

In the Wilderness: God-Centered Worship

Scripture Readings: Numbers 3:1-51; 1 Cor 12:27-31 • Text: Numbers 3:1-51

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Introduction

Have you ever been to a youth camp or an adult retreat where emotions ran high, so the leader and the campers decided to have a spontaneous Lord's Supper? Or maybe there were so-called decisions for Christ, so the youth leader decided to baptize the converts?

This is a common state of things today: the sacraments administered by an unordained person in youth camps and adult retreats, especially among parachurches. Self-appointed evangelists, pastors and missionaries are also very common today.

What does the Bible say about this? What does the book of Numbers say?

Last week, we considered Chapter 1 which consists of a census of all of Israel's males 20-60 years old, according to the twelve tribes. We also looked at Chapter 2 which tells us how the camp is to be arranged, and how the whole nation is to march towards the Promised Land.

We come now to Chapter 3, a chapter dealing with Israel's priests and Levites. Who are they? What are their duties?

One of the main themes of Numbers is the right worship of God by his people dwelling in the wilderness. We learned in Chapter 2 that the Tabernacle, where God dwells, is the center of the camp – God is the center of their worship and life. Chapter 3 gives us details on the qualifications of Israel's God-appointed priests and Levites and the duties God assigned them. It also shows us how the people are redeemed by God so they can worship God acceptably. All of these were commanded by God, *"Thus did the people of Israel; they did according to all that the Lord commanded Moses"* (Num 1:54; 2:34; 3:51).

This is God-centered worship, doctrine and life! Our theme this afternoon, then, is **IN THE WILDERNESS: GOD-CENTERED WORSHIP:**

1. **God-Appointed Officers**
2. **God-Assigned Duties**
3. **God-Redeemed People**

God-Appointed Officers

As the book of Numbers begins in Chapter 1, God commands Moses to take a census of the Israelites after they were in Mount Sinai for a year. Then in Chapter 2, God details how the people are to arrange themselves around the tabernacle, in camp and during their march. The Tabernacle, where God dwells, is the center of Israel's camp.

Only Aaron's descendants could be priests, the only people who could enter the Tabernacle. Only descendants of Levi could be assigned Tabernacle duties, which were twofold. They were to guard the Tabernacle against unauthorized persons – under the

penalty of death and judgment on the people; and they were to take care of the Tabernacle in camp (Chapter 3) and carry all the parts of the Tabernacle during the march (Chapter 4).

Chapter 3 has more details about the arrangement of the priests and the Levites. Moses, Aaron and the other priests were to be camped on the east side of the Tabernacle. Next, to the south, was the family of Kohath, Levi's second son. After the Kohathites, to the west, was the family of Gershon, the firstborn son. Last, to the north, was the family of Merari, the youngest of the three sons of Levi.

The importance of their position around the Tabernacle is seen in what they cared for and carried. Kohath's clan carried the most important parts of the Tabernacle – everything related to the Holy of Holies – the Ark of the Covenant, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the vessels, and the screen. Gershon's clan were assigned the tent itself and the curtains, the screen for the entrance, the hangings of the court, the screen for the door of the court, and its cords. Merari's clan cared for the least important parts – frames, bars, pillars, bases, pegs, cords and other accessories.

The importance of the duties assigned the Levites did not depend on position in family – whether older or younger – not even good works or sin. The duties assigned each clan was God's prerogative and sovereign will.

Moreover, only those whom God had chosen and appointed could serve as priests; dire consequences follow anyone else who tried to do priestly duties without authority from God. King Saul lost his kingdom after he offered sacrifices in battle because he couldn't wait for Samuel (1 Sam 13:8-15). Uzzah, one of King David's men, was struck dead by God when he touched the Ark (2 Sam 6:5-11). King Uzziah became a leper for the rest of his life after he usurped the duty of the high priest when – because of pride – he offered sacrifices in the Temple (2 Chr 26:16-21). The position of priest was sacred, serious business!

What does this tell us about today's self-appointed pastors who have not been called and appointed by God? Like the Old Testament priests, prophets and kings, office bearers in the church must be called, set apart, and appointed by God. They are not even chosen by a popularity vote of the congregation.

Not only did God instituted these offices, God was also the one who established the qualifications of church officers are in 1 Tim 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9. It does not matter if you are rich or smart, or if you have leadership skills, or which family you come from. These are the world's standards of success, not God's standard for those whom he would call and appoint as men of God. The standard for the man of God's doctrine and piety was set high in accordance with God's perfect holiness and righteousness. According to this standard, the officebearers' knowledge of and loyalty to Scriptures, his theological and ministerial knowledge and ability, and his spiritual life must be unassailable.

Furthermore, only men are to serve in these offices. But isn't this too old-fashioned? Not at all, because God has commanded in Scripture that men, and not women, are to be called and ordained to serve his church as pastors, elders and deacons. As in the book of Numbers, we are to do "according to all that the Lord commanded" us. How then can women serve in the church? They have special roles in teaching other women and children so "that the word of God may not be reviled," and they can serve in other unordained capacities (Tit 2:3-5). Their role in the church is so crucial that God's name is not slandered if they discharged their teaching duties faithfully.

In addition to disobeying God's strict requirements regarding the calling, qualifying and ordination of officebearers in the church, there are two other practical reasons for not allowing self-appointed pastors to shepherd the flock of God. When pastors are self-appointed, there is no accountability, which can lead to errors and misbehavior. And, as the human heart is prone to hunger for power, it is also common in many large denominations for men and women to seek positions of power and influence through political maneuvering. In the movie *Luther*, one of the cardinals in Rome boasts that he was appointed cardinal when he was only thirteen, presumably because of his wealth and influence.

When Christ came, he called and appointed his twelve apostles to build the foundation of his church. He gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers as his gifts to his church. Through the apostles, he established rules and regulations regarding the qualifications, calling and ordination of pastors, elders and deacons.

So we see in Chapter 3 of Numbers how God has called, appointed and ordained Levitical priests in the Old Testament. We are to do the same, obeying God's commands in the New Testament in qualifying, calling and ordaining ministers, elders and deacons in the church.

God-Assigned Duties

In this chapter, God not only appointed the priests and servants of the Tabernacle. He also assigned them their two-fold duties.

First, the Levites were to guard the Tabernacle from unauthorized access. No one except the priests and the Levites who were appointed and purified by sacrifices could come close, lest he die and judgment falls on the people, as we saw in the tragic examples of King Uzziah and Uzzah.

God is a holy God, and cannot fellowship with sinful mankind without provision for cleansing and forgiveness. This is why after the Fall, Adam and his family were cast out of the Garden of Eden, the tabernacle of God. This why at Mt Sinai, people were not to come close to the mountain where God was. He is a consuming fire, and they were to keep away. They can only go to the mountain after they have offered sacrifices, the reason why in the Old Testament, sacrifices and offerings were offered by God's people for cleansing.

This is why today, there is to be church discipline – to guard the church from unrepentant members. Without church discipline, judgment will fall on the church, false teaching will creep in unnoticed and unchallenged, and because there is no accountability, sin will increase.

As well, we do not offer animal sacrifices in our worship, because our changed and obedient lives are our living sacrifices. We can go to worship services, Bible studies, retreats and prayer houses, and do daily devotions, but if we walk in disobedience, all are in vain and unacceptable to God; they are as filthy rags in God's sight: *"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired... in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure"* (Heb 10:5-6).

This is why in the heavenly city, *"nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life"* (Rev 21:27). In effect, throughout Biblical history and into eternity, God has nailed a sign at the entrance to his kingdom: *"Unauthorized Persons Keep Out!"*

But Christ removed this warning sign after he accomplished on the cross what God requires of us: a sacrifice for all our sins. Through his offering of body and blood, we can now have authorized access to God's throne of grace, as Hebrews 10:19-22 again says,

"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith."

Unlike the Israelites who can never enter the Tabernacle, whoever has faith in Christ can come boldly into God's tabernacle without fear of judgment.

Second, the Levites were not only guardians of the Tabernacle, they were also its caretakers. God assigned duties to each of the clans of Levi – Gershon, Kohath and Merari. They were to take care of the Tabernacle in camp and carry it during their march to the Promised Land. And they were to perform their duties according to the letter of God's rules and regulations, lest judgment fall upon them, as King Saul, King Uzziah and Uzzah found out. Tragically, Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, suffered the ultimate judgment when they used fire which God had not authorized, and afterwards fire from heaven consumed them.

Today, like the Israelites in the wilderness, we are to worship God only according to what he commands in Scripture. By the first two commandments, we are not to bow down to any other gods or idols. This means that human innovations such as drama, dances, jokes and other entertainment gimmicks are also implicitly forbidden. All true worship elements – prayers, songs, liturgy – are to be Scripture-centered (John 4:24). We are not to add or subtract anything from God's commandments (Deut 4:2; Rev 22:18, 19), because our human minds are corrupt and sinful and *"a factory of idols"* (according to John Calvin).

As the people of God, we have been endowed with many different gifts. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 that we are one body, but many parts, all working in harmony. Every member has his or her own God-given assignment. Each one has a contribution to build up the body of Christ. Some are leaders, others are members. Some care for the sick; others encourage those who are suffering. No member is more valuable than the other. The important thing is to fully use whatever gifts, even how small or how big, God has given to

us individually. As we grow, let us remember these things, so the church would mature spiritually, and not be sundered by divisions.

God appointed his servants in the Tabernacle. God assigned them specific duties. As for the people, they are to worship God because he is the one who redeemed them from sin and death.

God-Redeemed People

Notice that God commanded a census of the firstborn of Israel and the number of the Levites. The number of the firstborn came up to 22, 273, while the Levites numbered 22,000. What was the relationship between these two counts?

God told Moses that all the firstborn and the Levites were his own special possession, *“Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, for all the firstborn are mine”* (3:12-13a). Why did God set apart the Levites and the firstborn? God continues his commandment, *“On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the Lord.”*

The census was connected with the Passover. In the last plague, every firstborn male Egyptian and every firstborn of their cattle died, but the Israelite boys and cattle were spared because of the blood painted on their doorposts. And as a memorial to God’s mercy on Israel, all Israelite firstborn boys and cattle were dedicated to God. That meant the cattle were sacrificed and the boys must serve God in the sanctuary (Exod 11:4–13:15). But after the golden calf incident, the Levites took the place of the firstborn boys (Exod 32:25–29), because the Levites were the only ones among the people who opposed the worship of the golden calf.

Incidentally, the so-called “dedication” of the infant Jesus in the Temple is part of the Mosaic Law: *“Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine”* (Exod 13:2, 12). Because Jesus was the firstborn son (Luke 2:7), he was to be consecrated (“made holy”) to the Lord with the sacrifice of a lamb (Luke 2:23).

This was the reason why the firstborn males had to be counted. They were to be consecrated to God. But since all Israel – except the Levites – sinned when they worshiped the golden calf, the Levites took the place of the firstborn. In our text, each Levite would take the place of each firstborn. The problem was, there were 273 fewer Levites than firstborns, so the 273 extra firstborns had to be redeemed with monetary offerings (Num 3:46-50).

What does this have to do with us? Jesus is the firstborn of God, *“the firstborn of all creation”*; he is the only-begotten Son of God (Col 1:15). As well, Christ is also our Passover Lamb because he offered himself on the cross in order that God would not destroy us. When God saw the blood that he shed on the cross, it was sufficient offering for all of our sins – past, present, future. But this offering becomes an offering for our sins only when we trust Christ as our Redeemer. And because he is the firstborn, all those who have faith in him also become

adopted firstborn children of God (Heb 12:23). This is the great exchange: the Death of the Firstborn Son for the Eternal Life of Adopted Firstborn Children.

In the Old Testament, the firstborn son received a double inheritance from his father. Today, because we are firstborn children of God in Christ, we also have an inheritance waiting for us, *“an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you”* (1 Pet 1:4). We are assured of this eternal inheritance by the seal of his Holy Spirit, *“who is the guarantee of our inheritance until God redeems his possession”* (Eph 1:14).

Conclusion

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, you are to worship God only in the way he has commanded you. As he has appointed priests and Levites to lead them in worship, so ministers, elders and deacons are to lead the church in worship. As he has assigned duties to the Levites in their Tabernacle worship, so the duties of church officers are now given in his Word. As the Levites performed a variety of duties assigned to them by God, so do the members of the church make use of their God-given gifts and talents for the building up of the church.

In the same manner that the Levites were substituted for the redemption of the firstborn sons of Israel, Christ became our substitute so that we might become firstborn children of God. He shed his blood on the cross so that through faith, we might have a guaranteed inheritance in the kingdom of God.

Guaranteed! This means we will never lose this inheritance! Let us rejoice in this knowledge and assurance, making sure of this inheritance through the fruits of the Spirit in us, now and forevermore. AMEN.