

God's Provision for Priests

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Date: 05 October 2025

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[0 : 00] And as you are, you might like to grab a Bible, although the verses will also be on the screen as well as we continue our series through the book of Numbers. I'm not sure if you've ever heard of this lady called Henrietta or Hetty Green.

She inherited quite a lot of money from her father. Today's terms of about \$7 million, but then she moved to New York and became the first woman of Wall Street. And she had such a business acumen that she grew her wealth to be in today's terms to \$2.5 billion.

In fact, people thought she was magic and so gave her the rather unflattering name, the Witch of Wall Street. But despite her wealth, she actually ended up in the Guinness Book of Records for a different reason, for being the stingiest person in history.

And yes, she bailed out New York in 1907, but by only giving loans with an interest rate return, so she made money from that.

She even refused to use hot water herself to save money, so it just had cold baths. She refused to pay her maid any more than she absolutely had to.

[1 : 17] She used to argue with the butcher to get a free bone for her dog rather than paying for it. And when her son Edward broke his leg, she tried to have him admitted to the free clinic.

But she was recognised and told that she could afford to pay. However, she refused and tried to treat the leg herself, and it was infected and had to be amputated.

Some people think that if only I had lots of money, then I would give to others. But generosity is not a matter of having loads of money, it's a matter of the heart, isn't it?

And in Hetty's heart, amassing money was more important than generosity. And so today's big lesson really is don't have a Hetty heart.

Now, yes, we are talking about money, and when I realised that that was where the passage was heading today, I did not jump up and down with joy. It is a tricky topic, but it's one that we need to address because the Bible does.

[2 : 25] But first, let me give you the context of our passage today. Last week, Israel were grumbling again, but then they finally learnt something of God's holiness.

However, they went from one extreme to the other. They went from taking God's holiness for granted to declaring that we're going to die. And so if you have a look at the end of chapter 17, right before chapter 18, the Israelites say, Oh, anyone who comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die.

Are we all going to die? They cry. The answer, of course, is no, because God had appointed Aaron and his sons from the tribe of Levi to be priests.

They were the priestly Levites. And that's what we looked at last week. Who stood between the holy God and a sinful people so they will not die.

For they made atonement for sins with sacrifices on the altar. And so you might remember this diagram I've shown you before of the tabernacle or tent of meeting or sanctuary.

[3 : 31] It's got the three different names there. And in the courtyard, you've got that square, which is the altar of burnt offering where the sacrifices were made. And then you've got the holy place beyond the outer curtain, which is where the priests went.

And then once a year, only the high priests went inside the most holy place on the day of atonement. The rest of the Levites, the non-priestly Levites, were to help the priests by preparing the animals, carrying the tabernacle, and so on.

But they couldn't do the work of the priests, making sacrifices on the altar or going inside the curtain. But together, God appointed these Levites, the priestly and the non-priestly Levites, so that Israel will not die, but enjoy life with God.

And so just before our passage, in verse 5 and 6, we read, God's saying to Aaron, you are to be responsible for the care of the sanctuary and the altar of burnt offering, so that my wrath will not fall on the Israelites again.

I myself have selected your fellow Levites, the non-priestly Levites, from among the Israelites as a gift to you, dedicated to the Lord to do the work at the tent of meeting. And so the work of the priests, together with the rest of the Levites, was important work, wasn't it?

[4 : 51] It was actually, literally, life or death work. For with them, Israel could enjoy life with God, but without them, Israel would face death for their sin before God.

But if these Levites are always working at the tabernacle instead of working on their own land or amongst their own flocks and herds, then how are they going to earn a living?

And how are they going to have food to eat? Well, that's what our passage today is all about. God will provide for his priests, firstly. So point 1, verse 8 to 10.

Then the Lord said to Aaron, And then he talks specifically about the most holy offerings in verse 9. You are to have the part of the most holy offerings that is kept from the fire. From all the gifts they bring me as most holy offerings, and then he names what they are, whether they're grain offering, the sin or the guilt offerings, that part belongs to you and your sons.

[6 : 03] Eat it as something most holy. Every male shall eat it. You must regard it as holy. Now, there are actually five types of sacrifices we saw the other year when we did Leviticus.

Yes, the first one is the burnt offering, and the whole animal was burnt on the altar, hence called burnt offering. But then 2, 3, and 4, only part of them was burnt on the offering, only part of the grain and part of the animal.

I'll come back to the fifth offering shortly. In fact, it was only the fat of the animal that was burnt up because it was regarded as the best bit. The bit that we know as the unhealthiest, but let's be honest, it's still the tastiest, right?

You know, pork crackling, not that pork would ever be offered on their altar. Or, you know, it's the marbling in the Wagyu steak, the fat marbling that actually makes it so tender.

But if only the fat was burnt up, where did the rest of the meat go? Well, God gave it to the priests. I mean, that's a lot of meat, right? But because these three offerings, the grain, sin, and guilt offerings in verse 9, were particularly for God, then in verse 9 they are called most holy.

[7 : 24] Oh, I've got it there, so I've just highlighted it there for you in yellow. And because they're most holy, then only the priests could eat them, and only at the tabernacle. Can you imagine the work lunches that they'd have?

But the fifth sacrifice, the fellowship offering, was meant to be eaten with others. Hence, it's called the fellowship offering.

And so the fat was burnt up, yes, but the Israelites were to eat it together, except for two bits that were also set apart as holy to God, the breast and the right thigh.

And to symbolise this, they were way before the tabernacle, before God. Kind of like when we splurge and get drumsticks for dessert, you know, the ice cream drumsticks, and then I pull one out and I wave it before the kids to say, this one's yours.

That's kind of what they were doing here with these bits from the fellowship offering. But then God gave those bits to the priests as well. But because it was part of the fellowship offering that was meant for all people, it's not most holy, it's kind of just holy.

[8 : 30] And so it could be enjoyed by the priest's family as well, if they're ceremonially clean. And 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 who is ceremonially clean may eat it.

Now it might sound at this point that the families don't get much. They just get the wave offerings, you know, the breast and the right thigh. But God provides even more now. He also gave them the first fruits that Israel offered him.

So verse 12, But wait, there's even more.

Verse 14, Now the background to this, just briefly, is that when they were in Egypt and Pharaoh wasn't going to let Israel go.

[9 : 55] In fact, he at one point drowned all the Israelite boys, you might remember, in the Nile. And so God was going to judge them and did judge them. And part of that judgment was taking all their

firstborn human and animal sons as part of the judgment.

But remember, he saved Israel's firstborn sons, human and animal, with the blood of the lamb on the doorframe, if you remember. That's why it's called the Passover. And so because he saved them, they belong to him.

They're devoted to him, you see. But God didn't want the firstborn sons, human sons, to be sacrificed. He hated human sacrifice, even though it was practiced in the ancient world.

And he didn't want the unclean animals either. And so they had to be redeemed or bought back. Rest of verse 15 to 16. But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals.

When they're a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price at five shekels of silver. And so the priests, along with their families, also received that money.

[11:02] But if the animal was clean, then it was sacrificed. And the priests and their families received the meat, just like they did with the burnt offering, verse 17. But you must not redeem the clean ones, the firstborn of ox or sheep or goat.

They are holy, they're clean. Instead, splash blood against the altar for atonement. Burn their fat as a food offering, the best bit as an aroma pleasing to the Lord. But then the meat, the whole rest of the meat is yours, just as the breast of the wave offering and the right thigh are yours.

Whatever is set aside as the holy offerings the Israelites present to the Lord, I give to you and to your household for you. 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. I mean, the sacrifices were to be the best animals. The firstborn are the privileged ones in that culture.

All we saw before, the firstfruits were to be the finest olive oil, the finest grain, the finest wine. I mean, olive oil and grain? Think baker's delight bread, right? You ever splash out sometimes and get a really nice loaf of bread from baker's delight?

[12:12] No? Anyway, we do sometimes. The finest wine, I don't know, tenfolds, grain? Grange? Grange? Anyway, the top wine. But this is the case because they were first and foremost giving them to God, you see.

And so there's a principle that Israel was to remember. They were not giving so much to the priests. They were giving first and foremost to God. In fact, all the way through the passage, it talks about what the Israelites give to me.

Then I will give to them. It's first and foremost an offering to God. And that's why in verse 20, the Lord said to Aaron as the representative of the priests and in fact the whole tribe of Levi, You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them.

I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites. You see, the Levites would be given cities to live in with small bits of land so they could have a goat to provide milk for their breakfast or something like that.

But they were not going to get a big share of the promised land like every other tribe. But they were set apart for God's work at the tabernacle and then later scattered throughout Israel to minister to the people.

[13:29] So instead of having land as their inheritance to farm and provide a living, God is their inheritance who will provide their living, so to speak. But God knew their work was important, that it was life or death work.

Now it's very easy at this point then for church pastors to then say, Well, you've got to give your best to God and then God will give that to me. And you know, while I'd be happy to have bakers to light bread and sometimes do get it, Thank you, Jane.

I'm not the priest who makes sacrifices at the altar. So God's wrath does not fall on us. Nor is Ricky, nor is Fiona. It's Jesus, isn't it?

Jesus is the priest who offered himself at the cross once for all time to pay for our sins. Jesus is the one upon whom God's wrath fell so it wouldn't have to fall on us if we believe in him.

Instead, we can enjoy life with God now in this world and life to the full in the world to come. And so it's this gospel message about Jesus that is a matter of life or death.

[14:40] Indeed, it's a matter of eternal life or eternal death, isn't it? And so we're to give to God to provide for this gospel work wherever. That this message of life or death will go out everywhere.

Whether it's to train gospel workers or to support gospel workers. Whether they're in universities or as overseas missionaries like Lauren we saw earlier.

And yes, in churches too. Or we can even give ourselves, our time, our energy to do gospel work. Serving here at church. We're to give to God to provide for this gospel work because it is a matter of life or death.

As we heard in our second reading from 1 Corinthians, don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple? And those who serve at the altar sharing what is offered on the altar?

That's exactly what our passage is today. In the same way, he says, the Lord Jesus has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel wherever they're preaching the gospel.

[15:44] Not just at churches. And what's more, 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 means the first part. So that we give God what's right and not what's left over.

I know of a person at our church who had to sell their house and move into aged care. They gave the church a generous bequest to help with gospel work. And they insisted on giving it to us as soon as the house sold before they passed away.

Usually bequests come after the person passed away. But they wanted to give it now to ensure that part of their estate went to gospel work. It was a priority for them, you see.

For they knew gospel work is life or death work. Of course, there are also the Levites who helped the priests too. So more briefly, point two. And verse 20, God is their inheritance as well.

[16:47] Because all the tithes that Israel gave to God, God will now give to the non-priestly Levites. Verse 21. I give the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the tent of meeting.

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 and herds and so on that year. And again, this was because the Levites would have no land as their inheritance to work and earn a livelihood.

For their work was at the tabernacle or ministering to the people. And this included, as I said before, preparing the animals for the priests to sacrifice, carrying the tabernacle and so on. The Israelites were not allowed to do any of this work.

In fact, if the Levites let the Israelites do some work for them, then the Levites would get in trouble. That's what verse 22 and 23 talk about. And by the way, verse 22, when it says Israelites must not go near the tent of meeting, it's not saying they can't go near to worship God or to hear the word of God through Moses.

You might remember the trumpets summoned them to come to the tabernacle to hear God's word and so on. Rather, it's coming near, verse 22, to do the work of the Levites, verse 23.

[18:06] But the Levites are the ones who are supposed to do it. And if they don't, if they let others, then they will cop it. But the main point is in verse 24. And I wonder if this more directly relates to people who work at church amongst God's people, because we're told in the New Testament that you yourselves, this group here, you are God's temple, because God's spirit doesn't just dwell in us individually, but also corporately.

And so the Levites were those who worked at God's temple or tabernacle and ministered to the people. Our church financial year started last week.

It starts the 1st of October. And as of July this year, the national minimum wage in Australia, not covered by an award, is \$50,000 per year.

Now, we have between the two, Doncaster Black, we have roughly about 500 full-time working adults. It's hard to get an exact figure. So just take the full-time working adults.

If they minimum wage, \$50,000 a year, gave one-tenth, that's \$5,000 a year. If they all did that, we would be able to double our church budget, literally double it.

[19:28] Now, I know not everyone is a working adult, full-time or even part-time. We have many retired people on fixed income or a pension, and we have students who are studying and some who are looking for work and so on.

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

And so 1 Corinthians 16 talks about, you know, on the first day of the week, the priority, setting aside income, some money in keeping with your income. Yet, while it's been keeping with our income, the New Testament still encourages us to give generously and cheerfully. Because in 2 Corinthians, we read that 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, but God loves a cheerful giver. You see, it's not about the law like the tithe, it's about our hearts again, what we're decided to give in our hearts. But the encouragement is not to have a heady heart that gives sparingly or reluctantly, but to have a happy heart that gives generously and cheerfully.

[20 : 54] Even if it's \$1 a week, which could be generous for a pensioner struggling to pay rent. And we have people like that. Or a student struggling to pay for textbooks or someone who is out of work.

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

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

And it will be counted as kind of your food from your grain or wine, even though you don't have land or a vineyard. You see, the Levites are to tithe the tithe.

They are to give a tenth of everything they receive. And it will be counted as their gift to God. And notice again that this tithe is given first and foremost to God, who then gives it to the priests, like Aaron.

[22 : 08] Verse 28. In this way you will present an offering to the Lord from all the tithes you receive from the Israelites. From these tithes you must give the Lord's portion to Aaron, the priest.

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

And then in verse 31, the Levites can keep the other 90%, but in verse 32, if they don't tithe, then they'll be guilty of defiling what Israel has given to God.

You know, not treating it as holy and tithing it as well. Michelle and I give to church as well as to other gospel work. But as I've been working on this passage this week, I've been convicted that we should give more as a couple.

Not we, but we. You may already be giving generously, which is honouring to God. That's terrific. You may not be able to give anymore. That's okay. What matters, though, is not having a hetty heart.

[23 : 16] It's not always easy, especially when we have so many financial pressures in life. I mean, before, just before Michelle and I set up some more giving yesterday, one of our kids, and I won't say which one, had a serious car accident on Thursday and rode off our car.

Thankfully, they're okay, and we have a second car, but it's going to be an expense for us, right? And so it's going to be... It would have been very... Well, it was. I was tempted to think, oh, we've got to now pay for this, so we won't actually increase our giving like I was planning to.

But the thing that really helped me not do that, and I hope it helps you too, seeing how Israel's giving was first and foremost to God before it was giving to the priests and the Levites.

You see, if we remember our giving is first and foremost to God before it's giving to gospel work or church or wherever, it's much harder to have a hetty heart, isn't it? Because who wants to be stingy towards God?

God has been so incredibly generous to us, giving his only son to die for us. None of us want to be stingy back to God, do we? And so remembering that our giving is first and foremost to God himself will help us not have a hetty heart.

[24 : 35] But second, so will remembering that gospel work really is life or death work. Giving can make an eternal difference to someone's life. It's a much better investment than Wall Street, right?

And third, remembering that God is our inheritance now will also help us. You see, unlike the Levites, we will get an inheritance in our promised land, the world to come.

But like the Levites, God is our inheritance even now too. As we'll sing in a moment, Riches I heed not, need not, nor man's empty praise.

Thou, God, is my inheritance now and always. That is, God will provide for our needs so that we can give. And that's what that other verse in 2 Corinthians 9 says.

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, or that you need, you can abound in every good work, including giving.

[25 : 39] Whether that's a buck or ten bucks or a hundred or whatever it is. It doesn't matter about the amount. It matters about the heart. And so again, the big lesson for us this morning is don't have a heady heart that gives reluctantly and sparingly.

But remember, we're giving to God first and foremost. And remember that this gospel work is life or death work. And remember that God is our inheritance now, providing for our needs so that we can give generously and cheerfully.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you for your word, which addresses sensitive topics like money.

And we pray, Father, that you would help us to use what you have given us wisely, generously, and cheerfully.

That the gospel might continue to go out around the world and that many more people might be saved. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.