

Set Apart for the Lord

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0:00] Well, if you were here last week, you would have noticed, you would have remembered that! I said that we were going to cover this, chapters 3 and 4, over two weeks. And so I will actually! flip back to the early part of chapter 3 in a while, just for a little while, and cover those passages or verses that I sort of skipped over from last week. So have your Bibles then opened to page 133 and 134.

Well, if you've ever watched a movie or been involved in a play, you'd understand the concept of the lead and the supporting actor. A lead actor is the one that is the main character in the show, you know, gets all the attention, whereas the supporting actors are the part of the cast which support the main characters and add colour to the plot.

Now, sometimes, however, it's hard, isn't it, to determine whether an actor is a lead or a support. And one way to decide is actually to count the number of lines that they're given in the script. And the relative number of speaking lines will indicate whether you're the lead or supporting actor. I know some of you, like me, maybe when we were young and we got the script for the school play and we got our part, we actually counted the lines to see whether we make it into the lead actor role or actually, oh, I just missed out. Now, as we look at the start of Numbers, I wonder if you can tell, just by comparing the lines or the verses, who the main actors are. Now, certainly, given that these are his instructions, we would say God, okay, but that's sort of not counted, all right, put that to one side. Maybe Moses and Aaron, certainly, because they get to carry out God's instructions. But if you come to the Israelites and the 12 tribes, who do you think are the main characters in that? Now, if you looked at chapter 1 of Numbers, you might think it was

Reuben because he was first on the list, the firstborn. Maybe he's going to be the main actor. But then, of course, when we come to chapter 2 and two weeks ago, we saw that, no, no, no, no, it was Judah, wasn't it? Because he takes over from Reuben as God's chosen leader for the tribes.

Then, I guess, if we come to chapters 3 and 4, as we did last week, I think given the amount of lines that are devoted to them, you would have to say that it's actually the Levites, isn't it, who have the legitimate claim to the title of the main actors, at least in the first four chapters of Numbers. And actually, I think we've already got a bit of a hint all the way back in chapter 1, because if you look at my outline, each chapter gave some focus to the Levites. In chapter 1, we were told that they were excluded from the census because they had the job of the care of the tabernacle instead of going to war. Then, in chapter 2, verse 17, they were given prominence in their position within the camp, and indeed, on the march. They were right in the middle where the tabernacle was, closest to the tabernacle. And now, when we get to chapters 3 and 4, we can see that the attention is nearly all on them, isn't it? The Levites and also the priests, that is Aaron's family, it's all attention and all the focus is on them. In fact, chapter 3, if you go back there to verse 1, begins with this introductory formula that says, this is the account of the family of Aaron and Moses at the time the Lord spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai.

[4:07] And this phrase, this is the account of, is actually the same one that is used all the way throughout Genesis when attention is being given to the history and genealogies of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and then Jacob, because they were, as it were, the recipients of God's promises to them.

So last week, we considered in detail with the Levites their position within the tribe, and we saw how by clan they were given specific roles. In summary, and I said that we will go into detail today. And we found out that there were three sons of Levi, right? Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, and that's their birth order. None of the sons, except for Joseph, receive the same amount of attention.

And so this week, as we look at the rest of chapters 3 and 4, we want to see why such attention is being given to them. First, however, in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 3, we are given a recap of Aaron's family, and particularly why two of Aaron's sons, the firstborn being one of them, met their untimely death.

So, looking then at the next verses, the names of the sons of Aaron were Nadab, the firstborn, and Abihu, Eliezer, and Ithamar. Those were the names of Aaron's sons, the anointed priests, who were ordained to serve as priests. Nadab and Abihu, however, died before the Lord when they made an offering with unauthorized fire before him in the desert of Sinai. They had no sons, so the third and the fourth sons of Aaron, Eliezer, and Ithamar, served as priests during the lifetime of their father Aaron. Now, we'll get to the role of Eliezer and Ithamar in a short while, but here we're also reminded by the fate of Nadab and Abihu just how serious sin is, and how important holiness is to God. And we ought to bear this in mind as we consider how the work of the Levites are performed today. Then, if we jump to Numbers chapter 3 and verses 11 to 13, we see that the Lord now says that I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine, for all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether human or animal. They are to be mine. I am the Lord.

Now, this, of course, is a reference back all the way to Exodus in the first Passover as they were about to leave Egypt. Because on that night, when the angel went through the land, God struck down every firstborn in Egypt, and only those Israelite households that had the blood of the lamb smeared on the doorposts of their houses were spared. And it's called Passover because on that night, God passed over those houses and spared the firstborn in them. But as a consequence, God is saying that each firstborn male, including the animals, belong to me. I've spared them, but actually they are for me. And God then provides a way for these firstborns to be redeemed, that is, to be brought back by the family, returned to the family. And this is explained in Exodus chapter 13, verse 13. Not the first sentence about the donkey, but the second one.

[7:59] Redeem every firstborn among your sons. Now, how do they redeem this? How is it going to work? Well, by setting aside the Levites as the price of redemption. Each Levite male, as we now read here in Numbers, takes the place of the firstborn male in Israel. And so as a tribe, the Levites are set apart and given to the Lord as Israel's redemption for their firstborn. And that's why they take a census of Levi to do this accurately. And when they do, they find that there is a mismatch with the numbers, right?

So last week, if you quickly turn back to that, chapter 3 and verse 39, we found out that the Levite males numbered 22,000. These are the males a month old or more. But when we now get to verse 42 of our reading, chapter 3, the firstborn males of all the other tribes were 22,273. So there's not enough Levites.

There's a shortfall of 273, which God says can be made up for with a payment. And so it's explained in verse 46, to redeem the 273 firstborn Israelites who exceed the number of the Levites, collect five shekels for each, according to the sanctuary shekel which weighs 20 geras. Give the money for the redemption of the additional Israelites to Aaron and his sons. And so what we see here is that even before the work of the Levites has begun, they are already serving the role of being symbols of redemption, reminding Israel of God's deliverance in Egypt. That's the reason why it's all males a month and older, not men over 20 as was with the original census, because the month and older males reflect all the firstborn that were spared in the Passover. And when this occurs, the consequence is that the firstborns of all the other tribes are then able to remain with their families. And remember, as firstborns, they're going to lead their family, aren't they? As they conquer the land, they'll have to settle it and cultivate. So the Lord returns it to them, returns it to the tribe, so that they can then do that job.

Now chapter 4 then goes into the jobs of the Levites. And you can see that they're all described at some length, aren't they? Each clan has specific tasks. And although the first section is headed as the Kohathites, you'll find that actually a lot of the work there is being done by the priests first.

Now Aaron was a descendant of Kohath, which means that all the priests then are drawn from the Kohathites. But the Kohathites, who are not priests, then have the roles that are described in this section.

[11:01] But we'll see firstly that the work of the priests was the most holy, because only they were allowed to come close and handle the most sacred objects in the tabernacle. And then after them, the next most holy task, if you will, were for the Kohathites, then the Gershonites, and then finally the Memarites.

Now I'm no fan of camping, as many of you will know. But earlier this year, I did help my daughter Emma set up her tent at the Engage Conference in Belgrave Heights. And even though hers was a simple, rather spacious, I think, four-person tent, there is a sequence, isn't there, to how you set up a tent and then pack it away in reverse order to how you set it up, right? All this sort of making sense?

Because when you pack, the first thing you need to do is to remove the contents before you take down the tent, right? Otherwise, it's going to get into a bit of a mess. And as we read, that's exactly how it happens here with the tent of meeting. The priests have to go in first to pack up the most holy things, right? Then the soft furnishings, the coverings and the tarp, not tarp, curtain, they are taken down. And then finally you dismantle the frames, the wooden bars and crossbars.

So we'll get into that. But firstly, in verse 1, God asks for another census to be taken. So he says, take a census of the Kohathite branch of the Levites by their clans and families.

Count all the men from 30 to 50 years of age who come to serve in the work at the tent of meeting. And again, here's another method of counting. Not men over 20, not males over a month old, but those aged between 30 to 50, because that was the eligible working age for the Levites.

[13:06] Which I think is not too bad, isn't it? 20 year working, kind of retirement at age 50. Imagine if that applies to me. Pretty good.

But the work then is detailed from verse 4, right? This is the work of the Kohathites at the tent of meeting, the care of the most holy things. When the camp is to move, Aaron and his sons are to go in and take down the shielding curtain and put it over the ark of the covenant law.

Then they are to cover the curtain with a durable leather. Spread a cloth of solid blue over that and put the poles in place. So again, as I said, it's not actually the work of the Kohathites just yet, is it?

It's Aaron and his sons who first have to do their part. And the first thing that happens is that the shielding curtain is taken down. That's the veil that separates the Holy of Holies from the holy place.

It's the curtain, if you read in the Gospel of Matthew, that is torn from top to bottom when Jesus died on the cross. And only Aaron is able to go past this curtain once a year on the Day of Atonement.

[14:14] And so it's called as such because the purpose of this curtain was to shield the ark from view whenever the tap and echo was in place.

But now, as it's being in transit, it also doubled up as a covering for the ark. And that is important because anyone who touches or sees the ark of the covenant is at risk of being smitten to death.

And again, that makes us appreciate just how holy God is. And therefore, the ark, which represents His presence, how holy the ark is. So much so that we read that it's not just wrapped with a curtain, but there's another two layers that are used to wrap over it.

There's a thick, durable leather cover as well, which if you read in the footnotes, is of the hide of a large aquatic mammal, likely a porpoise or something like that.

And then on top of that, another solid blue cloth. Three layers in total. After which, what they do is to put the poles in place.

[15:28] So that whenever it's being transported, no one touches. You can't even touch the ark. You can't even touch the cloth that is covering the ark. And all you could do, and it's only the coatides that could carry it, was to carry it by the poles.

There's a sense, isn't it, of just how holy this furniture or piece of equipment is. Now, a similar thing happens with the other holy items, and it's all in verses 7 to 14.

I'm just going to skim over it. But the table of the presents, the plates, the dishes and the bowls, that's cum snakes, the jars and the bread, they too are wrapped multiple times and then carried on the pole.

The lampstand and accessories, same thing, except because of the shape of the lamp, it's not possible to put poles through the lamp. So what they do is they have a frame on which it is carried.

Then we have the gold altar and its associated articles. That's the altar that's in the holy place, followed by the bronze altar, which is the altar that is outside, which is what they sacrifice and burn the animals on.

[16:37] That's why God says you have to empty the ashes, and then you spread a purple cloth with the firepans and meat forks and shovels and bowls, and then wrapped again with durable leather.

So there's a lot of wrapping going on, isn't it? It sort of reminds me of when I move house, and the removalist comes in, and if you've got antique furniture or grand piano, they put multiple layers because they don't want to scratch your furniture while they're moving it.

Now, it's only when all of this is done by Aaron and his sons, verse 15, that it says that when the camp is ready to move, only then are the coatides to come and do the carrying.

But they must not touch the holy things, or they will die. The coatides are to carry those things that are in the tent of meeting. And in fact, when we look to verse 16, some items are so delicate that they can't be wrapped, and so it's only handled by the priests.

So Eliezer, the son of Aaron, the priest, is to have charge of the oil for the light, the fragrant incense, the regular grain offering, and the anointing oil. And then he, of course, is to be in charge of the whole entire endeavor.

[17:52] He's to be in charge of the entire tabernacle and everything in it, including its holy furnishings and articles. Now, in verse 17 then, we have a further warning by the Lord.

He says, See that the cootides tribal clans are not destroyed from among the Levites, so that they may live and not die when they come near the most holy things. Do this for them. Aaron and his sons are to go into the sanctuary and assign to each man his work and what he is to carry.

But the cootides must not go in to look at the holy things, even for a moment, or they will die. So you might think, well, they basically just have a job of removalists, right?

Moving furniture. But this is actually a high-risk job, right? Not only do they have to be careful when handling items, if their eyes strayed and sort of glanced in the wrong direction, they could be in trouble, can't they?

And to me, you know, I think that that's, it's not actually that easy, is it? Because we all love to have a sticky beak, don't we? You know, you go into a shop and it says staff only, and there's a little curtain there, and you still want to look in there.

[19 : 06] You know, you go to someone's house, you know, you still want to poke your nose into those private rooms, don't you? Well, if the cootides had a sticky beak, they wouldn't live to tell the tale, would they?

Okay, after the cootides, we get to the Gershonites, and they have care of the soft furnishings, the curtains. So we just skip to verse 24, where their task is described.

It says, The Gershonites are to do all that needs to be done with these things.

And then in verse 28, we see that their work is supervised by the other son of Aaron, Ithamar. Verse 31 then gives us finally the work of the Merorites.

As part of all their service at the tent, they are to carry the frames of the tabernacle. It's crossbars, posts, bases, as well as the posts of the surrounding courtyard, with their bases, tent pegs, robes, all their equipment and everything related to their use.

[20 : 27] Asking to each man the specific things he is to carry. And again, they work under the direction of Ithamar. So this is all the packing that's done, and after which everything is sort of taken off the ground and could be transported.

So one long chapter just to describe all of this. And you might be thinking, this is totally fascinating, or this is totally boring. But the question I'm going to ask you is, why is there such a fuss over the tabernacle?

Sure, it's God's dwelling place, so there's some importance to it. And yes, the Levites risk death if they don't get it right. But surely, surely the focus needs to be somewhere else.

After all, they're about to go to war, aren't they? To conquer the land. So, where are the instructions to prepare for war? Surely, after they've taken the census and they know how many men they have for the army, you know, maybe the next thing ought to be how the army is to be organized, right?

Who's going to be infantry? Who's going to be cavalry? Who's going to be archers? Right? Maybe some information about basic military training.

[21 : 48] Yeah? What kind of sword fighting that they were engaging or stick fighting, you know? What about the battle strategies for the conquest as to which tribe would go from the south and which tribe would go from the north?

But we have none of that, do we? Instead, the focus is on the work of the tabernacle. And if you look at the end of the chapter and you look at the count there, the census of the Levites, in total, of all the three clans, numbered 8,580.

And these are the people aged between 30 to 50. So, there would be more if there was 20 and above. That is, if you compare it with the 603,000 that we counted earlier in chapter 1, that's more than 10% of the population of the army.

Isn't it? And these were men that could have been used in the battle. And yet God is sort of setting them aside, able-bodied men, and saying, no, what you do is just carry furniture for me.

Surely, 8,580 people to carry furniture. Men. That's a lot, isn't it? But of course, you know, who am I? I'm not God, am I?

[23 : 04] And God knows what He's doing. And I think what these passages then give us are clues about God's priorities. That actually for God, what is more important for His people is their worship rather than warfare.

Their relationship with Him takes precedence over how physically strong and prepared they are for battle. Why? Because ultimately, the victory lies not in their numbers or their strength, but in God's strength.

That actually with God in their midst, represented by the tabernacle, victory is assured, provided their relationship with Him is right.

More than anything else, what secures their blessing in the land is their relationship with God, rather than how well they're going to fight and face these enemies.

And you know, it is such a different view that we have compared to all the other so-called gods of the nations, isn't it? Because with them, their gods seem far away.

[24 : 15] You know, they want their God to hear them. They have to go up to a mountain, do some sacrifice, you know, make a carved idol, and then hope that their God has heard them and will give them what they asked for.

But Israel has a God that took the initiative to show that He was with them and made arrangements to dwell with them even though it was costly because He was holy.

And so what Israel needed to prioritize was a right relationship with Him. which occurred through the tabernacle because it is through the tabernacle that sacrifices can be offered for their sins to be forgiven.

It is there that Moses came to hear God's voice and therefore give Israel God's word for them to obey. And so the instructions here of the tabernacle actually show us what is of paramount importance.

Hence, the work of the Levites was important. And it's more than just packing and moving furniture because when they do their job, then the people have the means by which they can come to God and find right relationship with Him.

[25 : 30] And so friends, that is the same for us as a church as well. Thankfully, we don't have to move furniture each week except when we parted for funerals and weddings.

But what is paramount for us is our relationship with God more than anything else in our life. Now, thankfully as well, unlike the Israelites, we have Jesus who is our tabernacle, who is our great high priest.

He's our Lamb of God. And what He has done by dying on the cross is to enable us to go into God's presence, not in some physical tabernacle, but into His heavenly tabernacle.

And unlike the Israelites, God now dwells among us by His Spirit. Not a physical tent, but by His Spirit. And as we approach God each week, we can do so without fear.

As we approach God, whenever we pray at home, we can do so without fear because Jesus' blood has redeemed us, brought back, and purified us from sin and death.

[26 : 43] But what is still relevant for us from the book of Numbers is that we need to remember that for us as Christians, our worship to God is still the most important thing in our lives.

That the spiritual matters more than the earthly. That eternity is more important than the things that will pass away in this life. And you know, often we are caught up, aren't we, with life, like Martha.

Right? We're running around trying to get things done. Sometimes it's even in the name of serving God, advancing His kingdom. Now, these are important things that we need to get to in life.

That's true. But we must not neglect to be like Mary, to sit at Jesus' feet, to hear God's word and to worship Him with the right attitude and the right heart.

As Ruth read from the New Testament today, Jesus Himself said in the Sermon on the Mount, seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

[27 : 47] That is, God is not saying, don't care about these other things, or, you know, I'm not going to care for those things. No, He's saying, you seek first God's kingdom and then I, I will sort all these things out for you.

They will be taken care of because God knows what we need. And that's why, as well, before He says, don't worry, but bring it to God in prayer. Now, worship, of course, is more than just coming to church, even though that's important.

Worship is about putting the right priorities, prioritizing the things in life, and then living accordingly. So yes, you know, I'm sure your jobs, they are important.

You need to fulfill those. You need to pay your bills if you're already living outside of home. You've got maybe student debts that you need to pay off. If you're thinking of starting a family, your children will need to be fed and nurtured.

Our health is important. But none of these come at the expense of our relationship with God. You know, for Israel, what was secure their blessing in the land wasn't how numerous they are or how ready they were for the battle, but God.

[29 : 01] And unfortunately, as we go through numbers, we will see that actually they forgot that. And then as a result, many died and they all spent 40 years wandering in the desert.

Let us not fall for that same mistake. But instead, remember to worship God as the first thing in our lives. Do it wholeheartedly.

Seek God's kingdom first. And then God says, every other thing that you need to attend to in your life, He will take care of it for us, with us.

He will give them to us as well. Let's pray. Father, thank you for your Spirit's presence in our lives and in the life of the Church. Help us to worship you with our whole heart, to have the right priority in life.

Help us to be set apart to serve you in right relationship with you. Help us to seek you and your kingdom first and then to entrust everything else into your hands because you have promised to be generous and loving and to give them to us.

[30 : 12] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.