

The Holy God who is With Us

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- [0:00] Let me pray again. Lord God, I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts may be acceptable and pleasing in your sight.
- ! O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Well, as we started the book of Numbers last week, we heard that the people of God, the Israelites, were about to embark on a journey to the promised land.
- And the first 10 chapters of the book of Numbers is all about preparations for the journey. But it's exciting news.
- The people of God are going on a journey to the promised land. And what's more, there's even better news.
- Because the holy, mighty God himself is going with them. And the sign of his presence amongst them was to be the tabernacle.
- [1:26] Unfortunately, at the same time, there's a problem. The holy and mighty God himself is going with them.
- It's a great blessing, but it's also a problem because he is holy and they are not. But these chapters, chapters 3 and 4 of the book of Numbers address this issue.
- Firstly, we'll turn on the clicker. Firstly, we note that it's about a family. It's about, it's an account of the family of Aaron and Moses at the time the Lord spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai.
- Well, let's try and get an idea of who this is really talking about. And I've drawn up a little family tree and you'll see that on your handouts.
- It's, well, it's a little bit hard to see there. But it's the tribe of Levi. And as you can see, it's got three clans.
- [2:59] These there, and we'll come back to them. But Moses, Aaron, and their sister Miriam are all members of this tribe of Levi.
- However, it's only Aaron and his sons who are priests down here. The Levites are to assist the priests.
- And we'll see about that. So let's look then at Aaron's family. And verses 2 and 3 start to tell us about this. Aaron and his sons have been set aside as priests, anointed and ordained.
- But something went wrong. In verse 4, we see that Nadab and Abihu, the two eldest of Aaron's sons, messed up.
- They made an offering of unauthorized fire. We aren't quite sure what this is all about. This incident is first referred to way back in Leviticus chapter 10.
- [4:21] These two guys came before the Lord and did it in a way that was their invention, unauthorized by God.
- They made a sacrifice of some sort. And it's not clear exactly what it was.

But it was contrary to God's command, the way God wanted to be worshipped. They sinned, in fact. And God says that sin and holiness, his holiness, can't mix.

You see, that's the whole problem of God dwelling in the midst of his people. He is holy and we are not. We are sinful and he is not.

And the priests were to be the intermediaries between God and human beings, the point of contact, if you like, between a holy God and his less than holy people.

[5:40] And when the priests deliberately decide to do it their own way, they are in trouble because they too are less than holy.

God demands that we approach him on his terms, not ours. He is holy and we are not.

And so these two guys, Nadab and Abihu, died before the Lord. It's a serious, serious business.

Now the sign of God's presence in the midst of his people is the tabernacle. The tabernacle, you'll remember, was a big tent-like structure that contained the sanctuary, the place where the offerings were made.

And inside that there was another part called the Holy of Holies, the most holy place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept.

[7:00] And only the high priest himself could go in there and only once a year. And it was very, very serious.

But there's a lot to do in the tabernacle. And especially when it needs to be moved around, when it has to be assembled and disassembled as they are on the move through the desert, heading to the promised land.

And so God appointed the rest of the tribe of Levi to be assistants to Aaron and his sons.

But they were not priests, and there were boundaries around how they operate. Only Aaron and his sons were to serve as priests.

Anyone else who approaches the sanctuary is to be put to death. Why? Because God is holy.

[8:12] And his holiness is not to be taken lightly. Now, when God brought his people out of Egypt, do you remember the story?

He did so by an event which is commemorated in the Passover. The firstborn males of every household in the land were killed.

Except for those who were marked as belonging to God's people. You remember they marked the houses by blood on the doorposts.

God passed over those households. And so the Egyptians let the Israelites go. But there's an interesting detail in that story, recounted in Exodus 13, verses 1 and 2.

The Lord said to Moses, Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The firstborn offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal.

[9:34] Amen. The firstborn male of the Israelite households who had been spared now belonged to God, the God who had spared them.

And so in our reading, we heard that it is those people who are going to serve God. God says, They're mine. They are going to serve me.

But actually, I'm going to substitute the Levites in their place. The Levites are the substitutes for the firstborn.

So, we have a long section in chapter 3, which describes how this was done. There was a census of the, all the Levites, one month or older, all the Levite males.

And all the firstborn males were also counted one month or over. And they were substituted one for one. But when they had done that, they found that actually the numbers weren't the same.

[10:56] There were more firstborn males than there were Levites to substitute for them. So, God said that the remainder of the firstborn males are to be redeemed.

You pay the price for them. So, the standard price, it's believed, was the standard price for a slave at that time was paid for those firstborn males.

And the money was given to the priests. So, even right back here in the book of Numbers, we have this, these concepts of substitution, of redemption, concepts which are developed through the Bible and become refined.

And so, as Christian people, we can think of Jesus as our substitute, as our redemption. And we see that referred in the New Testament.

At this stage, it's a sort of a seed in the minds of the Israelite people. chapter 3, verses 21 to 36 goes through the three clans of Levi, showing that they all had responsibility for different parts of the tabernacle.

[12:37] The Gershonites, that is, the clan of Gershon, had responsibility for the woven materials, for the curtains, the coverings, and the ropes, all the fabric things.

The Merorites, on the other side there on that tree, were responsible for all the wooden materials, the frames, and the posts, and the crossbeams, even the tent pegs.

And the Kohathites, for all the vessels, and the implements of the tabernacle, all of the bits and pieces, the furnishings, inside the sanctuary.

So they had responsibility for packing up and transporting those things as well, not only for the maintenance of them, but for actually when they're on the move, they're the ones who packed them up, they're the ones who carried them.

So they had lots of responsibilities around the actual structure of the tabernacle, but they had one other important duty that's described here. And probably this might be their most important job.

[13:53] They were to keep the rest of the community, the rest of the Israelites, away from the tabernacle. Now, Andrew showed this diagram last week of the camp.

And it gives, it's kind of a funny picture of a camp because, of course, it was much more messy than this. They didn't stay in their boxes.

But notice that the Levites are camped around the tabernacle. and that's to protect the people, not to protect the tabernacle, but to protect the people, to stop them straying in to the tabernacle precinct, keeping people out.

And it wasn't just a tut, tut, tut, don't do it again type of keeping people out. You see, verse 38 of chapter 3 finishes those instructions, says that Moses and Aaron were to be on the east side and then all of the Levites were to be responsible for the care of the sanctuary on behalf of the Israelites.

Anyone else who approached the sanctuary was to be put to death. pretty extreme, really. But that's how serious it was.

[15:32] The tabernacle is the sign of God's presence with his people. He's so holy that straying into that space meant death.

death. And even when the Kohathites were packing up all the things to carry them down to the next stop on the road, they were to be very careful.

They weren't to mishandle the implements of the temple. And in fact, it was only the priests that would wrap them up and give them to the Kohathites to carry.

They couldn't even take a little sticky beak at them. The Kohathites must not go in and look at the holy things even for a moment or they would die.

There are no margins for slip-ups or mistakes. the Levites had to be vigilant. It's one of those jobs like say brain surgery or parachute packing.

[16:54] Lives are at stake here. No error can be tolerated. If you get a bad plumber who messes up, well that's unfortunate and you probably have to clean things up and pay lots of money.

But if you get a bad bomb disposal expert, it's more disastrous. God's presence through his tabernacle has been likened by one of the commentators as being like a fiery hot oven in the middle of a fireworks factory.

You have to be very, very careful around it. One false move and the results are catastrophic.

That's the problem of the presence of a holy God. He is holy and we are sinful and the two can't mix.

so what about for us today? We as Christian people are like the people of God in numbers on a journey to the place of God's promise.

[18:24] they were going to the physical promised land that God was giving them. We are headed for our forever spiritual home of heaven where our true citizenship is.

And we share with those people the good news that the holy and mighty God himself is going with us.

In our reading from John today we heard that the word, that is Jesus, who is the one who is God himself, remember from verse 1, the word was God, he became flesh and dwelt amongst us.

The Greek word is actually tabernacled. tabernacled amongst us. The one and only son who came from the father.

Tabernacles amongst us. And it's not just for Jesus' ministry back then. When Jesus was leaving his disciples, do you remember at the end of Matthew there's that great passage which we call the great commission sometimes.

[19:48] we kind of concentrate on the first part of it about what Jesus told his disciples to do. But look at the last sentence.

And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. the one who is God himself is with us always.

What great, great news. But you can see the other side of it too, can't you?

Because we all know all too well that although he, the holy God, is with us, we are sinful.

There is sin in our lives. We do mess up sin in sin. But it's still good news.

[20:57] Because we have what they didn't have way back then. We have a great high priest who is the one who is the same one who is God with us.

Jesus is the high priest who makes us right before God and he is God with us at the same time. We as Christian people can enter the very presence of God at any time.

Hear what it says in Hebrews 4. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence. Why? Because we have a high priest because we have Jesus.

God hasn't changed. He's still the great and mighty holy God but Jesus gives us access. That doesn't mean we can be casual about it.

We have the privilege of the presence of the holy God. Yes, we have the protection of a perfect priest but he is still a holy God.

[22 : 32] It's not to be trifled with. That we have free access into the holy presence of God through Christ should not make us complacent and casual but make us want to praise Jesus more.

God is present with us and so how we live matters because your living is in the presence of a holy God.

I tried to imagine God is God to be to be to be God to be the host of a great and respected person.

Now I tried to think of somebody who we hold as great and respected and I struggled because we don't anymore. An older generation might have thought of royalty, but their image is kind of tarnished now and we don't respect them in the way that we used to. The only person I could think of is somebody who has died. Nelson Mandela might be somebody who we might have thought of in that way.

But just imagine that there was a person like that and you are selected to host them on a journey, say on a train, on a train journey. You would pay attention to how you dress, to what you said, to your manners, to the way that you conduct yourself, wouldn't you?

[24 : 22] You wouldn't treat it casually because they are so special, so respected. The journey we're on is being made in the company of the Lord of hosts, the King of heaven, the creator of the universe, the high and mighty God. How much more?

How much more carefully should we behave? How much more careful should we be about what we say?

How we live our lives? Not that we're scared of God. When we mess up, as we inevitably do, he is loving, kind and merciful and loves to forgive through Christ when we turn to him in repentance and faith. He wants very much to be on the journey with us and we can and should enjoy him. But what I'm saying is we are on this journey in the company of the Most High and we need to be attentive to finding out what his requirements are, what his tastes are, what his preferences are, and we find those through the Bible, don't we?

We should be conforming ourselves to his choices rather than our choices and decisions and being ruled by him rather than by our comfort and enjoyment.

And this extends to every detail of our journey. Our work, our leisure, our holidays, our family, our church, our shopping centre, our food, our drink, our clothing, what we read, what we watch, how we feed our minds, what's on our devices.

[26 : 49] May every part of every step of our journey be touched by his holiness. Let's pray.

Lord God, our Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a great and mighty and holy God, but you are a loving and kind God who wants to be with us on our journey.

Lord, we pray that you would help us to trust wholly in Jesus and to live for him every step of our journey, all our days.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.