

# "Priesthood"

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning. Again, it's good to see all of you. If you are feeling hot and overwhelmed, we will say this a few times this summer, there are fans.

If you can't feel a fan, it's okay for you to get up and move to a place you can feel a fan. Or you can go downstairs to our lower level meeting room, which is air conditioned and live streams are service from there.

We would rather you get up and move in order to continue to participate than sit in the pews and suffer. So, that's our heart as we come to God's Word today.

So, I want to begin by asking a question. When you think of a priest, what do you think of? Maybe you think of Indiana Jones in the Temple of Doom, the pagan priest offering human sacrifices. Or maybe you think of the princess bride, marriage. Marriage is what brings us here together today. Maybe you think of a priest like that.

[ 1 : 03 ] Maybe you think of the classic stereotypical priest in a Catholic school, ready to wrap your knuckles for chewing gum or not having your socks pulled up. Or maybe you think of a Catholic priest as a judge whose life is consumed with exposing all of your unrighteous living and to bring you shame.

Now, some of you may have had good experiences with priests and have different views, but these negative responses are typical in our culture and often come from our personal experience, don't they?

But is that how we are supposed to think of priests? Well, that brings us to our text today. We are going through the summer, the book of Numbers, and we are in Numbers 17 and 18.

Interestingly, at the end of this week, I did a Google search online to see if I could find a sermon on Numbers 18 in the internet, and the answer was no. So, here we go. We're going to do it, and we're going to be exploring parts of the Scripture that maybe aren't always looked at.

And just to remind you where we are as we come into this section, last week, Pastor Nick preached about chapter 16, where the people of God rose up and rebelled, at least a portion of them, rebelled against the priesthood that God had established among His people.

[ 2 : 31 ] The followers of Korah, a part of the Levites, rose up against them, and God brought judgment upon them because of their rebellion. They were swallowed up by the earth, and then a plague came, and Aaron, the high priest who God had anointed, brought his censer full of incense, and the smoke of that stopped the plague that was a second judgment against the people of God because they were rebelling against God's plan.

And the people realized the danger of trying to come to God without a priest, of trying to come to God on their own. But they haven't yet even learned that lesson. We'll see in verse 12 of chapter 17, they will come back to this refrain again and say, we are undone. We will all perish if we try to approach God.

But God speaks a word of hope to them and to us today because God has given the priesthood in order to bring blessing to His people.

And that's the overarching theme of verses of chapters 17 and 18. We're going to walk through it in three sections, so we'll read it in a section at a time to see how these blessings come to God's people through the priesthood.

So, first, chapter 17. This is page 117 in the Pew Bible. If you want to pull out your Pew Bible and follow along, or it will be on the screen behind me as well.

[ 4 : 05 ] The Lord spoke to Moses saying, speak to the people of Israel and get from them staffs, one for each father's house, from all their chiefs according to their father's house, twelve staffs.

Write each man's name on his staff and write Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. For there shall be one staff for the head of each father's house. Then you shall deposit them in the tent of meeting before the testimony where I meet with you.

And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout. Thus I will make to cease from me the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against you.

Moses spoke to the people of Israel, and all their chiefs gave him staff, one for each chief according to their father's houses, twelve staffs, and the staff of Aaron was among their staffs.

And Moses deposited the staffs before the Lord in the tent of testimony. On the next day, Moses went into the tent of the testimony, and behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted, and put forth buds, and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds.

[ 5 : 21 ] Then Moses brought out all the staffs from before the Lord to all the people of Israel. And they looked, and each man took his staff. And the Lord said to Moses, Put back the staff of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their grumbings against me, lest they die.

Thus did Moses, as the Lord commanded him, so he did. And the people of Israel said to Moses, Behold, we perish. We are undone. We are all undone. Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord shall die.

Are we all to perish? Let me pray as we look at God's Word this morning. Lord, thank you for this Word. Thank you that, Lord, by your Spirit, you have given us this Word so that we might know you and be instructed by you, so we might understand what you are up to in the world, and Lord, what it means to be your people.

Lord, I pray for your help this morning. You would help me to speak clearly as I ought. And I pray for all of our hearts, that we would sit under your Word, that we would receive it as from you.

Lord, that we would know it in our minds, that we would love it in our hearts, that we would do it with our hands. Thank you, Lord. We pray this in Jesus' name.

[ 6 : 47 ] Amen. So the first thing we see in chapter 17 is that God gives a priest who brings abundant life to his people.

Right? So this story, remember, they've just come out of judgment, and God comes to Moses and says, okay, I've got to do more to establish Aaron in the eyes of the people as the one that I have chosen.

And so he calls all the tribes together. He says, we want one tribe from the leader of each tribe to give a staff. And they write a name on it. And in case you're doing a little math and you're wondering, the Hebrew is a little less clear than the way... The English suggests there were 12 staffs, then there were 13 staffs.

There were 13 staffs total because there are 12 tribes. And then on top of that, there was the tribe of Levi. Because, if you remember, Jacob had 12 sons. Those were the 12 tribes. But then Levi gets set apart earlier, and the two sons of Joseph, Manasseh and Ephraim, become their own individual tribes.

In the 12 tribes, when they enter the land, they will get 12 different parcels of land. Levi will get something different, and we'll see that by the end of our passage. So, sorry, that was a little excursus into the history of that, but that's the way it was.

[ 8 : 06 ] So, 13 staffs, Moses gathers with the names of these tribes, and he puts them in the tent of meeting, the holy place, right? The Ark of the Covenant in the middle of the tabernacle.

And he puts them in, and he says, just wait and see. And then he comes back the next morning, and there are 12 dead sticks, and there's one staff that has budded.

And it hasn't just budded. It has budded, and it's flowered, and it's borne fruit, right? Don't miss the fact that this is not some sort of natural process where somehow a green staff became a little bit more lifelike.

God did something miraculous to picture something that was dead being brought back to life, and not only life, but abundant life where it was producing something, almonds, that would bless those who received it.

So, this is the sign that God gives. Now, here's a question for you. If I say to you, what's the biblical significance of almonds?

[ 9 : 14 ] Anything? Anyone? Yeah, me neither, right? So, I did a word search, and do you know what? It's amazing. There are a couple of other references to almonds, but there's this really neat one in Exodus 25.

Exodus 25 is when God is giving instructions to the people of God on Mount Sinai as they receive the law about the building of the tabernacle, the place where God will meet with his people. And in it, there's a lampstand. And that lampstand has, like a menorah, like multiple branches that will then hold candles to bring light into the temple where the priests are offering sacrifices. But in Exodus 25, verses 33 and 34, it describes those branches like this. They will have three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flour.

And on one branch, and three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flour, on the other branch. So, for the six branches going out from the lampstand, and on the lampstand itself, there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms, their calyxes and flour.

[10:31] So, this is the one place in all the ritual life of Israel where almonds are mentioned. And it's amazing. I don't think, by the way, that Aaron's staff was made from an almond tree.

It might have been. I suppose it's possible. But I don't think that was the point. The point is that the people of God would remember this passage and would see that Aaron alone has the right to minister in that place where the lampstand was, he and his sons in the priesthood, right?

And that, that lampstand was a picture. One commentator says that the lampstand was like a stylized almond tree set within the holy place representing Eden's tree of life, its light symbolizing the light of Yahweh's blessing.

Did you get that? In this place, in the temple, there was this lampstand that pictured a tree of life and it had almond blossoms. And so, when you get to this sign in Numbers, God is reminding the people, the priesthood is there so that they can minister in the tabernacle so that you may have the abundant life that I'm going to bring you because I am your God.

What an amazing thing it is that God has given us a priesthood that brings life. Sometimes we feel like coming to God is more like being called into the principal's office.

[12:10] We know we've messed up and now we're just waiting for the other shoe to drop and the consequence time to happen for us and we are afraid and we fear the outcome, right?

And it's fascinating because that's what God's people did. They said, we're not done. How can we ever approach God? But God is trying to say, your priesthood is there to give you life, not death. And of course, we know that the priesthood of Aaron is just a picture of a priesthood that's yet to come. That Jesus would come as a greater priest and that He would come as one not to bring death and destruction, but to bring life life and life that is abundant in Him.

And He would picture this death by being one who is made dead and then who is brought back to life as the resurrected Son of God.

And so, this staff of Aaron both affirms the priesthood and pictures ahead the resurrection life that Jesus will bring as our high priest to all who believe in Him.

[13:25] And because Jesus is raised from the dead, you don't have to fear going to God because He's a God who delights to give life to those who come to Him. So, chapter 17, the priesthood that brings life.

Let's look ahead now to verse, chapter 18 and think, what else do we learn from these sections about the priesthood that God gives? What we'll see, well, let's read it first.

So, we'll look at verses 8, chapter 18, verses 1 through 7. So, the Lord said to Aaron, you and your sons in your father's house with you shall bear iniquity connected with the sanctuary and you and your sons with you shall bear iniquity connected with your priesthood and with you bring your brothers also the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father that they may join you and minister to you while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony.

They shall keep guard over you and the whole tent but shall not come near to the vessels of the sanctuary or to the altar lest they and you die. They shall join you and keep guard over the tent of the meeting for all the service of the tent and no outsider shall come near you and you shall keep guard over the sanctuary and over the altar that there may never again be wrath on the people of Israel and behold I have taken your brothers the Levites from among the people of Israel they are a gift to you given to the Lord to do the service of the tent of meeting and you and your sons with you shall guard your priesthood for all that concerns the altar and that is within the veil and you shall serve I give you your priesthood as a gift and any outsider who comes near shall be put to death so the second thing that God's priesthood brings us is access to God why do I say that well you've got to go back and recognize a couple things first remember the context of Korah's rebellion where people rose up and said we can get to God without the priest without the Levite we can just go in straight ahead and lo and behold they found out the holiness of God is too great to be born for sinful

people to merely approach him go back and listen to Pastor Nick's sermon last week to get all of that but the other thing you need to remember is that what God is reaffirming to Aaron here is the structure of the camp okay this goes back to numbers one through four we're trying to pull all the threads together so you can follow through all this so remember that in chapters one through four when God set up the people of God to leave he set it up with a particular structure to picture things that he thought were important first at the center of the camp was the tabernacle the tent of meeting and that's where

God's presence was manifested that's where Moses met face to face with God and that's where Aaron and his sons would offer sacrifices in worship to God according to God's instruction so God was in the center of the people of God and then you had these other people you had the priests ministering within the temple and then you had the Levites and the four tribes and you can look at chapter four and see all the details they had particular roles about packing and carrying and setting up and all that stuff but the Levites were tasked with ministering on the outer outside of the tent but between the tent of the meeting and the people then the twelve tribes who were set up in a square around that and that's what they would do when they were camped and then when they would move they would elongate it and make it a big line but the same picture basically is there with concentric circles going from God at the tent of meeting to the priests to the Levites and then to the tribes of the people and then the people outside and that was the picture that you got right and God is reminding

[ 17 : 45 ] Aaron and the Levites and the people of God by extension that this structure had a purpose right the priests had a particular role to deal with the holy things in the vessel to offer sacrifices to atone for the sin of people inside the tent they stood between God and the people and represented them so that the people of God and their sin would be addressed the Levites surrounded them and served the priests so that they could continue this act and acted as a buffer and here in this passage you see very clearly they were the guard of the tent of meeting to make sure that people didn't fall into the same sin that had happened in chapter 16 of thinking you could just run rush right into the tent of meeting and face God in his holy of holies on your own because as we're reminded

God's holiness is like the sun it is beautiful it is radiant but it cannot bear impurity it will burn up anything that draws close that is not perfectly pure and so the priests and the Levites lived between and did you notice the phrase that they will bear the iniquity of the sanctuary that they will actually stand and bear the consequences if the Levites transgressed and tried to do what the priests would do both the Levites and the priests would die if people from the outside tried to come in and the Levites allowed that to happen the Levites would die so they stood in the gap and bore responsibility for the judgment of God against the people all of this is to say God created a system like the guardrails a couple of summers ago we went to Yellowstone National Park and if you've ever seen the hot springs right they're absolutely beautiful they're gorgeous they're also really hot and every once in a while you see that some bison wandered into a hot spring and do you know what happens it dies really quickly it's boiled to death almost instantaneously and so when you go visit these things there are guardrails there are boundaries that are set up so that you and me and the silly tourists in our world that always think I've got to get a little closer I've got to get the perfect selfie and transgress these boundaries and end up falling into these things and dying that's what the priests and the Levites were doing they were preventing the foolish Israelite people from doing something that would lead to their death by their guarding the tent and the tabernacle by their playing their particular roles that God had given them friends how much more now do we have a high priest who mediates our access to God just like it was a matter of life and death for them we too have a high priest who mediates life and death to us so in Hebrews chapter 9 verses 24 and following the writer says this for Christ has entered not into holy places made with hands which are copies of the true things but into heaven itself now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf nor was it to offer himself repeatedly as the high priest entered the holy places every year with blood not his own for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world but as it is he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrificing of himself and just as it is appointed for a man to die once and after that comes judgment so Christ having been offered once to bear the sins of many will appear a second time not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him okay there's a lot here

I don't know if you've noticed how often we keep quoting the book of Hebrews as we're reading numbers but it's a really amazing rich deep connection between these books so for your for your benefit but what we see here in Hebrews is picturing Christ being the ultimate high priest who goes in and by his final and perfect sacrifice makes it possible for us to approach God because our sins have been dealt with because he has died in our place and so when we on this side of the crucifixion of Jesus in his sacrifice and the resurrection of Jesus in his justification approach God in Christ trusting in him knowing that we have no righteousness that we would be just like the Israelites burning up if we try to approach him on our own but because Christ has done that and because Christ was perfect in his sacrifice we now have access to God we have a mediator who has opened the doors I didn't read Hebrews 10 19 through 25 because we've read it every week for the last three weeks but go back and read it again because therefore Christ has opened a way for us by the sprinkling of his blood and the cleansing of our conscience for us to approach God with great confidence this is the access that God has given to us he is our great guardian who has made a way so that we have access to him so this is the second blessing that we see the first one is abundant life the second one is access to God and fellowship with him and then the last section gives us one more thing to see about the priesthood now this is a longer section so bear with me here we go starting in verse 8 of chapter 18 then the

[ 24 : 17 ] Lord spoke to Aaron behold I have given you charge of the contributions made to me all the consecrated things of the people of Israel I have given them to you as a portion and to your sons as a perpetual due this shall be yours of the most holy things reserved from the fire every offering of theirs every grain offering of theirs and every sin offering of theirs which they render to me shall be most holy to you and to your sons in a most holy place you shall eat it every male shall eat of it it is holy to you this also is yours the contribution of their gift all the wave offerings of the people of Israel I have given them to you and to your sons and daughters with you as a perpetual due everyone who is clean in your house may eat the first fruits of what they give to the Lord I give to you the first ripe fruits of all that is in the land which they bring to the

Lord shall be yours everyone who is clean in your house may eat it every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours everything that opens the womb of all the flesh whether man or beast which they offer to the Lord shall be yours unclean animals you shall redeem and their redemption price at a month old you shall redeem them you shall fix at five shekels of in silver according to the shekel of the sanctuary which is twenty geras but for the first born of a cow for the first born of a sheep the first born of a goat you shall not redeem they are holy you shall sprinkle their blood on the altar and shall burn their fat as a food offering with a pleasant pleasing aroma to the Lord but their flesh shall be yours as the breast that is waved and as the right thigh are yours all the contributions that the people of Israel present to the Lord I give to you and to your sons and daughters with you as a perpetual due it is a covenant of salt forever before the

Lord for you and for your offspring with you and the Lord said to Aaron you shall have no inheritance in their land neither shall you have any portion among them I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel to Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance in return for their service that they do their service in the tent of the!

so that the people of Israel do not come near the tent of the meeting lest they bear sin and die but the Levites shall do the service of the tent of the meeting and they shall bear their iniquity it shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations and among the people of Israel that they shall have no inheritance for the tithe of the people of Israel which they present as contribution to the Lord I have given to the Levites for an inheritance for I have said of them that they shall have no inheritance among the people of Israel and the Lord spoke to Moses saying moreover you shall speak and say to the Levites when you take from the people of Israel the tithe that I have given you from them for your inheritance then you shall present a contribution from it to the Lord a tithe of the tithe and your contribution shall be counted to you as though it were the grain of the threshing floor and as the fullness of the wine press so you shall also present a contribution to the Lord from all your tithes which you shall receive from the people of

Israel and from it you shall give the Lord's contribution to Aaron the priest out of all the gifts to you you shall present every contribution due to the Lord from each its best part is to be dedicated therefore you shall say to them when you had offered from it the best of it then the rest shall be counted to the Levites as produce of the threshing floor and as produce of the wine press and you may eat of it in any reason of it when you have contributed the best of it but you shall not profane

the holy things of the people of Israel lest you die okay reading the law is so much fun isn't it there's lots of little details in here and there are lots of threads that I could pull out about different kinds of offerings or about how do we redeem people and things like that but I don't think actually that's the big picture because what we see here is basically two big things right what

[ 29 : 03 ] God is doing in this section is assuring both Aaron in verses 11 through verses 8 through 19 and then the Levites in 21 through 32 he's saying I'm going to provide for you even though you don't have an inheritance of the land because the other 12 tribes will take up all the land and the promise I will provide for you through the contributions and one of the things that remarkable is if you look through this over and over again God isn't instructing the people hey you need to give to these God is saying I will provide for you I will provide as these people give to me I will be the one who will provide for you God is the source of their abundant provision and generous inheritance and when you look through the details you see they get the best stuff they get the first fruits of the grain and of the wine they get the fat parts of the meat that is offering all that doesn't go straight to the

Lord is available to them and it's not just to them but it's for their whole families right did you hear again commentaries I read actually argued that this is the very center of the entire book of numbers we can talk about that later but it's an interesting is verse 20 look back with me at verse 20 let me read it again for you and the Lord said to Aaron you shall have no inheritance in their land neither shall you have any portion among them

I am your portion and your inheritance among friends all of this the promise that goes way back to Abraham that God would make his people great and would give them a land and a place all of that is temporary in some way because God's ultimate purpose is that the inheritance that his people receive is not merely a place but him God himself right and when we have God as our inheritance then we live in his kingdom and he provides a place for us and you know Jesus went to provide many rooms for us in his mansion there there is a place that we live but the key to it is not the land that we get but the person around whom we are centered it is God himself who is the center and God the of Levi around you your inheritance will be me and my provision and my presence among you that is picturing what is to come for the people of God and so again looking at the book of Hebrews chapter 9 verses 11 through 15 when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come then through the greater and more perfect tent, not made with hands, that is not of this creation, He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer sanctified for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our consciences from dead works to serve the living God. And then listen to this verse, therefore He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. Now again, there's far more in that passage than I'm going to unpack this morning, but do you see the resonance again and again and again of how the Old Testament sacrificial system and the role of the priests and the role of the sacrifices are all pointing to Christ in different ways? Here I want to focus on this last verse 15 where it says, therefore He is a mediator of a new covenant, so those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance. Friends, this is what our great high priest has done. He has secured for us by being the high priest who has entered into the throne room of God, offering Himself in our place so that we no longer face judgment, but rather welcome and acceptance because our sins are atoned for.

[ 34 : 33 ] As we come into that, our inheritance is God Himself. And with God, the richness of everything that comes with being God's people in God's kingdom.

Right? And we know that right now, as the church, we're not experiencing the fullness of that in all of it yet, and yet we do have the most important part, don't we?

We don't have the fullness of God's kingdom in all of its riches and all of its glory where justice will reign and where righteousness is ascendant and where there's no more sin and no more sorrow and no more death in the world. We don't live in that world, but we do live in a world where even now we can have God as our inheritance.

Because through faith in Christ, we are now His, and He calls us His children. And all that He is, then, He gives to us the riches of His kingdom, the joy of knowing Him, the freedom from guilt and shame, the hope of eternal life, the purpose of living for His glory and His righteousness every day

on this earth. And all that we do, the riches of His kingdom, right, are not counted in our bank accounts or in our deeds or in our trophy cases or in all the other things that maybe we wish they would be. But we have an inheritance that's better than that of God Himself. And so, friends, we are not fearful outsiders because of our great high priest.

These high priests, this priesthood in the Old Testament pictured the reality of where we are, but Christ has come and fulfilled so much so that now we may be able to approach God with great confidence, that we may have an inheritance that is kept for us in heaven as 1 Peter writes, that is imperishable and undefiled, waiting for us. And even though we don't have all of that now, we do have the joy of knowing Christ and knowing God Himself, and He is our inheritance. And so, this is then the priesthood, friends, a priesthood that brings us much blessing and great joy.

[ 37 : 05 ] Because we have in this priest abundant life. We have in this priest access to God, and in this priest a certain inheritance that is worth all of our lives. So, let me pray as we close. Lord, thank You for this Word, and thank You for Jesus, our great high priest who has gone before us to secure all of these things. And Lord, that Your call is that by faith we may know You. Lord, I pray this morning that if we are struggling, struggling with fear because we don't know if we can approach You, or struggling with doubt, Lord, that what You have done for us is truly good. Lord, I pray this morning that as we gaze upon Christ, we would be renewed in faith, that we'd be strengthened in belief, and that our hope would be encouraged and emboldened as we think of Christ, our great high priest.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.