

Tabernacle Responsibilities

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[0 : 0 0] for a few moments of that chapter that we read, Numbers chapter 4. And we're going to look at the whole of the description given there as to how the tabernacle was moved from one place to another. But perhaps if we're taking one verse to summarize the whole procedure that we find described in that chapter would have to be the end of the chapter, verse 49.

Numbers chapter 4 and verse 49. According to the commandment of the Lord through Moses, they were listed, each one with his task of serving or carrying. Thus they were listed by him as the Lord commanded Moses. You've probably noticed from time to time that I love to come back to this place. The place where as the Israelites traveled through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan, God commanded them to build a place of worship. But it wasn't a place like we know worship, a place where the people could gather here and sit and listen to his word, although they did listen to his word. This place was rather different because they weren't allowed in it. It was a place where God dwelt. And I've said to you before, of course you know this already from previous occasions, many years going back, many of you know this more than I do, far better than I do. As to how the Lord himself chose to dwell among his own people in the place in that particular chamber called the most holy place or the holy of holies. And the reason I love to come back to this is because it was the key focal point for worship in the Old Testament. It was where God made himself known to his people and where his people approached him, not by gathering together as we do inside a house, but they approached him and they could only approach God through their representative, the high priest. And only as that high priest on their behalf approached God with the blood of the sacrifice that was shed. And as such, the tabernacle is a foreshadowing, a New Testament type, the Old Testament trailer, if you like, to the coming of Jesus Christ, who was our tabernacle. Because just as God in the tabernacle in the Old Testament revealed himself to Israel, God reveals himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ. And just as the people were able to approach God through their great high priest, through the high priest in the tabernacle who represented them as he carried the blood of the sacrifice, so we, all the more so, are able to approach God confidently in our high priest, our great high priest, who on our behalf laid down his own life as our sacrifice. And so the tabernacle is a wonderful representation to us of the coming Lord Jesus Christ.

And there are many ways in which we could look at the tabernacle and its furnishings and the procedures that went on from day to day within the tabernacle that would speak to us and announce to us something of the work of Jesus Christ. But we're not going to do that today because we've got no time. Rather, I want us to use the occasion of this chapter that describes to us the responsibility that was given to the tribe of Levi. Because as you can well imagine, a structure like this, if you've ever studied the tabernacle, it was a, it was, on the one hand, it was a very simple structure. And yet every single piece had to be measured correctly and placed in its right place. every single piece had to be exactly as God ordered it to be. And that just didn't happen. It just didn't happen by itself. Someone had to be given responsibility to make sure that not only the tabernacle was built, that was done by a man called Bezalel and Aholiab, two very special gentlemen in the wilderness. But the ongoing maintenance of the tabernacle was given to the responsibility of the tribe of Levi. For some reason, and it's, of course, we can't answer this question, God chose for himself the tribe of Levi and all the responsibility that was attached to the tabernacle, whatever that responsibility was, anything to do with the tabernacle was the responsibility of the tribe of Levi. Now the ministry, the priesthood that I referred to before, that priesthood by which a high priest represented the people before God and brought the blood of the sacrifice, that was Aaron and his sons. And that could only be Aaron and his sons. But there was far more to the maintenance and the ongoing work of the tabernacle than simply the ministry that went

on inside it. There was, and especially, we especially see that when God chose to move his people from one location in the wilderness as they traveled through the wilderness, you can imagine how complicated it must have been to dismantle the tabernacle and to reconstruct it again in the new location where

[6 : 24] God settled as they made, as they wanted. And there were several times during that 40 years, many, many times God required his people to move from one location to another. And each time that movement took place, the tabernacle had to be taken down and set up again. And that operation could not just happen any old way you wanted to. That operation was as precise and as meticulous as the ministry of the tabernacle itself. And that was the responsibility, not this time, the carrying of each component part of the tabernacle was not this time the responsibility of the sons of Aaron, although they had to oversee and manage that conveyancing. But the responsibility for actually carrying the different component parts of the tabernacle was given to the tribe of Levi, the rest of the tribe of Levi. Every male between the age of 30 and 50 was chosen by God, all of those who were fit for the task of carrying.

And it's very simple. Let's just go over the chapter again. It's very simple. The tribe was divided into the three sons of Levi. And the sons were Kohath, Gershon, and Merari. And each of these tribes was given a different area of responsibility. First of all, the Kohathites, they were the most prominent of the tribes of Levi because, and simply because of this, they were given the responsibility of carrying the holy furniture of the tabernacle. Remember what that consisted of? On top of everything else, over and above everything else, there was the Ark of the Covenant. Then there were three items of furniture in the Holy Place. We saw this last week in Solomon's Temple. Exactly the same thing. There were three items of furniture in the Holy Place. There was the table of showbread. There was the lampstand. And there was the golden altar of incense. These were the three items of furniture in the Holy Place. The Ark of the Covenant, I already mentioned, that was situated in the most holy place. You could not go near. You could not look. You could not touch the Ark of the Covenant. Outside the tabernacle, there were two remaining pieces of furniture. There was the altar of burnt offering. That was made of brass. And then there was the great brass basin, which the priests used to make sure that they were kept clean in a bodily sense. So only those who were clean were able to represent. And that in itself, of course, is another sign. Points us to the Lord Jesus Christ in his perfection. As our high priest, he was always completely and perfectly clean. So there were these items of furniture that had to be carried from one location to another. And that was the first responsibility of the tribe of Levi. And that was given to the Kohathites. The Kohathites. And they were far more said about the Kohathites in this chapter than about the Mararites or the Gershonites. And that's the reason why God said, make sure. On no account must the Kohathites ever be obliterated from the tribes of Israel because their responsibility is carrying each of these items of furniture. That was their job. The Gershonites came in next. And after the holy items were taken out of the tabernacle and moved, after they began to move, and they had to be moved on carts, especially arranged, rather they had to be moved on poles, I should say, the next tribe that came in was the Gershonites, the tribe of Gershon.

And their responsibility is what we might call the soft furnishings of the tabernacle. The curtains, the veils, the coverings, the ropes, the fabrics, all of these things had to be taken down. And the boards that constructed the fence round about, the great barrier, the big high barrier, round about the tabernacle.

[10 : 39] Their responsibility was to dismantle all of these soft furnishings, fold them up, make sure that everything was in its right place, everything was kept neat and tidy, and nothing came into contact with anything unclean. And they were to put all of these things neatly onto carts, and then they were to make their way behind the Kohathites with all of the precious objects on the carts. That was the Gershonites. Soft furnishings, remember that. Soft furnishings, Gershonites. The last tribe was the Mararites. And they had to do the rest, because what was left was a structure, a structure with poles, and a long poles.

And they had to take down the poles, and to dismantle them. It was rather like a sort of a simple, it was like a simple scaffold, if you like, I suppose. Or I don't know if any of the children, if I bring the children, I'm sorry I didn't have a children's talk this morning, as I do apologize, because we're running out of time. Have you ever played with connects? Have you ever played with connects?

You get it in the shops, a lot of people play with connects. You know, if you play with connects, you get these little rods. You know, it's actually possible to make a model of the tabernacle with connects, because that was how it was made, with poles. Not little poles, but big poles, all joined one to another. And the Mararites had the job of taking down the poles and the boards that existed between, in other words, the structure, the hard structure of both the fence round about, and the structure of the tabernacle itself. The Mararites had to take each one of them carefully, making sure everything was in place, making sure that everything had to be done properly and tidily, making sure nothing was left behind, because there was one thing left behind, it couldn't be properly put up again. And then it was all put properly on carts, and then lastly they were to make their way. I'm sure they had to look behind them and make sure they hadn't left anything behind.

It was as simple as that. Everything had to be so meticulous. That was the job. Now you might ask, well, if you weren't allowed, I'm sure somebody perhaps is thinking about this. I hope you are asking these these kind of questions that arise. If you were never, ever, ever allowed to look at the Ark of the Covenant, how can you carry something without looking at it?

Well, the answer is in this chapter. Because the very first thing that would happen, I'm just going all the way back to the beginning of the procedure now, the first thing that happened is that the High Priest Aaron had to come inside the tabernacle. You remember there was a great curtain between the holy place and the most holy place where the Ark of the Covenant was.

[13 : 41] And all he did was he stood on one side of the curtain, and he unhooked the curtain. And then he moved forward without seeing the Ark, wasn't allowed to see the Ark, and then he just placed the curtain on top of the Ark of the Covenant. So he could do everything with it without ever having to look at the Ark of the Covenant. Because you know the Ark of the Covenant represented the holiness and the presence of God. And if anyone touched the Ark of the Covenant, this was God's command. God made it absolutely clear. You might wonder why. It's not for us to wonder why. It's for us to listen to God. Not wonder why. God is sovereign, and he's king over us. The problem with us is that in asking why, it's just another way of rebelling against him. This is God's command to people. And it's just, he made it very simple to them. And it's when people decided to deliberately go against his command by saying, oh, why should we do this? That's the same problem all through the centuries.

God says something to us, and we say, why should I do that? As if God owed us an explanation. That's his way. God is saying to Israel, I am revealing myself to you in grace and in mercy and in holiness. This is what you're to do. And I'm making it clear and simple to you.

And if you break my command, you have to pay the consequences. And they did. From time to time, the two sons of Aaron, they were killed because they simply, they disobeyed God's command. So when God's command, when God tells us something, orders us to do something, it is for our good. It's so that we will know more about himself and so that we can be saved. God's intention in all of these things was to bring us into a relationship with him. But listen to this. If we come into relationship with him, it does not mean that he compromises himself or changes himself in any way. He can't do that because he's unchangeable. And so therefore, if we are to come into relationship with him, it must be by the way that he has provided for us to come into relationship to him.

[15 : 49] And if I was you, I'd be listening to God rather than arguing with him. Listen to him. That's the big problem, isn't it? We just don't listen because there's something within us that just rises up and say, why should I do that? That's the problem with sin. It's the problem with Adam and Eve. That's what Eve said. Why should I not eat the, the, the, the, the, the fruit, the forbidden fruit? And that's what the devil, that's how the devil came in. And so, and with such subtlety, questioned the sovereignty of God. God's intention was that Israel be, can you see the uniqueness of Israel? And here was a people out of all the world in whom, in the midst of this people, God was pleased to dwell and reveal himself. What a blessed, what a privilege to have God living. That's what we saw last week in the temple, Solomon's temple. God chose to live in the middle of his people. That's always his intention.

The very last book of the Bible tells us now the dwelling of God is with men. I want to ask you this morning, does that thrill you or does it, does it fill you with horror? Is that the last thing you would ever, ever want to have? God living next to you or living in you, living with you? Or is it the greatest news in all the world? To me, it's the greatest news in all the world. It's what I want more than anything else, to be in the presence of God, to do what he wants me to do, to live as he wants me to live. Do you know why? Because he loved me and he gave himself for me. And there's nothing

greater in all the world than to live for him and to listen to him and to obey him. God's word is for our good and for our freedom and for our liberty. And so that he will set us free from sin. Now, there's three words I want us to look at just very, very briefly as we come to ordaining our brethren here and inducting them into the service of the diakony amongst us. I think that these three words rise out of this chapter and they give us a wonderful picture of how the church operates. Of course, the procedure is completely different. This whole procedure is now done away with through the New in the New Testament. Jesus did away with all of this procedure. And yet, there are principles that rise out of this chapter which are true and which apply to the church in every age. And you can find them replicated in the New Testament. The first word I want to look at is the word conscientiousness.

Conscientiousness. Can you not see it? Throughout this whole chapter, God is spelling out every single detail that has to be carried out in order for the tabernacle to be dismantled and in order for it to be carried from one place to another in the proper form and assembled once again. Now, that requires conscientiousness in listening to God in every detail and in applying yourself willingly and cheerfully to the task that God has given to you. This wasn't a task that was given by Israel. This was a task that's given by God. And we have to believe today that nothing has changed with regard to that. By his providence, by the mind of God's people in this congregation, these men who you see in front of you have been elected because you have considered them prayerfully to be deacons and you have voted for them. Now, that doesn't mean that those who haven't been elected are of no consequence to the congregation.

That is nonsense. They haven't been elected as yet or in God's providence that God has something else for them to do. The fact is that everyone, men, women, young people, old people, every single one of us has a responsibility in the church of God. It so happens that by God's providence that these men here have been selected just like the tribe of Levi, the Kohathites, the Gershonites, the Mararites, that they were selected by God. Now, somebody in the rest of Israel could have said, well, who do they think they are? Do you think they're special or something? Do you think they're above everyone else? You know, that's the way we operate, isn't it? A sinful heart coming up again. But that's not the way God works at all. God says to Israel, that's it. I have chosen these men. And it's the same with every office in the church. Why am I in the ministry? Do I think I'm better? I don't. Don't.

Kenny I doesn't either. It so happens in God's providence, in God's providence, by the way in which God operates that he has led us to this point. It is not because we are higher or more important or more special than anyone else. In fact, whenever we come to talk about office within the church, the words that are used in the Bible are servanthood. Ministry means slavery.

[21 : 18] And you didn't, there wasn't much lower in Israel than slavery. That's what we are. That's what these men here are. Slaves. That's what these men are. Slaves. I am a slave to first and foremost to God.

And you look at the, if you look at the, the, the, the, uh, the kind of words that are used here, they're really rather special, aren't they? The words are, if you, if you look how many times the word duty comes up, if you look how many times the word work comes up, if you look at how many times the word service comes up, you know what these words mean? It means the everyday ongoing boring drudgery that we, we have to do. Sometimes it's, sometimes it can be quite tedious, the work that is involved with the church of the Lord. You might say, well, that's terrible, terrible you to say that. But that's the way sometimes when we lose sight, I'm going to come on to this in a moment, from a human point of view, anyone who does the same thing day after day after day is sometimes going to be tempted to get bored with it. And that way, that's the way that the devil very often comes in and he says, ah, give this up. Come on, there's far more exciting ways to, to spend your life. You're not going to spend your life in all of this drudgery, are you? And you're going to say to them, yes, I am. Because the Lord has led me to this point. And no matter how tedious and no matter how monotonous it is, no matter it's the same thing as I've been doing for years, I'm going to do it because I do it for the Lord. That's the kind of work it is. It is service, service. And I'm told by the scholars that that word service that arises here on a number of occasions in chapter four, it means military service. I suppose very few of us know anything about what military service. I certainly don't, but I can, when I see something of it and people I know who belong to the military, they have a different life altogether than mine. They can't just relax anytime they want to. They can't go away for a coffee when they feel like it. They are, they are involved in a regimented, carefully ordered,

structured, disciplined world. And that is the way that the church absolutely needs to be. A tidy world, a structured world. You know why I'm saying that? Because there's a new idea emerging in modern times about the church that anything goes. You know, just let's be led by the Spirit. And let's just wait and see how the Spirit moves within us. And let's just wait and see how we feel like proceeding. And let's just wait and see. And they use terms like wait on the Lord. Nobody believes more in waiting on the Lord than I do. Nobody believed more in waiting on the Lord than Aaron and Moses and all of the Levites did. And yet, at the end of the day, they had to get on with it. Waiting on the Lord by all means. The fact is that God was leading them and guiding them and their responsibility was to get on with it and to do their duty. There are some people who are waiting on the Lord so, so much that they're of no use whatsoever to the kingdom. You might think, that's a terrible thing to say. But all I'm doing is I'm trying to emphasize that there are two sides of this. And these two sides are so powerfully brought out in this chapter. Here was God. God was doing. God was overseeing and loving his people and leading them from one part to the other. And he was giving them at the same time their responsibility of obedience. Our first responsibility is obedience to him. And if we were, if we spent half the time that we could spend obeying him and listening to his word and his revealed will in his word, we would be a lot better off. You know, if I had a pound for every person I've ever met that said to me, oh, well, I'm just waiting to see what the Lord has. Now, I'm not, I'm not, don't get me wrong. There is a place for that. There is a place for the operation, the inward operation of the Holy Spirit. And yet, sometimes we can emphasize that so much we lose sight of what's obvious. There's ongoing work in the church to be done. And I've heard people saying, I've heard people coming to a congregation, for example, saying the Lord led me here to help and to support this congregation. Great. A year from then, they come to the minister and they say, sorry, the Lord's leading us away again. Of what benefit were you? What about what you said a year ago? Is the Lord's, does he change his mind so much that he leads you one direction and then changes his mind and leads you somewhere else? Or is that not another way of saying, I actually don't really like it here. Find it a bit boring and I want to go somewhere a wee bit more exciting. You know, you have to be very careful with what, with your own inward impulses and motives in your heart.

[26 : 40] If you believe the Lord is, you're very, you know, you know, I shudder every time I hear people talking in these terms because I don't think they know what they're talking about. Be very careful.

You know, be careful every time you invoke the name of the Lord on anything. Be very, very careful. If you believe the Lord's leading you somewhere, you better make me very sure that he is. And be very sure that you do what he tells you to do. And do it with all your might. Do it conscientiously. And it won't. I can tell you this, the test, one of the tests that you are where God wants you to be is how hard the work is and how many times you get exasperated with that work. Same as these men here, they're going to get exasperated. Same as every other office bearer, get exasperated. Same as everybody else who gives themselves to the service of the Lord in whatever way you serve him. You're going to get exasperated and frustrated because it's not easy. But you're going to do it. You're going to get up and you're going to do it because it's the Lord's work. The second word is cooperation. Can you see what's going on here? The Kohathites come in first. You know, this didn't just happen. It meant that the Kohathites all had to get together and they had to assign one item of furniture or one utensil or one piece of equipment to each person. There's a verse there. And the scholars tell me, verse 32, the end of verse 32, and you shall list by name the objects that they are required to carry. And I believe that that verse, I'm told that that verse can mean one of two things. It can either mean as it's here in the ESV Bible or it can mean that it's the person's name. In other words, a particular object was given to one particular person to say, that's your responsibility. But they all had to work together. That meant they had to get on with one another. Imagine these people all fighting and arguing with each other as they're handling the tabernacle. Imagine they're saying, I'm not doing that. You do it. It's about time you did some work. [28 : 44] It's about time you took over. I'm doing far more than you are. Or else somebody's saying, somebody being jealous of another. I want my turn to carry that. Wanting prominence and wanting to be more in the limelight. Imagine there was stuff like that going on. Then how dishonoring is that to God?

It's the same today. Because we're handling the holy things of God. Anyone who has any responsibility in the church, that's what they're doing. They're handling God's things. You know, the

most dishonoring thing we can do is to handle it in such a way that brings, which is unharmonious. God has called together a family. And that's why it's that great chapter in 1 Corinthians, where Paul talks about the body and the hand and the foot, and that no member of the body has any right to say, I'm more prominent than you are. I am better or more important than you are.

Because I'm more prominent, because I am more obvious to everyone else, my importance, the hand cannot say to the eye, I don't need you. Everyone had to. And that's the same with office bearers. And if office bearers don't get on with one another in the office to which they're called, then what hope is there for the rest of the congregation? And I'm thankful tonight. And I've said this before, I'm thankful to God for the harmony that exists in our court. And I never, never take it for granted. Oh yes, we disagree.

Do we disagree? There's nothing wrong with disagreeing. Nothing wrong whatsoever with disagreeing. That's the place to disagree. And when one person thinks we should go in one direction, so be it. Another person thinks we should go in another direction, so be it. And we discuss it just the same way as these Kohathites and Mararites and Gershonites, they would have to meet together and make sure there was a meeting of their mind. Everybody knew what they were doing. But once there is, once there is a decision, everyone has to fall in with that. That's the way Presbyterianism works. That's why I love Presbyterianism. Not because we always make the right decisions, but the way in which we come to decisions is such a biblical one. And it, and I must never say, I don't agree with that decision. I'm not going along with it. We must never, ever say that. Once the court or the session or the Presbytery or the Assembly makes a decision, that decision has been come to by the God-ordained leadership in the church. And that's a very, very solemn, a really, really solemn act. And I think it would do us good even right now to just remember that and remember that God has led, has given a leadership in his church. So there had to be cooperation. May God grant that each one of these men will cooperate with one another and help one another and encourage one another and be a brotherhood in the Lord. That's what the court ought to be, a brotherhood. That's what the Levites were, a brotherhood. And they helped one another and they loved one another. And I hope we are the same, loving one another. And thirdly, and I say this, the time has gone, the first word was conscientiousness. The second word was cooperation. And the third word was consciousness. Consciousness. Conscious of what? Conscious of what they were doing. And what they were carrying. You know what? They couldn't see them. They couldn't see what they were carrying. So for them to carry what they carried was an act of faith. Every time they picked up whatever it was, whether it was the ark of the covenant, whether it was the table of showbread, whether it was the lampstand, whether it was the poles, or whether it was a couple of forks or spoons, they were conscious that each item was included in the Lord's worship and the Lord's presence with them. Nothing was of no consequence. And they knew and they were permanently conscious, aware that this represented God's promise, God's presence, [33 : 22] God's power amongst them. And here they were. Look at how many there are. 8,580. And they could go back hundreds of years to when it all started. God called Abraham out of the land of Ur of the Chaldees when he was a nobody, when he was an old man of 75. And when he gave that promise that your seed will outnumber, will be as many as innumerable as the stars of the sky and the sand of the seashore.

So every time they went on their way carrying, even though it was heavy and burdensome and tedious, they knew that they were in the Lord's business, serving the Lord, fulfilling God's promise. They could see God's promise fulfilled before their very eyes. So can we. We talk about a day of small things. It is a day of small things. But there were many days of small things throughout the ages, throughout the centuries of mankind as God unfolded his gospel, as God built his church. He still is building his church. And many times we use the day of small things as a bit of an excuse just to do nothing for the Lord. And it was because our forefathers in their day of small things, they got up, they worshiped, they served, and they obeyed, and they lived for Christ, witnessing for him. It was because they were so faithful that we are who we are and what we are today. And they did that because they were conscious, not because they were successful or numerous, but because they were conscious of the awesomeness of God. May we be the same. Ministers, elders, deacons, congregation, may we be conscious, continuously, of who God is and where God is. God, in the midst of her, doth dwell. Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, we ask, O Lord, that as we re-examine the principles that govern the way we operate as we serve, we ask that your blessing may be upon us. We ask, O Lord, that each one of

us might accept the place that you have given, that you have assigned to us, and that we might be faithful in every way, never reneging on that faithfulness, but always conscious of the nearness and the presence of God among us. Bless now these things to us. Bless the rest of our service. Forgive our sins. In Jesus' name. Amen.
Amen. Amen.