

## The Levites

GOOD MORNING!

This is our second session on the Old Testament Book of Numbers –The Hebrew title for the book is B'Midbar, coming from the standard practice of naming books after the first several words of the opening line of a book. In English, this translates as 'In *the Wilderness*' – which is a more appropriate title for the contents of the Book.

We're going to begin coming across concepts and incidents that speak about the holiness Of God – some understandable, some not and some scary.

Brief recap of the state of affairs of the Israelites at this point in time. The Book of Numbers starts off just over a year after the Exodus from Egypt with God telling Moses to take a census of the twelve tribes for purpose of organizing the Army for the coming battles. At Mt. Sinai, God makes a new covenant with Israel. The difference between the earlier covenants with Abraham and the new covenant at Sinai (called the Mosaic covenant) is that this new covenant was not one-sided. In the earlier ones, God promised that He would do something, and all Abraham had to do was have faith that God would be true to His Word. With this new covenant on Mt. Sinai, both parties made promises. God promised to  **dwell in their midst**  and be their God, and the Israelites promised to keep the Torah. AND, accept the blessings for keeping it or the curses (penalties) for not keeping up your side of the bargain.

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We should remember that this new covenant did not supersede the earlier one made with Abraham, it added a radical new element: God was establishing the terms by which He could dwell in their midst.

- Dwell in their midst – that’s a KEY to understanding what’s going on in the entire Bible. As I noted last time, *we should write that on our hand like we sometimes did in high school to pass an exam*. In the earlier covenants, God had promised would be their God, but He did NOT dwell in their midst – that divine intimacy ended in the Garden. At Sinai, God takes a major step in restoring that intimacy.

When the Holy God of the Universe states that He wants to dwell in their midst, the Israelites have to understand how this is possible and what that means when he does so. God begins a process to educate them on these issues, and first and foremost in the process were the 613 commandments of the Torah. They were God-dictated – with the purpose of revealing His Holiness. These commandments were not man-made do’s-and-don’ts established to please a grumpy deity. Their purpose was to show what it took for a human to stand in His Holy Presence and SURVIVE! Today, some of the commandments may see like primitive or silly practices, perhaps even unChristian (ex: a person with skin-disease Tzarath was ritually unclean and made anyone who touches him also ritually unclean). But God had His purpose for these commandments and we’ll be exploring them as we go through the Book.

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Again, I want to emphasize that we need to see these commandments as God given. These are not the man-made traditions that came later and that Jesus railed against.

- If a person does not realize that the commands of the Torah were God-dictated, he or she may find themselves in the unenviable position of criticizing as *unnecessary* what God thought *was necessary*. I was in that exact position for most of my Christian life, but I do not want to be in that position any longer.

The ultimate purpose of all these rules and regulations in the Torah is to drive people who want intimacy with God to follow the only way that is possible – through His established path. Ultimately, this is through **Christ!** If we can't keep the Torah perfectly, which is God's standard, then we NEED an **innocent substitute to take our punishment, to die for us**, if we are to dwell in God's Holy Presence. Over and over again, the Torah shouted to the people the reality that none of us deep down like to admit – *WE are NOT* – and *can never be* – holy in and of ourselves. It was true then, and it remains true today!

- Jesus was the only person who kept the Torah perfectly. It's just pure grace that **God doesn't return us for a refund – because we're all defective!**

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### 1<sup>ST</sup> BORN & LEVITES

Ok. Let's continue in the Book of Numbers... Numbers 1: 52 [*God is speaking to Moses*]:

"The Israelites are to set up their tents by divisions, each of them in their own camp under their standard. 53 **The Levites, however, are to set up their tents around the tabernacle of the covenant law so that My wrath will not fall on the Israelite community.** The Levites are to be responsible for the care of the tabernacle of the covenant law."

I want to take a look at the Levites. Levi was the third of twelve sons of Jacob.

- 'Levi' is pronounced in two different ways. '*LEE-vie*' is the standard Christian way, and '*Lev-EE*' – like the southern water *levee* – is the Hebrew way.

Last time, we saw that God had set-apart the Levites as His servants. Levites not included in the census for the Army. In essence, **God adopted the tribe of Levi away from Jacob – making them His own.** From here forward, the Levites are considered *separate* from the other twelve tribes of Israel. The tribe of Levi will received no allotment of land when Joshua assigned the tribal inheritances after conquering the Promised Land.

"The LORD said to Aaron (a Levite), "You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; **I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites.**"

Numbers 18:20

Because they didn't receive a land inheritance like the other tribes, the Levites were sometimes called "*The poor Israelites*". The other tribes all

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received a region of the Promised Land that they would pass to their descendants for generations. However, with the Levites, God would be their inheritance. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

I find it fascinating to note that, while my ancestors were painting themselves blue and trying to invade Southern England, Sue White's ancestors had the unfathomable privilege of taking care of the Tabernacle described here in Book of Numbers.

- I have to admit, however, that I still have a fondness for the color blue.

### LAYOUT OF TABERNACLE (LEVITES)

In the last session, we covered the layout of the Israelite camp in the wilderness and discuss how the twelve tribes were camped in groups of three around the tabernacle. Verse 52 tells us that God commanded that the Levites camp between the tribes and the Tabernacle.

### <SLIDE> - camp layout (clicks)

You will notice that the Levites are camped close-in around the Tabernacle structure. This layout is by God's direct command.

There were three clans among the Levites: **Gershon, Kohath and Merari** – and their specific duties are described in Chapter 3 of the Book of Number. For the clan of Kohath:

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"The Kohathite clans<sup>1</sup> were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle.<sup>30</sup> The leader of the families of the Kohathite clans was Elizaphan son of Uzziel.<sup>31</sup> They were responsible for the care of the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the articles of the sanctuary used in ministering, the curtain, and everything related to their use.<sup>32</sup> The chief leader of the Levites was Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest. He was appointed over those who were responsible for the care of the sanctuary." Numbers 3:29

The activities for which the Gershon clan and the Merari clan were responsible are also described. The Levites are dedicated to do the **blue collar tasks** associated with the Tabernacle, and that they are to follow the directions of the priests.

### SLIDE: here's a blowup of the inner camp area.

At the eastern end, we find Moses, Aaron and Aaron's sons (the priests) camped on the eastern side of the tabernacle.

- **East** – remember that East is most prestigious position.

The clan of Kohath camped on the south side of the Tabernacle – which was the next highest position of status after the priests (right hand – rule – demonstrate). The position of status – i.e., where they camped – was determined by the clan's responsibilities at the tabernacle – we'll get into this next time and see how it figures into the death of Uzzah, who was killed by God when he reach out to prevent the Ark of the Covenant from falling into the mud.

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<sup>1</sup> Actually "sub-clans"

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**CLICK:** OK: here is a picture the three Levite clans & their responsibilities.

**CLICK:** Notice the white block in the clan of Kohath. It is a placeholder. I put it here so as to indicate that Aaron and his sons – the priests – were also of the clan of Kohath, as was Moses.

**CLICK:** However, Aaron and his sons would from now on have a *higher* degree of holiness attached to them by virtue of the fact that God said that this was the way it would be.

- So, just like the Levites were separated away from the other tribes of Israel for special service, Aaron and his sons are separated away from the Levites for special service.

This special status of the priesthood would become a source of contention later on in Numbers, when some others from the clan of Kohath saw this as just blatant cronyism on the part of Moses. The contention would have serious consequences.

What happened with the Levites and then the priests is an example of a foundational biblical pattern we all need to recognize – **God selects, separates and anoints individuals and groups for reasons that are completely His own**<sup>2</sup>. The people themselves don't merit it – the Levites weren't inherently any better than the other tribes of Israel, and yet they were separated away; and Aaron & his sons weren't

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<sup>2</sup> Discussed nicely in Tom Bradford's Torah Class

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inherently any better than other Levites, and yet they alone were permitted to enter the Holy Place in the Tabernacle.

God's decisions are Holy decision. We know that none of God's decisions are arbitrary or capricious. What was that decision based upon? Scripture doesn't tell us what it was based on, but it definitely tells us what it was NOT based upon – personal merit.

This is a spiritual principle that completely flies in the face of the modern world – doesn't it? "Chosen people"? – isn't that a bit arrogant? Such a principle today **would be denounced** in the newspaper as intolerant and arrogant. And yet – 5,000 years of Scriptural **evidence plainly shows that Yehoveh DOES give certain groups or people different status; and again it does not come from works.** It comes by grace.

**And, it's the same with us** – why did God select us before the foundation of the world to be His saved ones? We're not inherently any better than our neighbors – in fact, I can name quite a few neighbors who have not accepted Christ and yet do more good works than I do. We don't know why we were chosen, but the Torah **shouts at us** that it isn't because of any personal merit on our part. We have to get this through our thick skulls – and please understand that I'm preaching more to myself than anyone else. We can neither earn this salvation nor remain in it by our own merits. We can't brag about our tithing, or showing up on work days, or our lingering to mingle after church, or even being a drummer – that's all good, but it gets us not an inch closer to salvation. Christ alone, the innocent sacrifice, saves us – and makes us holy. Why? **Because that's the way God said it is.**

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- God separates His servants away from everyone else; He elevates them, has higher expectations of them, and gives them special attention. They are different.

YOU and I, by the blood of Jesus, have been separated away from all other humans. The Lord has given us elevated status and favor. What did **we** ever do to merit this favor? **Nothing**. We simply accepted the reality of what Jesus did for us.

### LEVITES GUARDED GOD'S HOLINESS

Ok - let's get back to the Levites. The Levites served the priests and were the blue collar workers in the Tabernacle. But, that was not their only or even their primary responsibility. Let's reread Numbers Chapter 1 verses 52-53:

"The Israelites are to set up their tents by divisions, each of them in their own camp under their standard. **The Levites, however, are to set up their tents around the tabernacle of the covenant law so that My wrath will not fall on the Israelite community.** The Levites are to be responsible for the care of the tabernacle of the covenant law."

Verse 53 says that the Levites and Priests are to camp between the tabernacle and the 12 tribes so that God's wrath would not fall on the camp. What we're going to see in the Book of Numbers is that God is Holy, and **Holiness is not completely safe** for anything un-holy. (Narnia: *"Aslan - of course He's not safe, but He is good."*)

We know that the Israelites had the rules and regulations regarding what is considered clean and unclean, regarding what is holy and

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common, regarding who could approach God. These were part of the 613 commandments God gave in the Torah, and they were not given so that you might earn you brownie points. **They had a purpose:**

- Remember – God's intention now was to dwell among His people.

But, this was **all new to them**. *They didn't understand that Holiness is dangerous to the unholy*. These rules were to **protect people from destruction** if they attempted to approach the Holy God of Glory in any way that relied on self-righteousness.

Remember how God would only allow Moses to get a fleeting glimpse of His glory, and as a result, Moses' face shown so brightly much that people begged him to cover it with a veil. These Torah regulations were like telling someone to check to see if the electricity is turned off before trying to rewire a house – it can be deadly even if our intentions are good, God is Holy – & Holiness is *dangerous* to the unholy. Quite a few people lost their lives in the Bible by approaching the Holy God in a manner other than the way He allowed.

The Levites would act as a guardrail or a protective barrier between Holy Ground of the Tabernacle and the people of Israel (or anyone else for that matter). Their main duty was to:

- (1) **protect God's holiness**, and to
- (2) **protect the people** from being destroyed by God for trespassing – whether intentionally or accidentally – upon His holiness.

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**Are we OK?** I know that when we get into the subject of Holiness, God's wrath, that Holiness can be dangerous – we're getting into areas that may make some people feel uncomfortable, but please bear with me. God put this text here for a purpose.

- Always keep in the back of your mind that Jesus' blood is become our holiness. We'll see the connection between holiness and the cross as we go along.

Let's look a little closer at the Levites. **Now – what sort of mental picture comes to mind when you hear the term 'Levite'?** Illustrations in bibles and books usually portray them as men in white tunics carrying wood, wandering around aimlessly in the tabernacle courtyard, and playing musical instruments. Well, they did all that – But... were they *just*, in modern terms, *members of the Band*? Well, yes they did have to do that, but ...

But their primary function was to physically defend and protect the Holiness of God. How many bands can do that? (football game and "much better band this year" statement)

I don't picture most musicians as tough enough for guard-duty (not counting the people who were up here a few minutes ago, of course). Can you picture **Elton John on guard duty – how about Neil Diamond or Barbara Streisand?** So why was guard-duty a primary function of the Levites? Because, man-for-man, the Levites were probably the toughest group in the camp. They were the ones who rallied to Moses at the incident of the golden calf and they killed 3,000

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Israelites who were running wild. Back in Genesis, Levi and his brother Simeon, Jacob's 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> sons, demonstrated a ruthlessness that disqualified them from assuming the role of firstborn when Reuben dropped the ball. That's one of the reasons why firstborn status fell to Judah, Jacob's 4<sup>th</sup> son.

- The Levites were armed and dangerous! They weren't pacifists who would lay down in the path of a trespasser.

No – The Levites immediately killed anyone who encroached too near the holy grounds. This was not about justice as we think of it.

- Sympathy was irrelevant. Simple error brought death as quickly as malicious intent. Remember in Genesis the word picture of the Cherubim with the flaming sword that guarded the path to the Garden of Eden? Any unauthorized person foolish enough to venture too close was immediately destroyed by those Cherubim? The Levites were required by God to behave just as those Cherubim behaved.

The Levites didn't have to ask permission to kill the trespasser, they were expected to do it *without hesitation*; they didn't detain an encroacher and take them to a judge – the Levite was obligated to kill that person on the spot or lose their own life for not doing so.

- God's holiness is that serious of a matter. God indeed places high value on human life; but He also places the ULTIMATE value on His own holiness – because without that, He is not a Holy God.

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The role of the Levites would change a bit over the centuries after the Temple in Jerusalem was built but they continued in God's service in and around the Temple. But, 1,400 years later, all the temple sacrifices and ceremonies of worship were made obsolete when Jesus – the ultimate and final sacrifice – died just outside the City walls. At that point, the Levites were then technically out of a job, although most didn't know it.

Fifth days later at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit said – *let's get the Band back together again!* From Acts 6, we have an indication that a large number of priests (and undoubtedly Levites) did become Christians.

### CENSUS OF LEVITES MADE BY GOD

The **Census of the Levites** that was taken in order to determine how many Levites were available to redeem the firstborn of the Israelites.

NUMBERS 3:14-16 “The LORD said to Moses in the Desert of Sinai, 'Count the Levites by their families and clans. Count every male a month old or more.' So Moses counted them, as he was **commanded** by **the word** of the LORD.”

Now... Since I don't read Hebrew, I read a lot of Jewish commentaries on the Torah. And, of course, I also read NT commentaries that relate a passage to the Gospel, but occasionally I have found that some NT articles were built on a misunderstanding what the actual Hebrew is saying. **The manner in which this census was conducted is a prime example of such a misunderstanding.** I had assumed that Moses counted the Levites as we ourselves would count – one, two, three, etc.;

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but this is not the case. **In fact, the census was not conducted by humans at all.**

The Hebrew commentaries are in agreement in their belief that *something rather extraordinary* occurred. The results of the census were divinely communicated to Moses – it was a revelation from the Holy Spirit, a very special announcement made for a monumental purpose.

- Neither Moses nor Aaron, nor the Levite tribal chieftains, nor any human for that matter, was involved in the counting of the Levites. Moses just RECORDED the numbers God told him to write down.

WHY did God do this? Because **this was much too important of a matter to leave to humans because redemption was at the heart of it.**

Yehoveh Himself conducted the census and Moses was simply told to write down the results.

**This is one of the deepest principles of the redemption of Christ,** and I hope this goes deep into your spirit. GOD CONDUCTS THE REDEMPTION CENSUS. It would do no good for leaders and elders of all the churches and synagogues of the world to conduct a census in order to determine how many people are actually redeemed (or in evangelical Christian-eze, “*saved*”). The Holy Scriptures makes it clear that the Lord, and the Lord alone, makes that determination.

The census of saved people will be performed in an instant before the rapture, & God will not consult any man – He will do it Himself. My Certificate of Baptism, or church membership, or ordination papers, or that fact that I'm a drummer in the music ministry, *or the fact that I am*

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*standing up hear giving a message...* all of these are nice and meaningful things; but they count for exactly **nothing** when God takes His final census. Our Lord will ensure that not ONE Believer is going to be accidentally overlooked and left behind. That's the Good News.

- But an opposite and terrifying reality also presents itself – since the Lord will do the census, **not one who should NOT be included will be allowed to accidentally slip on in.**

The last words of a German poet named Heinrich Heine was *"God will forgive me. That's his job."* Well, no it isn't. God Himself will make that determination based on His intimate and perfect knowledge of each individual's heart – only God can see the heart and the soul for what it really is. Only God knows whether that individual has truly accepted the one-saving provision God has made for mankind, Christ the Lord.

### FIRSTBORNS

Now, in Numbers chapter 3, we get to the matter of the **Firstborns**.

"The LORD also said to Moses,<sup>12</sup> "I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites **in place of** the **first male offspring of every Israelite woman**. The Levites are mine,<sup>13</sup> 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."

Verse 11 begins a little know instruction from God – the Levites are to **REPLACE** the first-born of the other tribes of Israel. Notice that the firstborn of the livestock also belongs to God.

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A basic Biblical principle is that THE FIRST OF EVERYTHING BELONGS TO GOD. This does NOT apply just to Israel but to everybody, at least all who worship the God of Israel. We saw this principle applied in Egypt when Yehoveh killed all the firstborn of humans and animals among households were not protected with blood from a yearling Ram on the doorposts (the first Passover). In some way, the firstborn males of Israel had been special and set-apart for Him ... a kind of ownership or adoption by God. **Now, God has taken the Levites, in total, as His own in substitution for all the firstborns of Israel.** What is going on here?

Well, just as Israel as a whole now were God's set-apart people, previously, all the firstborns of Israel held a special status above the firstborns of gentiles. **BEFORE** the establishment of the priesthood, the firstborns held a sacred status before the Lord.

### OK - WHAT DOES FIRSTBORN MEAN?

It can have either of TWO meanings, depending on the text:

1. Firstborn = chronologically, it was first son born
2. "Firstborn" = was a Title, an office (position)

**The Title** of Firstborn meant that the person was PREEMINENT in position and authority – and any son can be given that title by the father – it doesn't matter if he is the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 10<sup>th</sup> son born. Usually, the person who held the office of 'Firstborn' also was the first son born chronologically – *but not always*.

**Now, please understand that the term "firstborn" applies ONLY to males.** "Firstborn daughter" is an oxymoron..... There is no such thing.

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For example, in the case of the Otterbeck children, Jennifer, Kristen and Sandra were born, and then along came Jonathan – late for the party. Well, despite his tardiness, Jonathan would be considered ‘firstborn’.

And, as I mentioned, Firstborn usually was more important in Hebrew society because it was associated with an *office* conferred upon a male child – **the future leadership of the family**, not just a simple order of birth, and the firstborn got a double share of the father’s wealth when the father died. (4 kids, 5 shares so firstborn has 2 shares and rest 1 share; in the parable of the prodigal son, the older son had 2 shares of the money but was still jealous of younger brother who had only 1)

But, the 1stborn rights and privileges *could* be given to another son.....for any number of reasons. In fact that exact thing occurred in the lives of the first three Patriarchs: Ishmael was Abraham’s first son born, and then along came Isaac. Abraham gave the firstborn office to Isaac. Isaac then fathered Esau, who was born one who came from the womb, and then out came his twin brother Jacob. Jacob purchased the office of firstborn from Esau for a bowl of lentil soup. And then Jacob fathered twelve sons, with Rueben being the first son born chronologically. Jacob gave the office of firstborn to Judah, the 4th son born to him, thus skipping over his first three sons born before Judah. So, there’s a difference between the title of firstborn and the first son born.

- But here in the Book of Numbers, as well as in the Book of Exodus and the death of the firstborns, we’re strictly talking about the first son born chronologically.

The Jehovah Witnesses get the chronological firstborn versus the title of firstborn mixed up all the time: **Colossians 1:15**

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"He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him."

They reason that if Jesus was "born", then there was a time when He was not, so he cannot be God? However, the 'firstborn' in this passage refers to the Title – it means PREEMINENT.

### DATING THE EXODUS:

As a brief aside, we can get a good approximation of when the Passover took place by the event surrounding the Passover and the death of the Egyptian firstborns. The Pharaoh of the Exodus is unnamed in Scripture, but we know from the movie the Ten Commands that the Pharaoh of the Exodus was Yul Brenner. Almost without exception, the writers of the Exodus stories and movie scripts choose to depict Ramses II (Yul Brenner, about 1290BC) as the Pharaoh of the Exodus (because slaves built store cities of Ramses).

We usually only think about the fact that the Pharaoh's firstborn son died in the 10<sup>th</sup> plague. But, think about it – **the Pharaoh himself** was evidently not a firstborn – if he was a firstborn, he also would have died that night. Since Ramses II was a firstborn, that rules him out.

So, we have to find when in Egyptian history we find two pharaohs in a row that were not firstborns. We have that VERY sequence and – by complete coincidence I'm sure – at the very time needed in the Bible. Amenhotep II was the 2<sup>nd</sup> son of Thutmose III, but his elder brother died before taking the throne. Therefore, Amenhotep II was not a firstborn.

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And neither was the next Pharaoh – Thutmose IV, who was the 2<sup>nd</sup> son of Amenhotep II – his firstborn son had died. Therefore, we see **two Pharaohs in a row** who were not firstborns.

- In all likelihood, Amenhotep II was the Pharaoh of the Exodus, and it was his 1<sup>st</sup>-born son who died in the 10<sup>th</sup> plague. That would have been about 1425 B.C.

### I WANT TO BE A FIREMAN

OK – back to Sinai and the firstborns. Remember that the Levitical priesthood was established at Mt. Sinai. Up to that time, a formal priesthood did not exist. It had been the duty of the firstborn of each family to perform sacrifices and other rituals on behalf of the family. The firstborn was a kind of pre-priesthood family priest. Even today, this notion is visible in some cultures – such as **Irish, Italian and Polish families urge the first son to become Catholic priests.**

- (me – “Fireman”) – relate story with nuns

Here in Numbers 3, we’re talking strictly about the first son born chronologically. God said to Moses that He has “*taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine,<sup>13</sup> for all the firstborn are mine.*”

### REDEMPTION OF THE FIRSTBORNS

So, the Levites would be taken in place of the firstborn Israelites for service to God. In Numbers Chapter 3, God conducts **a census of the Levites:**

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Verse 14: The LORD said to Moses in the Desert of Sinai, <sup>15</sup> "Count the Levites by their families and clans. Count every male a month old or more." <sup>16</sup> So Moses counted them, as he was commanded by the word of the LORD.

Verse 39: The total number of Levites counted at the LORD's command by Moses and Aaron according to their clans, including every male **a month old or more**, was 22,000.

So, there were 22,000 Levites one month or older.

Next, God orders **a census of the other Israelites from the other tribes that are 30-days old or more** and who are firstborns.

Verse 42: So Moses counted all the firstborn of the Israelites, as the LORD commanded him. The total number of firstborn males a month old or more, listed by name, was 22,273.

- Verse 44: The LORD also said to Moses, <sup>45</sup> "**Take the Levites in place of all the firstborn of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites in place of their livestock.** The Levites are to be mine. I am the LORD.
- Verse 46: To redeem the 273 firstborn Israelites who exceed the number of the Levites, <sup>47</sup> collect five shekels for each one, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. <sup>48</sup> Give the money for the redemption of the additional Israelites to Aaron and his sons the kohens (priests)."

OK - there were 22,273 firstborns - 30 days old or more - among the other tribes. **These would have been those firstborns born since they left Egypt** - there were certainly a lot more firstborns in the Israelite camp, but they had already been redeemed in Egypt with the death of

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the Egyptian firstborns in the Passover. So, we have 22, 273 firstborns needing redemption and only 22,000 Levite males eligible to exchange for them.

- Remember – when we talk about ‘redemption’ here, we're NOT talking about redemption from the curses/penalty of sin. We're talking *redemption from the requirement to serve at the tabernacle.*

So what to do about the problem that there were not enough Levite males to redeem every Israelite firstborn? Well, the book of Leviticus had set a redemption price from vows based on age. For example, we see where you might vowed – using God’s Name as a witness – to cook your wife a meal, but you later changed your mind. You were required to pay a penalty to the priests to redeem you from the vow. The price of redemption here was based on age – the older, the greater the price.

- The price for redemption of a newborn was 5 shekels of silver. So, 5 shekels was set as the redemption price of the firstborns to redeem them from tabernacle service.

At this point in history a shekel was NOT a coin like it is now (e.g., like a quarter). Rather a shekel was just a *unit of weight*....like saying give me 2 *ounces* of silver (20 grains of silver = 1 shekel). So, the original payment would have been a measure of silver rather than actual coins. (Note: a shekel would amount to about a month's wage when they finally got to the Promised Land, so 5 shekels was not an inconsequential sum).

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So 22,000 Israelite firstborns among the other tribes were redeemed in a one-to-one swap with 22,000 Levite males; and the remaining 273 Israelite males were redeemed with 5 shekels of silver each. In this way, every Israelite firstborn was redeemed and thus no longer automatically devoted to the service of the Lord. This completed the transfer – the Levites now belonged to God *in place of* the Israelite firstborns, but at the same time, and individual – chronological – Israelite firstborns lost their special status and the Levites took their place.

The redemption of the firstborn from mandatory service to the tabernacle (later temple) continues even to today – although primarily symbolic, since there's no Temple in which to serve. And, in carrying-on this tradition, the Israelites unknowingly pointed to Christ.

- Would it surprise you to know that ***even Jesus* was redeemed from *mandatory* Temple service** by means of a 5-sheckle price paid by his earthly father Joseph? This was so that **His service, like His death, would be *voluntary*, not mandatory.**

### <SLIDE> Luke 2:21

<sup>21</sup> On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

<sup>22</sup> When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses (40 days after the birth of a male child), Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every **firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord**"), <sup>24</sup> and to offer a sacrifice in keeping

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with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

<sup>35</sup> (Simeon...) and a sword will pierce even your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

Here is a story with which we are pretty familiar, but perhaps we may not have fully realized what's going on. We're witnessing **two** events here:

### The redemption of Jesus from mandatory temple service.

First, in verse 23, it says – "as it is written in the Law, **every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord**" -> a Jewish audience would have readily understood that this is talking about the redemption of the firstborn son accompanied with a 5-shekel payment. This would occur sometime after the child was at least 30 days old, in accordance with the details in the Book of Numbers.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus was circumcised when He was 8 days old, but His parents had to wait until He was at least 30 days old to be redeemed from mandatory temple service. The text agrees perfectly with this chronology. This was a standard, every day, firstborn redemption of a Jewish baby boy in the Temple – only in this case, it is Jesus the Messiah. The Hebrew title of the entire process of firstborn redemption is called *pidyon-haben*. The life of Jesus, even as an infant, was one that fully kept the Torah

### The purification ceremony for Mary.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> event is the purification of Mary. The purification being discussed here is NOT about Jesus, it's about Mary. When a woman

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<sup>3</sup> Numbers 3:40

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bore a child, if it was a boy, she was ritually unclean for a period of 40 days. So, we know that it was at least 40 days AFTER Jesus' birth that this scene in Luke took place because Mary could NOT have come to the Temple in an unclean condition.

So, here in Luke we see that the family journeys to the Temple 40 days or so after the birth of Jesus & two ceremonies are performed – the redemption of the 1<sup>st</sup> born and the purification of Mary. Now, the sacrifice that is spoken of here – two turtledoves or two pigeons – again concerns Mary, not the baby Jesus. This is the sacrifice necessary to complete her ritual purification after childbirth.

- Note: two turtledoves are a poor person's offering,

As a side note, Magi could not have yet arrived at Bethlehem, otherwise, Mary would have a bag of gold and would have had to buy more expensive sacrifice! This ties in exactly with any earlier presentation discussion that the magi didn't arrive on the night that Jesus was born. I suspect that they had to arrive sometime later (at least 6–9 months later), because – if the Magi had arrived on the night Jesus was born, Herod certainly would have staked-out the temple to identify the mothers from Bethlehem coming for the purification ceremony.

You will note that the passage does NOT mention the 5 shekels given for Jesus' redemption – but that's what had to happen – since it was the standard amount no matter whether the family was rich or poor – the cost of redemption was exactly the same for every Hebrew firstborn.

Why did the two events – redemption of the 1stborn and purification of Mary – occur at the same time? Simply – *it's a matter of logistics*. Traveling to the Temple in Jerusalem was somewhat of an

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ordeal, and when several things could be accomplished in one trip, that's what usually happened. So Mary was purified and Jesus was redeemed on the same visit.

And how did this practice point to Christ? The practice of redeeming the firstborn from mandatory devotion to God's service pointed to the fact that Christ's service to His Father, like His death, would be entirely voluntary, not mandated. Like Abraham who refused to take any money from the King of Sodom after he rescued their people – Abraham said that no man would be able to say that God wasn't the one who gave Abraham riches. It would have to be credited to the Lord.

- Jesus would be able to say that no one forced Him to go to the cross – He did it voluntarily!

Now, sometimes you might hear that Jesus had an older brother – James. Since Jesus here is obviously the firstborn son of Mary, for that to be true, James would have had to come from another wife of Joseph – perhaps one who had died before his marriage to Mary. However, seems to be stretching the point because nowhere does James show up when Scripture describe the family's journeys.

By the way – *in the Pidyon Ha-Ben ceremony today*, the father presents his son to a Cohen (priest), who asks whether the father will pay 5 silver coins to redeem his son from service or let his son remain for service; the father pays the coins and says two blessings. Then, the Cohen lifts a cup of wine and recites a blessing: *Barukh atah Adonai Elohaynu melekh ha-olam, borei p'riy ha-gafen. (Amein)* "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who created fruit of the vine." If you ever attended a Passover seder, you might remember that this is the

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EXACT BLESSING that is said during Passover meal before taking of the 3<sup>rd</sup> cup of wine – CUP OF REDEMPTION.

- Then Jesus said – "*This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.*" And, He was doing this voluntarily.

I mentioned that the firstborn of the flocks was also God's property; the Torah provides that they too can be redeemed back for varying prices or items. Do you know the redemption price for a donkey? A Lamb. If a person does not redeem it, they break its neck. (*Exodus 34:19-20*)

- Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor? Jackasses are redeemed by a Lamb!

## THE HOLINESS OF GOD

OK – I said we'd come across some incidents regarding the holiness of God that might shock us when we first encounter them. We're about to see one here in Numbers, *but first...* I want to ask you a question – you don't have to answer out loud, but just use your imagination for a moment. What comes to mind when you hear the word "holiness" or "holy"? Ask that at Price Chopper and you might hear: Mother Theresa – Billy Graham – Dali Lama – , the Pope...

- **Holiness makes us uneasy.** Golfing story (Ford, Nickolas, Graham)– Billy didn't say a word (but he represented a Holy God – and that spooked the champion)

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- Bill at Kristin's wedding.
- **Because they represent the Holy One.**

Now, I would guess that we each probably have a slightly different idea when we hear the word 'Holy' – *Purity, spotless, perfect goodness...* These are all aspects of holiness, but 'Holy' itself is a difficult word to pin down, especially when applied to God.

The root meaning of 'Holy' is separation, to be apart from people or things. God is Holy, Holy, Holy = He is entirely different from any created thing.

- But – again – what does that *mean*? Well, I readily admit that I'm **totally inadequately** to describe it. **But I can sense that Holiness exists.**
- Negro spiritual: Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

The lyrics are haunting – something stirs inside of me when I hear those words. "Causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord? I can sense a deep truth there, an echo of a bottomless and profound mystery, a glimpse into eternity that God grants only infrequently. I can't describe it, but it washes over me and chokes me. I can feel it in my soul. It's real.. it's deep, it's overwhelming, it's even somewhat scary, and I am woefully inadequate to describe it.

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- Remember Moses and the Burning Bush – God orders Moses to take off his sandals – why? **Because this is holy ground, different ground – because God is there.** It became holy ground the moment God's presence lit the bush on fire.
- **Moses' feet had to be in the dirt** –> because man is a creature made of earth, and Moses had to be reminded of his status – he had to have his feet in the dust, dirt between his toes; when compared with God's Holiness, even Moses was not worthy to rise about the earth by **even the thickness of the bottom of his leather sandal**.
- However – and here's a tremendous however – when standing on holy ground, God's imparted His Spirit upon Moses. Just like what happens to us – we become temples of the Holy Spirit, burning bushes, when we're grounded in Christ.

Put on your seatbelts. We're going to go where many mega-churches fear to tread. **How Dangerous is it to trespass on the Holiness of God?** Numbers Chapter 3, we have an abbreviated account of an incident that happened to the family of Aaron...

Numbers 3: 1 "This is the account of the family of Aaron and Moses at the time the LORD spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai.

<sup>2</sup> The names of the sons of Aaron were Nadab the firstborn and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. <sup>3</sup> Those were the names of Aaron's sons, the anointed priests, who were ordained to serve as priests. <sup>4</sup> 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 Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests during the lifetime of their father Aaron.

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- A fuller description of the event is given in Leviticus Chapter 10

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. "And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD."

"Then Moses said to Aaron, "It is what the LORD spoke, saying, 'By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, And before all the people I will be honored.'"

Aaron had four sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, who were chosen by God to be priests to minister in the tabernacle. We just read that Nadab and Abihu had put hot coals in their censors in order to start burning incense and they were going toward the Holy Place to offer the incense to God. This was a location that they – as priests – were normally allowed to enter. These were the two oldest and most respected of the Aaron's four sons, and Nadab – the eldest – was next in line to become the High Priest when his father Aaron died.

- But they were incinerated – seemingly without warning – as they opened the curtain to the Holy Place. What's going on here?

I'm fairly certain that this event would not make to cover page of Modern Church Growth on how to attract more seekers to the church. In fact, many pastors would shy away from this passage. But it's here, the Holy Spirit put it here for our benefit, and so we must deal with it.

Nadab and Abihu were not evil men. The Book of Exodus records that they had been invited by God along with Moses and the seventy elders up onto Mount Sinai, and they saw the presence and glory of God. This was the opening day for the tabernacle. And yet they were

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killed by God for their inattention to what He demanded of those who enter His Holy presence.

What did they do to receive God's wrath? It says they offered "strange fire". What was strange about fire? Fire is fire, isn't it? No. God had specifically instructed that the coals that were to be used to offer incense in the Holy Place must come from the altar where the sacrifices for sin were made. (Leviticus 16). So they knew what was required – God's reaction was not arbitrary.

For some reason, these two sons of Aaron ignored that instruction – some suggest they might have been too nonchalant in their attention to God's requirements, some say they might have drunk too much wine – but, for whatever reason, they put coals from some other source into their censers and attempted to walk into the Holy Place. But – unfortunately for them – they didn't have the option to improvise; they didn't have the option to treat God's instructions as suggestions rather than commands. God says that He WILL be treated completely different – as holy – or else!

It's incidents like this one that lead some to think that the God of the Old Testament is different than the One presented in the New – or if not different, at least understood differently by the writers of the OT. Some see no love or mercy in the Lord described in the Torah and the Prophets; instead, they see a capricious, angry deity. Six months earlier, these same people had built and celebrated the Golden Calf with the permission of Aaron – and God forgave them of that. And then God even permitted these very men to become priests!

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- What is going on? Well, I think for two things:

# 1. God's wrath is a Holy wrath, and he doesn't do anything without first warning of the consequences. Nadab and Abihu **did know** what was required. They were not ignorant, and so they were not innocent. You know, we get so used to God's mercy that we think it is a right – something God must give, and we get mad when God doesn't play fair in our estimation. Ultimately, God always plays fair, and He also plays for keeps!

God is a God of mercy – but God's mercy is a Holy mercy, and God's wrath is a holy wrath, and He alone makes that call of when He extends mercy. In all of human history, God has only authorized the death of one person who didn't deserve it – His Son.

# 2. The second reason for God's stroke, I believe, is that their actions – if unpunished – would undermine the **absolute necessity** of the atonement of Christ. The coals had to come from the altar of sacrifice. If we are ever to dwell in His presence and survive, the Cross cannot be compromised. Their actions, if allowed, would do that. The prerequisite for offering incense in the Holy Place was coals from the altar of atonement. God does not play games with His Holiness nor with the coming atonement of His Son.

What happened to these two men is a perfect symbol of what will happen at the end of time when people try to approach God without carrying the holy coals from Mt. Calvary. **Here in Numbers is a God Who is not politically correct. Here is a God Who plays for keeps.**

Yehoveh says .... Whether you agree or not, I WILL be treated as Holy.

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And especially so by those who have been authorized to COME NEAR me.”

The Bible says that God is **holy, holy, holy**. He is not merely holy, or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love, or mercy, mercy, mercy, or wrath, wrath, wrath, or justice, justice, justice. It does say that He is holy, holy, holy. Holiness is not just another attribute of God. It's His essence. God IS Holy. We say God is a God of love, God of mercy, God of justice. We don't say God of Holiness – we say Holy God. When God exercises mercy, it is Holy mercy, when He executes judgment, it is Holy Judgment. His grace and forgiveness is Holy grace, Holy forgiveness. And at times, He exhibits Holy Wrath. It is not done randomly or without first having given clear and unambiguous warning – but it is done.

The notion that the God of the OT is different from the loving God of the NT is a *false conflict* between the two testaments. Why? Because the most brutal act of divine vengeance ever recorded in Scripture is not found in the Old Testament but in the New Testament. If ever a person had room to complain of injustice, it was Jesus. He was the only innocent man ever to be punished by God. Someone once wrote: If we stagger at the wrath of God, let us stagger at the Cross. Here is where our astonishment should be focused. If we have a reason for moral outrage, let it be directed at Golgotha.

- Jesus died for us – is that fair? No. Is it grace – yes.

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I want to share two final thoughts of a personal note.

First: When I read passages like the incident with Nadab and his brother, I realize that I have only the vaguest understanding of the Holiness of God. The more I look at this, the more I feel so inadequate to speak about it. Last summer, I was outside in the backyard on a crystal clear night and chanced to look up at the sky – I looked up and almost fell over backwards at seeing the thousand points of light that seemed to go on and on, deeper and deeper into the distance. *I realized that I can't even begin to describe the Holiness of the God to could speak all that into existence.* Christ in me is my only hope of Glory.

Second: I must admit that when I wrote the words *that "no one gets in by mistake"* – I **cringed a bit inside**. Even though I sincerely believe that Christ alone saves me from sin, my heart skipped faintly but noticeably at this frightening truth. Perhaps yours may have also when I spoke those words today. Why?

I think it's because we all are sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. We've all done things we shouldn't have, we haven't done things we should have, and when the memories of those things pop up, as they too often do – we feel shame – we realize we're not holy. What did Adam say when God asked him why he was hiding – “I was naked”. Notice: not that they had disobeyed God – that was part of the reason, but his main explanation was that Adam realized he was naked – his imperfections were uncovered & people could see that he was not holy.

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- And, like Adam and Eve, our instinctual reaction is to hide from a Holy God when we realize we're not holy.

My heart cringes because I wonder if that will be my reaction at the Judgment – to hide from the Holy God. And it carries over to our relationship with others also. Have you found yourself in situations where you see everyone else as interesting, more knowledgeable & self-confident, but you seem to have nothing to offer that anyone wants to hear – and so you sit silently, and you're embarrassed at who you are? There's that twinge inside – I'm not good enough. And sometimes fear wells up inside and doubt creeps in:

- We know that God can heal, God does heal, but we may doubt that we're holy enough to be healed. And then you wonder: *where is my faith? Did I ever have faith?*

Oh, of course, then we're “blessed” by some people who – if you listen to them – never have any of these problems, or if they do, it's for no more than 30 seconds –> and they are more than willing to tell you of their holiness than talk about your need. You can almost hear the words from a familiar prayer:

- *"I thank thee, O Lord, that I am not like other men, like that sinner there..."* Little do these people realize that these types of statements are prayers offered with "**strange fire**", **their coals are from their own pride** and not the altar of sacrifice.

There are times when anyone of us can be devastated by a whisper.

- **How much more when God is silent?**

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I remember --- Catholic Church retreat - priests' main question - *does Christ love them?* Here are men, many of them in the late 60s and 70s, who have given up their lives, given up having a wife and children for the sake of the Gospel, and they are haunted by doubt over whether Jesus loves them. **Have I done enough? Can I do enough - to please God?**

- I have to confess that I struggle with this, and so did Martin Luther, and it almost drove him mad.

Please don't brush me off and come up later and lecture to me that salvation is not based on our feelings - as if I don't know that. If you listen to my presentations, that's the central message of every one. I know that - I teach that. My salvation is 100% based on faith in the atoning death of Christ.

- I'm not saved by feelings, but I like to feel saved.

Sometimes your soul just cries out to hear the words **"Ego Te absolvo"** - *"I absolve you"*.

- Would you like it if Jesus walked into this room right now and said "I absolve you?" He can, you know, right there in your spirit.

We've all at one time or another pictured ourselves back at Calvary looking at the cross. Right? Well, try viewing it from Jesus' standpoint - on the cross looking out at you all alone standing before Him.

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- You are an entire world. He thinks you are lovable, even if you **do not**. The Gospel is that Jesus died for you because the Father loves you.

God doesn't love you just because Jesus died for you – the Bible doesn't say that. It says that Jesus died for you because the Father loves you (that's what John 3:16 says). God loved you before Jesus died for you. Salvation is 100% *not you*. Salvation is 100% Christ! It was 100% finished before you were born!

- When Martin Luther understood the scripture that "*The just shall live by faith*", he said that the Gates of Paradise swung open and he walked in.

You think you're not good enough to be in God's Holy presence – great!→ you got it!

➤ Jesus says again today: **“Ego Te absolvo”** – I absolve you.

In Christ alone my hope is found  
He is my light, my strength, my song  
This Cornerstone, this solid ground  
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm  
\*Til on that cross as Jesus died  
The wrath of God was satisfied  
For every sin on Him was laid  
Here in the death of Christ I live, I live

\* No guilt in life, no fear in death  
This is the power of Christ in me  
From a life's first cry to final breath  
Jesus commands my destiny