foremost to you that our giving is for life or death work and that you are our inheritance who is able to provide for our needs including the ability to give as well.

And so help us we pray to give in keeping with our income but also cheerfully and generously we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.