

God is in our midst

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[0 : 00] I wonder whether you've considered being enlisted in the army a privilege or a punishment, a blessing or a curse.

! Well, certainly in wars gone by, we have seen young men keen to sign up.! Anyone here would like to sign up? None? Okay. Because they saw it as a privilege to defend their country, right? Others saw it as a punishment, and so they avoided the draft, became a deserter, not willing to lose their lives for a cause that they didn't believe in.

But what if an entire tribe was excluded from enlisting? Well, that's what we saw last week, didn't we, in the beginning of Numbers, when we discovered that the tribe of Levi was excluded. So in chapter 1, verse 49, for example, the Lord told Moses, you must not count the tribe of Levi or include them in the census of the other Israelites.

[1 : 04] They were to care for the tabernacle instead. Now the question remains, why Levi? Why not another tribe? Especially when, later on, we will see that there are consequences for not being part of the army.

Because if you didn't join in the conquest in that way, no land will be allotted to you. So is this a punishment or a privilege?

Now to answer that question, we'll need to delve a little into history, go all the way back to the twelve brothers as they were sons of Jacob. Because what happened then not only impacts the tribe of Levi, but had consequences for the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Judah as well.

And so this is what we'll see as we look through chapter 2 and 3 today. Now recall in chapter 1, when we first had the listing of the tribes, the leaders, and then also the counting and the census, Reuben, as the firstborn of Jacob, was first in that list.

But did you notice that when we were reading the camp arrangements, that is no longer the case, right? Instead, Judah is first, followed by Issachar and Zebulun.

[2 : 25] And so even though Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are older, they have been bypassed. So, looking at chapter 2 and verse 1, this is what we read. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, The Israelites are to camp around the Tethom meeting some distance from it, each of them under their standard and holding the banners of their family.

On the east towards the sunrise, divisions of the camp of Judah are to encamp under their standard. The leader of Judah is Naphthali, son of Aminadab. His division numbers 74,600.

The tribe of Issachar will camp next to them. The leader of Issachar is Nathanael, son of Zua. His division is 54,400. The tribe of Zebulun is Nix.

The leader of the people of Zebulun is Eliab, son of Halon. His division numbers 57,400. All the men assigned to the camp of Judah, according to their divisions, number 186,400.

They will set out first. Being on the east there is therefore the prime position, because, as we will soon see, it faced the tent of meeting, the entrance to it.

[3 : 42] Thus, also, when the nation set out to march, it was Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, that it says here, that they will lead them, because they set out first.

Now, after that, in verses 10 to 16, we come to the division in the north, which is Reuben, Simeon, and Gad. Now, Gad, as we saw last week, was one of the maidservant's son.

So, he was further down the list. But he's now been promoted to take the place of Levi in this group. This was to maintain the fact that we needed three, three, three, three, three.

No, too many threes. Four threes in order to make twelve, right? So, this group of three, the second group, they would march second. The third group is in verses 19 to 24.

Those are Rachel's descendants, Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin. They camp to the west of the tent. Then, the last group in verses 25 to 32 are the tribes of Dan, Esher, and Naphtali.

[4 : 43] They camp north of the tent of meeting, and they march last. Then, in verses 33, what is reiterated is that the Levites are not to be included.

Instead, they are divided by clans, according to the sons of Levi. And where they are is to be arranged between the tent of meeting and the camps of the other twelve tribes.

But right in the middle of that reading, which Vanessa sort of summarized, between the second and the third groups, we find verse 17, which Vanessa read. And it says, Then the tent of meeting and the camp of the Levites will set out in the middle of the camps.

They will set out in the middle, they will set out in the same order as they encamp, each in their own place, under their standard. So what we see is that there's east, south, west, and north.

And I don't know whether you've watched those movies where you've got the American sort of cheerleaders, and they have this chant, north, south, east, west, who's the best? Yeah? So what's the answer?

[5 : 53] Who's the best? East. Yep, correct. Bear that in mind, because when we get to the sons of Levi, the same thing happens. So we're going to jump forward now. We're going to skip over verses 1 to 16 of chapter 3 because I'll come back to them next week.

But we'll jump to chapter 3, verse 17, where it says, These were the names of the sons of Levi, Gershon, Kohath, and Mereri. By the way, I've just made up all the pronunciations, so Vanessa's probably right, I'm wrong, but anyway.

These were the names of the Gershonite clans, Lipni and Shimei. The Kehohai clans, Amram, Ish-ha, Hebron, and Uziel. The Mereri clans, Mali and Mushi.

These were the Levite clans according to their families. So this is what verse 17 says, and then from verses 21 to 37, the relative roles of the clans are summarized, or the specific roles.

And again, because chapter 4 elaborates on all these roles, I will get to that next week. So for this week, what I want to focus on, as I said, is to look at the position that they had in the camp.

[7 : 09] So verse 23, if you look, the Gershonites were camped on the west of the tent. Verse 29, the Kohathites were on the south. And remember, that's second in prominent after the east.

And then the Mererites, verse 35, are to the north. And who are in the east? Well, it's Aaron and his sons and Moses, because they are the priests.

They're from the tribe of Levi as well, but they have a more specific role than the Levites. And they get to camp in the east, right in front of the entrance to the tent of meeting, because only they are allowed to enter, to go into the tent.

Thus, verse 38 says, Moses and Aaron and his sons were to camp to the east of the tabernacle towards the sunrise in front of the tent of meeting. They were responsible for the care of the sanctuary on behalf of the Israelites.

Anyone else who approached the sanctuary was to be put to death. Okay? Now, I've got a visual representation of this, which I've stolen off the internet. But you'll see exactly how, basically, chapters 2 and 3, this is summarized in how they actually have to camp around the tabernacle or the tent of meeting.

[8 : 28] But we come back to the original question. What's going on with the tribe of Levi? And also, what about Reuben and Simeon? Well, to figure this out, and you'll see this in the outline, we need to go all the way back to Genesis, because, as I said, what happens then determines the position of these tribes.

And in particular, it was the sin of these sons, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, that influences Jacob's blessing of them at his deathbed. So, as I said, Reuben was the firstborn, and by right, he had a double portion of Jacob's inheritance.

He was actually, or his tribe, was actually in line to lead the nation as the firstborn. But Reuben sinned against his father, and so in Genesis chapter 35 and 22, we read that he went in and slept with his father's concubine, Bilhah, and Israel, another name for Jacob, heard of it.

So, when it came time for blessing, when Jacob was at his deathbed and pronounced his blessing, this is what we got in Genesis chapter 49, verse 3 to 4.

Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honour, excelling in power.

[9 : 51] Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel, for you went up onto your father's bed, onto my couch, and defiled it. So, this is not really a blessing, is it?

It's a bit of a backhanded compliment, which is really a curse. Next, we see Simeon, and actually, Simeon and Levi go together, because they're brothers in crime.

And if you look in Genesis chapter 34, by the way, I hope this is not going to be PG-rated, the next few stories. But anyway, I'll try and keep it sanitized.

In Genesis 34, the story goes that their sister, Simeon and Levi's sister, Dina, Dina is raped by a Hivite, called Shechem.

The truth is, Shechem loved Dina, but slept with her before, or without marrying her first, which is what's wrong, probably against her will.

[10:53] But he tries to make amends for it, so his father then seeks to negotiate with Jacob, Dina's father, in order to get her hand in marriage.

Now, Simeon and Levi hear about this, and they're outraged, and they decide to take justice into their own hands. And without getting their father's permission, they deceive Shechem and his entire clan, saying that, you know, yeah, okay, you want to marry Dina, that's fine.

You and all your clan, all your males, you go and get circumcised, and then you can come and marry Dina. But of course, what happens is that, once the snip was done, and while the man was still walking around gingerly, in pain, Simeon and Levi killed them all in revenge.

Now, Jacob's not happy with that, and he scolds them, saying, on the next slide, 34 verse 30, you have brought trouble on me by making me obnoxious to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land.

We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed. And then come Jacob's time for blessing at the deathbed, at his deathbed, he curses them instead.

[12:09] And so he says, Simeon and Levi are brothers, their swords are weapons of violence. Let me not enter their council, let me not join the assembly, for they have killed men in their anger, and hamstrung oxen as they please.

Curse be their anger, so fierce, and their fury so cruel. I will scatter them in Jacob, and disperse them in Israel. And so, what we see then is that Reuben, Simeon and Levi, being first, second and third born, even though they are, all forfeit their place at the head of the nation.

The fourth then is Judah. Now, although Jacob was the one to bless them all, or curse them, we find that actually in Numbers, God still honours what Jacob says.

And so actually, even though it was a human blessing, as it were, they become prophecies of what eventually happens. Anyway, coming back to Judah, Judah was fourth, and he was no saint either, right?

Just to give you a couple examples. Firstly, he suggests, he suggests selling Joseph to slavery in Egypt. Remember, Joseph was Jacob's favourite son, and all the other brothers hated his guts.

[13:29] And so, Judah suggests that Joseph be sent to slavery instead, which is actually slightly better than the other brothers, because the other brothers just wanted to kill him, right? Now, later on, Judah also doesn't fare too well when it comes to his own daughter-in-law, Tamar, whom he deprives of having children when she is widowed.

So, according to the law, according to the tradition, if the first son dies, you're meant to marry the second, and the third, and whatever, in order for the wife to have offspring.

But, Judah somehow conspired to prevent that from happening, and Tamar hoodwings him into sleeping with her instead. And, thank God for that in one sense, because then Judah now has offspring in order to form a tribe.

Now, so Judah didn't do the right thing by Tamar or God, but Judah's one redeeming feature is that when he was found out, he actually was willing to admit his wrong.

He was willing to repent. And then finally, when he makes the trip to Egypt with his brothers during the famine, his turnaround is complete, as it were, when he puts his own life on the line.

[14:46] Joseph, in disguise as an Egyptian at the time, was threatening to take Benjamin, Jacob's youngest son, into detention. But Judah instead says, no, take me.

I volunteer my life because I know my father loves Benjamin, and he would be heartbroken if Benjamin was detained. And so, when it comes to the blessing, Jacob finally gives a true blessing, which is what we read on the next slide.

Judah, your brothers will praise you. Your hand will be on the neck of your enemies. Your father's son will bow down to you. You are a lion's cub, Judah. You return from the prey, my son.

Like a lion, he crouches and lies down. Like a lioness, who dares to rouse him? The scepter, that's of rule, will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come, and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

And as Christians, we know exactly who this person, he to whom it belongs, is referring to. It is ultimately fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. He was a son of David, the king of Israel, but from the tribe of Judah, and therefore called the Lion of Judah.

[16:00] But all that's later on. But even now, here in Numbers, we are beginning to see, aren't we, God's plan and God's will unfolding, and in particular, for Judah.

Judah, from here on in, will begin to lead Israel, with Reuben, Simeon, and Levi relegated down the order. Now further on, just by way of a side point, when we get to the book of Joshua, and the land is allocated, or allotted, we actually see a similar thing.

So Reuben, they will be given land that is east of the Jordan. And so if you know Israel at the moment, Israel itself is west of the Jordan, right? I think.

Yeah. East is largely the nation of the country of Jordan. So the prime real estate of the promised land is actually west of Jordan. And Reuben gets the one outside, on the east.

When Simeon is allotted land, he's actually given land that is within the territory of Judah. And so what happens over time is that Simeon's land gets subsumed into the tribe of Judah.

[17:15] And so if you look at a map, some of your Bibles have maps in them, if you look at a map of all the 12 tribes, you actually wouldn't see often Simeon in it because they're actually scattered among the people of Judah, just as the prophecy said.

Now, as for Levi, well, they get no land at all. And yet, as we've been reading, it seems like they are being blessed and given the special job of guarding and caring for the tabernacle.

And then, even so much that Aaron and his sons are the only one that can enter the tabernacle.

They can approach it. Because as we probably heard in Numbers 3.10 and then again in verse 38, we read that if anyone else apart from them came close, they would be put to death.

And next week, when we get to the jobs for the Levites, we'll see that actually only the Levites can lay their hands on the tabernacle. Only they can handle the tent, the curtains, the ropes, the whatever.

Alright? Set it up, pack it up, and carry it during the journey. No one else can do that. So, what has happened? Well, we find that actually the curse of being scattered and not having land has been turned by God into a blessing.

[18:47] That they become a tribe that is set apart especially for God. Belonging to Him in an even more particular way than the nation of Israel as a whole.

So, why this turnaround? Well, ultimately, it's God's grace and sovereignty, but there is one incident in Exodus that is pivotal to this change. And it's in Exodus chapter 32.

Again, all the references are in the outline. You can go and look at it in your time. But there was the, described the incident or the story of the golden calf. Right? Many of you probably remember that.

Moses had coming down from Mount Sinai, stone tablets of the law in hand. Okay, some of you have seen the movie. And then he finds the people being impatient and therefore creating a golden calf to worship instead.

And so, God's anger burned against them. But prior to his punishment of them, Moses actually issues an ultimatum to the people in Exodus chapter 32 and verse 26.

[19:56] And what he says is this. Before he punished them, he says, whoever is for the Lord, come to me. And all the Levites rallied to him.

And so, Moses commanded the Levites to execute God's judgment and 3,000 people died that day. And then after that, Moses said, on the next slide, you, that is the Levites, have been set apart to the Lord today.

For you were against your own sons and brothers and he has blessed you this day. You see, the Levites chose God ahead of their own family.

And so, for that, the Lord set them apart from that day forward. Now, in a sense, you know, God had already ordained all this to happen, right?

Because he'd chosen Moses and Aaron who were also from Levi way before this incident here. But the Levites still had to stand up or rise up to be counted on that day.

[21:09] Declare their allegiance to God in order to claim their calling of being set apart. Now, as I said, I've flown through a lot of stories today but the references are in the outline if you want to look

over and check that I haven't made things up.

But I've deliberately spent some time today describing all these and giving you the background because otherwise, when you first look at Numbers chapter 2 and 3, you think that maybe all God is concerned with is logistics, right?

Having the right people do the right things. But actually, no, there's more to it than it seems, isn't it? Because what is going on here reflects the mind of God.

It reveals how he works and actually it displays his character. God has been faithful to his word even though it's been a long time. And today, if you look at the third outline, I want to focus on two things about his character that is reflected in these chapters.

And the first is that God is holy and therefore sin has its consequence. Every wrongdoing will be accounted for because nothing escapes our all-knowing God.

[22 : 28] Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, you know, they probably thought, hey, we got away with this because at the time there was no punishment, were there? But it wasn't overlooked by God.

And when Jacob remembered and on behalf of God spelt out the consequence of their sin, God then followed it through in numbers.

Now, Judah sinned at the time too, but I think the difference there is that he actually did repent at the time and perhaps that was the difference. And so, brothers and sisters, our sin matters to God. There will be accounting for it and we should not expect anything less. Sometimes we are so quick, aren't we, to ask God to intervene when somebody else does wrong.

You know, we want justice, otherwise God, you're not being fair. we want the wrongdoing exposed, we want the wrongdoer made an example of, and as a society, you know, we love, don't we, seeing our leaders and celebrities named and chained.

[23 : 37] That's a symptom of that, isn't it? But when it comes to us, oh, God, please go easy on us, right? We have, you know, we had a bad day, we've got mitigating circumstances, please God, go easy on us.

But no, God is utterly consistent. All sin has to be dealt with. But the way he deals with it is not only just, but it's also gracious.

And that's the second thing we see with this list. Because even though Judah and Levi fail, God's grace is shown to them and there is redemption. For Levi, it's his sons that sort of turn the corner for the tribe.

God doesn't change his mind. Whatever was prophesied happens. They are still scattered, they have no land. But in the long run, they're given something better by God.

They're set apart to serve him and be his special portion. And we'll see more of that next week. But today, we see this in the camp arrangement, isn't it?

[24 : 47] They are positioned closer to the tabernacle than all the other tribes. They become mediators, protecting the other tribes from coming too close because then they would risk their lives.

It's not that God wants to keep others away and say, I don't love the rest. No. It's rather God is protecting them, preventing them from being consumed by his holy fire.

And friends, we too have a mediator like this, right? His name is Jesus. And even though he's not a Levite, he's our great high priest who pays for our sin not with the blood of animals but with his own blood.

And that allows us to be forgiven and therefore approach and come into God's presence. And that's the beauty of the God we serve, right?

If last week the main comparison was with God's faithfulness and human weakness, this week we see the truth that God is both holy and gracious. Some people like to focus on God's holiness, some people just on his grace, but actually he's both gracious and holy, unrelenting against sin but merciful to us as sinners.

[26 : 07] And that is only possible because of Jesus, his sinless son, who comes to deal justly with our sin so that God's grace can then be poured out on sinners without measure.

And as a result of that, friends, when we put our faith in Jesus, our sins are forgiven. We're then able to draw near to God with confidence.

We can now approach God's throne, enter into the Holy of Holies even, all because of Jesus. God's grace is poured into our lives.

Now, the other thing to say here as well is that what we see in this chapter has been a pattern that has been emerging over the first four or five books of the Pentateuch.

And that is a picture of God being in the midst of his people. Actually, it started all the way back in the burning bush with Moses. When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, which is around the Mount Sinai actually, the same area the people are now at, God told him as he approached the bush, what did he say?

[27 : 22] Take off your sandals. Why? Because you're coming to holy ground. Then when the people left Egypt and they gathered around Mount Sinai, what happened?

God established a cordon around the mountain and he says, please, don't come any nearer than that. Don't even let your animals come because they will die. Why?

Because God's holy presence is now on Mount Sinai. Only Moses could come up. And it's the same picture now that we get with the tabernacle.

This time, the priests and the Levites are that human cordon guarding the people from God's holy and consuming fire. And friends, the God we worship has not changed, even in the New Testament. But the writer of Hebrews now says in our other reading today that we can approach God's throne confidently, going past the cordon. So we read, we have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

[28 : 30] You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge, holy still, righteous, judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.

How is that possible? Because you have also come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, better word than the blood of Abel.

Friends, it's not that we are any better than the Israelites. We're not. And it's not that now God is more lenient.

He's not. He's the same God. But it's only because of Jesus' sprinkled blood that speaks the most perfect word on our behalf, that we can come into God's holy presence each Sunday, each and every day when you put your trust in Jesus.

And that means, too, that we must never take this for granted. Our reverence for God should not change just because we have the confidence to come in. Our humility and repentance with sin needs to be maintained.

[29 : 53] Our thankfulness to Jesus for his salvation alone must be increased. And whenever we gather our attitude in prayer and praise and even afterwards when you have your chicken and chips need to reflect the fact that we are actually in God's presence.

Every day we are. We are in God's holy presence. Now, that's not to say we have to be overly formal, we can't tell jokes.

No, it's what's in our hearts and our lives. We need to set ourselves apart for him, live holy lives because we are living in his holy presence.

So I want to pause now and allow God's spirit to minister to us, to impress upon us this deep sense that God is both holy but also that his grace is abundant so that when we head out into our week, we will live lives that is full of reverence and awe for this God that we serve.

So, let's do that. I'll give you a minute's silence, I'll pray and then we can sing again. Father, we praise you for your holiness and grace.

[31 : 33] We thank you that by the blood of Jesus, we are able to come boldly into your presence. Help us to remember your holiness even when we're not in church, even when we're not doing Christianly things, but just going about our lives by ourselves in front of our computers, alone in our own rooms, with our friends who may not be Christian.

Help us to remember that we are living in your holy presence, so that even though we have the assurance of the forgiveness for our sins, we will live according to your will and be full of thankfulness and gratitude for your grace, shown to us in Christ Jesus.

In his name we pray. Amen.