

Our Part in Enjoying Life Together with God

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[0 : 00] I will please turn back to Numbers chapter 7. We're looking at chapter 7 and 8 today. They're very long, so we're not going to cover it all. But can I begin by saying it's nice to be back with you after a three-week break.

For one of those weeks, as I've said to some of you, we went up to Cairns with the kids to enjoy some warmth with each other. And as the kids get older, two of them are already adults. We're not sure how much longer they'll want to come away with mum and dad for a family holiday. But as I said to one person, it helps when the parents pay. And we did through the nose. You know, the accommodation, the flights, the food, the fun activities. But while we paid the price, the kids still had a part to play in enabling us to enjoy life together on holiday. And so they still had to pack. They still had to carry their bags. They still had to clean up the rooms in our accommodation at the end. And they still had to speak nicely to each other.

[1 : 05] And they did. Which helped enable us to enjoy life together in Cairns. Well, today, as we come to our next two chapters in Numbers, it describes the part the tribes of Israel played in enabling them to enjoy life together with God.

Where they could come to God at the tabernacle to have their sins atoned for and forgiven by God. Where they could come to praise God and pray to God. Where they could come to enjoy fellowship with each other and with God.

You know, to have his face shine upon them and enjoy blessings from him. In other words, to enjoy the full spectrum of life together with him.

And so let me show you the big picture of the two chapters. In chapter 7, it's all about the tribal leaders who bring offerings to the tabernacle. And then at the end, most of chapter 8, about the one tribe that's not mentioned in chapter 7, which are the Levites.

The Levites are then mentioned who serve at the tabernacle. And in the middle, you get this curious thing of just four verses that have to do with the lampstand that shines in the tabernacle.

[2 : 23] And I think the writer deliberately does this to highlight the point that the lampstand that shines in the tabernacle is a picture of God shining his face upon Israel.

And to help enable that happen are either side of that. The tribal leaders who bring offerings and the Levites who serve. That is, they all have a part to play to enable life together with God. But let me show you from the Bible. We're going to start in the middle. And that's why in your outlines, I've put point one in the middle. Just to try and make that point. So the lampstand that shines, point one.

It's going to start in chapter 8, verse 1 to 4. So it'd be helpful. I'm going to have verses on screen. But it'll be actually helpful to have your Bibles open because we're not going to put them all on the screen.

The Lord said to Moses, chapter 8, verse 1, Speak to Aaron and say to him, When you set up the lamps, see that all seven light up the area in front of the lampstand. Aaron did so.

[3 : 23] He set up the lamps so that they faced forwards on the lampstand, just as the Lord commanded Moses. This is how the lampstand was made. It was made of hammered gold from its base to its blossoms.

The lampstand was made exactly like the pattern the Lord had shown Moses. So here Aaron is to set up the lampstand. And do you notice the emphasis that the writer gives to the lampstand? By just repeating it. The word lamp or lampstand is repeated seven times just in these four verses. Clearly the writer is emphasizing its importance.

Now, you may know that it probably looked like this. And notice it has seven lamps. And do you remember whose number was seven in the Bible?

God's number is the number seven. It's for perfection and so on. And so the lampstand is meant to represent God's presence. In fact, in Leviticus, we're told that the lampstand is to be continually burning.

[4 : 28] And so the idea is that God is continually present with them. As they say, if the lights are off, nobody's home. But if these lights are on, then God is home.

That's the point. But also notice in verses two to three in your Bibles that we're told twice it's meant to light up the area in front of the lampstand.

Now, to remember what that area is, we need to remember the layout of the tabernacle, which I've actually put on the back of your outlines in case the screen is too small. And so moving from the right-hand side where the gate to the courtyard is, you've got the altar of burnt offering, which will come up later.

You've got the basin for washing. And then if you keep moving left, you get to the holy place. And in there is the lampstand. Do you see it? And it's to light up the area in front of it.

And so what's in front of it? Well, it's a bit of space for the priests to work. And so the lampstand will give them light. After all, it's pretty dark inside a closed tent, isn't it? But also on the other side in front of the lampstand is the table for bread.

[5 : 37] And do you know how many loaves of flatbread were always kept on the table, freshly baked each week? Twelve. And so who do you think the twelve loaves represent?

The twelve tribes. And so do you see the picture, the thing this is meant to represent? It's meant to represent God's presence shining on Israel.

In fact, in verse 2, the words, see that all seven light up, the words light up are literally shine. The same word we saw last week in that blessing.

The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. And so these four verses are a picture of God continually making his face to shine upon his people, to bless them, that they might enjoy life together with him.

Of course, for us, the way God shines his face upon us and blesses us is through Jesus, isn't it? As we'll sing later, it's from Christ all blessings flow.

[6 : 49] Or as Jesus himself said, he is the light of the world. The one through whom God makes his face shine upon the world to bless the world. With the things that Peter mentioned last week.

Things like grace to forgive us and to help us live this life. And peace. Peace with God and one another and in our hearts during life.

In other words, help us to enjoy life with him. But only if we believe or trust in the one through whom his face shines.

That is, Jesus. And so do you. If you don't yet trust in Jesus but want God's face to shine upon you, then I'd love to help you.

Please speak with me afterwards. But the point is, this little scene in the middle of our two chapters is a reminder of God's presence to bless his people, that they might enjoy life together with him.

[7 : 52] But to help make this possible, that people have a part to play. Which is described either side of this scene.

And so if we come back to chapter 7, to the tribal leaders who offer. So point to chapter 7, verse 1 and 2. Now 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. And then the leaders of Israel, the heads of the families, who were the tribal leaders in charge of those who were counted, made offerings.

Here we're told that the tribal leaders, you know, those with the difficult names from chapter 1, the ones that I tried to read out a few weeks ago and completely butchered, do you remember that? Well, they bring offerings on behalf of their tribes.

Except the Levites who were in chapter 8. But we're also told that this happened in verse 1 when Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle. Which he actually did before the book of Numbers starts, did you realize?

[9 : 00] And so these chapters are a bit like a flashback. You see, in Exodus chapter 40, we're told that the tabernacle was actually set up on the first day of the first month in the second year of coming out of Egypt.

But Numbers begins first day of the second month. And so here these chapters, chapter 7, 8, 9 and part of 10, they're actually a flashback to what happened a month earlier before the book of Numbers starts, when Moses had set up the tabernacle.

So why does the writer do that at this particular point? Why does he pause to flashback to talk about these tribal offerings?

Well, to make the connection with the end of chapter 6. I mean, chapter 7 comes after chapter 6, doesn't it? And in your Bibles, if you look at chapter 6, it ends with that priestly blessing that Peter showed you last week.

And so that we might not only make the connection between God's face shining and the lampstand shining, but also so that we'll see these tribal leaders' offerings are actually in response to God's gracious blessings.

[10:17] You see, God not only saved them from Egypt, but at the end of chapter 6, the priests pronounce God's desire to continue graciously blessing them, to continue making his face shine upon them.

And so the writer now inserts the tribal offerings here to show that they are in response to God's gracious blessings, you see.

God's grace is always the motivation to give to God, isn't it? I mean, don't we love God because he first loved us in Christ?

Don't we give to God because he first gave to us Christ himself and all spiritual blessings in him? And don't you want to serve Christ in life because he first served you in death?

Isn't that what motivates us? You see, God's grace to us in Jesus is always the motivation to love, give, and serve. And if we don't, then perhaps we need to reflect more on God's grace to us, that we might love, give, and serve God.

[11:29] But by inserting these chapters here, the writer makes this connection, that the tribal offerings are in response to God's gracious blessings at the end of chapter 6. And so what are these offerings that the leaders give?

Well, they're offerings to help enable them to enjoy life together with God. And so in verse 3 to 9, they firstly bring oxen and carts so that the Levites could carry the tabernacle to the promised land. Now notice in verse 4 and 5, or verse 5, the name of the tent changes from tabernacle to tent of meeting. And just by way of clarification, it has three names, tabernacle, tent of meeting, and sanctuary.

And it seems to change to highlight a different aspect of God's place. So tabernacle literally means dwelling, and so it highlights God's dwelling place, that he is with them.

Tent of meeting highlights it's God's meeting place, where he speaks to them. And sanctuary, from the word sanctify, highlights it's God's holy place.

[12:44] And so it's to be treated carefully by them. But in verses 6 to 8, these oxen and carts help the Levites, the Gershonites, and the Merites to carry the tent of meeting so that God could continue to dwell among them, continue to meet with them, and make his face shine upon them.

In other words, it enabled them to continue enjoying life together with him, you see. And so too do their offerings for the altar, verses 10 to 11.

And so here, when it came to dedicating the altar, God says, you've got offerings. Well, each day, one leader, so one tribe per day, is to bring their offerings for the dedication.

Now this altar is that burnt altar, sorry, altar of burnt offering that I showed you before in the diagram towards the gate in the courtyard.

And it's here that the animals and flour and so on are offered in different sacrifices.

[13:54] And so as the tribal leaders bring offerings for its dedication and use on behalf of the tribe, and what follows in verse 12 and following is each day is recorded where each tribe brings the same offerings.

So verse 12 talks about the first group or tribe was the tribe of Judah. But then it goes on for 12 more days.

And if you've got your Bibles there, you can look at verse 12 and it goes on the rest of that page and over to the next page, the two columns, and then you flick over the page, it goes on and it goes on and it goes on down to verse 83.

And then it goes on some more. Verse 84 to 88 is a summary of what all the tribes brought to dedicate the altar.

Now there's not many chapters of the Bible with this many verses in it. In fact, this chapter is the second longest in the whole Bible. Aren't you glad you came today?

[14:58] Only Psalm 119 is longer. So why is it this long? Why does the rider go on? It's not because the tribes brought different things every day.

No, no, they brought the same thing every day. So why repeat these same offerings for the altar 12 times for the 12 tribes? Well, firstly, to highlight the importance of the altar.

You see, on the altar the different sacrifices or offerings were made are like the ones mentioned in verse 13 to 17. So they brought bowls and plates and animals for grain offering, burnt offering, sin offering, fellowship offering.

And these offerings or sacrifices were more than just for atonement, more than just to pay for their sins. They were also made to express thanks and praise to God, to emphasize their prayer to God, and to enjoy fellowship together with God.

In other words, the altar, with its different sacrifices, enabled the full spectrum of life with God. The altar was like their lifeline to God.

[16:11] It was important. And the length of the chapter highlights this. But its length is also because it names each tribe to show that each tribe is equally part of God's people.

Have you ever been to a graduation ceremony, perhaps of a relative, and they read out each name one at a time and they come up on stage, they shake their hands, get the certificate, then walk off stage and the next person comes up.

It takes forever, doesn't it? And all you're doing is sitting there waiting for your relative to get up so you can cheer and take a photo which ends up blurry because you're so far back. Why do they do that?

Well, to show that each student is equally part of the graduating class. Well, so do he. Each tribe is named one by one to show that they're equally part of God's people, which included being of equal worth amongst God's people because not only is every tribe named, their offerings are exactly the same and their worth is exactly the same number of shekels or the same number of animals.

Verse 13, like Judah, they all give one silver plate weighing 130 shekels and one silver and on it goes. This again shows the tribes are of equal worth amongst God's people.

[17:36] The bigger tribes are not worth more to God than the smaller tribes, even though they've got more fighting men to offer as they head into the promised land, that would be kind of important. But they're not worth more to God and the smaller tribes belong to God's people just as much as the big ones.

And so although they are different tribes, although they have different places in the camp, if you remember that picture a few weeks ago, they are all still equally part of God's people and have equal worth with the other tribes amongst God's people.

But the point here is that their offerings enable them to enjoy life together with God. They enable the altar to work and the sacrifices to happen so they could enjoy life with God.

And that's what we get a glimpse of at the end of the chapter, at this time expressed in terms of speaking with God. So if you skip over to verse 89 or on the screen, after all the offerings are done, we read, 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 Covenant law.

In this way, the Lord spoke to him. Here seems to be the result of all their offerings. Moses hears God speaking to him.

[18:55] He can meet with God in the tent of meeting. Here is part of enjoying life with God, you see. Indeed, it's a key part of their life together with God because did you notice that speaking is mentioned three times in this one verse?

Though here God speaks to his servant Moses who then speaks to Israel. Of course, for us, God has spoken definitively through his son Jesus, hasn't he?

God gave Jesus the words to say who then spoke to his apostles and yet whether it was God speaking through Moses or God speaking through Jesus, both have been written down in God's word, the Bible, so that God can continue to speak to us.

And that is a key part of our life with God during the week and especially as we gather together here on Sundays. It's why the Bible talk takes the most time of the service because it's a key part.

But for us, there is no more altar. This thing out here that we're going to use later for communion is called a table, not an altar, because altars are for sacrifices.

[20 : 12] But as we heard in our second reading today, Jesus is the once for all sacrifice. Jesus willingly said to God, here I am, I've come to do your will, and that will was to go to the cross.

And unlike all the sacrifices of animals that didn't deal with sin permanently, Christ's death at the cross did. So it never needs to be repeated.

It was once for all time. And so there's no longer a need for an altar, nor for us to bring dishes and animals, for Jesus has permanently enabled us to enjoy life together with God, which we can do as individuals during the week, yes, but especially as we gather together like Israel did, Sunday by Sunday, every week, and to enjoy our forgiveness of sins, to bring our praise and prayer to God, to hear God speak through his word, to enjoy God's face shining upon us through Jesus, all because of Jesus.

God has done everything needed for us to enjoy life together with him, and yet, like Israel, he still gives us a part to play. For just as he ultimately gave Israel that silver and gold to have the dishes and gave them the animals to offer back, so he gives us gifts, which we can offer back, to help enable us to enjoy our life together with him.

Whether that's financial gifts, we can offer to keep the lights on and the heaters on here, so we can gather comfortably Sunday by Sunday. Indeed, Paul describes such financial gifts as a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

[21 : 58] Or whether it's offering our spiritual gifts to edify one another and build one another up as we gather together Sunday by Sunday. As the body of Christ, we can use our gifts and abilities to encourage each other.

And although we have different gifts and abilities which change depending on our stage of life and circumstances, we are still equal members in the body of Christ.

Just as there were different tribes in the nation of Israel, arranged in different places in the camp, but still equally belonged and were equal worth to each other, so we have different gifts and arranged differently in the body of Christ.

And yet, are still equal worth to each other and still belong to the body of Christ. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them just as he wanted them. But then later on he says, you, you're still part of the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it. You each belong to it. And so what part can you play to help us enjoy our life together with God?

[23 : 08] I know many of you already play a part. Like some unsung heroes I know, so some I know, every single night go around and change the bins in church, put them out into the bins out there and then take the council bins and put them on the curb every Sunday night to be collected every Monday morning.

It's not a very glamorous job, is it? And yet the part they play actually helps us to enjoy our life together with God without rubbish overflowing everywhere, Sunday by Sunday.

Or those who pray each day for our church, they pray for you. For me, that we might continue to grow in Christ. Here are these unsung heroes who play their part to help us enjoy our life together with God.

Whether it's using your financial gifts or spiritual gifts, we can all play a part to enable us to enjoy our life together with God, just as the tribal leaders did, by offering oxen and carts and dishes and animals for them.

And so do we, is the question? What's more, we can all do the specific work of the Lord, like the Levites who serve. We're running out of time, so we're going to be pretty quick with point three and chapter eight.

[24 : 23] So if you look at chapter eight, from verse five to 26, it talks about the Levite tribe, which wasn't mentioned in chapter seven. And in verses five to 13, they are cleansed, firstly, with water and then by blood, by making atonement through sacrifice.

And the purpose for this is if you skip down to verse 14. Verse 14 says, in this way, you know, by cleansing them with water and blood, you are to set the Levites apart from the other Israelites, and the Levites will be mine, says God.

But why? Why are they set apart for God? What are they to do? Well, they're to do the work of the Lord at the tent of meeting. In fact, this purpose is repeated five times throughout the passage.

I can only fit three on the screen. But you see there in verse 11, so that they may be ready to do the work of the Lord. Or verse 15, come to do their work at the tent of meeting.

And on it goes, verse 19 and so on. But what is this work of the Lord in particular? Well, it could have included carrying the tabernacle. with the oxen and cart we saw before.

[25 : 36] But that's actually not mentioned here. Rather, focus is helping the official priests, Aaron and his sons, make atonement for the people.

Verse 19. God says, from among all the Israelites, I have given the Levites as gifts to Aaron and his sons, the official priests, to do the work at the tent of meeting on behalf of the Israelites.

And so what is this work? Well, to make atonement for them so that no plague will strike the Israelites when they go near the sanctuary. You see, the work of the Lord is especially to help the official priests make atonement for the people so they won't suffer judgment.

And in this way, the Levites' work of the Lord helped enable Israel to enjoy life together with God. I mean, if you're being struck down with plagues or even death, it's pretty hard to enjoy life with God, isn't it?

And so the Levites helped enable this. And so verses 20 to 22, it explains that's what they do. And in verses 23 to 25, it makes the point that the work of the Lord is so important, it demanded the best years of their life.

[26 : 48] Which we're told in verse 25, those Levites, 25 years to 50 years. I mean, when you're younger than 25, you wish you're a bit older, you know, finished studying, starting earning, making money.

And when you're older, well, you kind of wish you were younger, don't you? I mean, I could handle being 25 or 30 again. Could you? I could handle it. Having said that, retiring at 50 sounds pretty good too.

Though notice in the last verse, it's only semi-retirement. Those who retire at 50, they may still assist their brothers in performing their duties at the tent of meeting, but they themselves must not do the work.

This then is how you are to assign the responsibilities of the Levites. They could still help out, you see. There's no complete retirement. And so every mature Levite still has a part to play in serving God, even if that looked different at different stages of their life.

And this service, this work of the Lord here was specifically helping the official priests handle the sacrifices of the animals to make atonement for people's sins, which in turn help them, enable them enjoy their life together with God.

[27 : 59] Now because of Jesus, we have all been cleansed or set apart. Just before our second reading, it talks about the blood of Christ that has cleansed our consciences so that we may serve the living God. And so because of Christ, we are all Levites, if you like.

We are all set apart to serve God. And we are therefore all set apart to do the work of the Lord, which is specifically helping our official priest, Jesus, and his blood shed once for at the cross, make atonement for people's sins.

How? Well, by pointing people to Jesus, that they might believe in him and so his death become effective atonement for their sins. Or by pointing each other to Jesus so that we might continue to believe in him and his death continue to be effective atonement for our sins.

Or to enable all of us to enjoy life together with God. And so is there a way you can do this work of the Lord? A way you can point others to Jesus, whether it's those inside the church through teaching or encouraging each other to follow Jesus or those outside the church by speaking some way of Jesus.

Before I went on leave, I went to a church member's 100th birthday, Olive Wilkinson, and at 100, she is still pointing people to Jesus, usually by speaking about the importance of her faith in Jesus and that she's ready to go home and be with Jesus.

[29 : 30] Or last year, I read the speech of another member, John Bartholomew, at his 100th birthday. John is a man of few words, and so his speech was quite short. But in it, he pointed people at his party, both Christian and non-Christian, to Jesus by giving thanks to God for Jesus.

He turned 101 this year, of course. We have all been set apart to do the work of the Lord. Yes, that will look different for each of us in terms of what we do and how much we do, but it still involves all of us, even after we retire.

I mean, if 100-year-olds can do it, then we all can, can't we? Will we point people to Jesus as we have opportunity then? Whether it's those inside the church or those outside the church, that we might believe and keep believing, and his atonement, that his blood be effective atonement for our sin.

Well, Michelle and I paid the price for our holiday, but the kids still had a part to play, to help us enjoy our life together on holiday. And while Christ has paid the price for our life with God, we still have a part to play to help enable us enjoy this life together with God.

Whether it's by using our financial gifts or spiritual gifts as different but equal members of the body, or whether that's doing the more specific work of the Lord, pointing insiders and outsiders to Christ.

[30 : 56] Let's pray that we might play our part and so help enable us to enjoy our life together.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, we do thank you, even for these long chapters in numbers, and for the lessons they teach.

Thank you for the reminder that you long to make your face shine upon us through Christ. We thank you also for the reminder that we have a part to play to help enable us enjoy life together through Christ.

And so help us, we pray, to play that part, that we might continue to build one another up and help others come to know Jesus. We ask it all in the name of Jesus.

Amen.