

Numbers 8:5–26

Ordained to Service in Support of Worship

Friday, April 19, 2024 • Read Numbers 8:5–26

Questions from the Scripture text: Who spoke to whom in v5? To whom was Moses to do what (v6)? By what three steps (v7)? Then what are they to bring (v8) where (v9)? Whom are they to gather with them (v9–10)? What are the children of Israel to do (v10)? Then who is to do what in v11? After themselves being presented as an offering, what are the Levites to do (v12)? What do they do again in v13? From whom does this separate the Levites (v14)? Unto Whom? What can the Levites then do (v15)? What two things are repeated a third time to conclude this section? Of what do v16–18 remind us (cf. 3:12–13, 45)? Of what does v19 remind us (cf. 3:9)? What three purposes does v19 add? How do the various people and groups respond to YHWH's command (v20)? How does v21 summarize the preparation? What followed (v22)? Who speaks to whom in v23? About whom (v24)? At what age do they enter into the service of the tabernacle? At what age do they stop supporting the worship (v25)? What may they continue to do (v26)? What mustn't they continue to do?

What are we to see in the ordination and work of the Levites? Numbers 8:5–26 prepares us for the evening sermon on the Lord's Day. In these twenty-two verses of Holy Scripture, the Holy Spirit teaches us that **in Christ, our High Priest, all of His saints are designated by God for priestly service as living sacrifices.**

Preparation: cleansing and presentation—cleansing, ordination, separation (v5–15). First things first. Before even speaking of the purposes of their service (v19), the Lord directs how the Levites are to be prepared properly for that service. There is the cleansing (sprinkling, shaving, laundry) of v7—anticipating when Jesus is baptized upon His entrance into His earthly ministry. Then there is the ascension bull with its tribute, together with the sin-offering bull, in v8.

But before the atonement part of this cleansing can be completed, the Levites are ordained. The same leaning/resting that they are going to enact upon the animals in v12, the children of Israel enact upon the Levites in v10.

Throughout their service, and their whole life, a Levite would remember when an Israelite household came and leaned upon them in the place of their head of household. The very memory of the pressure would recall them to the significance of their calling and the fact that the Lord Himself is the One Who designated them for their ministry. This procedure would continue in ordination to church office in the Christian church (cf. Ac 6:6; 1Tim 4:14, 5:22).

With the cleansing and ordination (laying on of hands) completed, the Levites are presented as a wave offering. This is important enough to be mentioned before (v11), during (v13), and after (v15) the actual standing-presentation of them. The significance is that they are separate. They are separated from among the children of Israel (v14a). More emphatically, they are separated unto YHWH Himself (v14b).

We must be cleansed in Christ, and atoned for by Christ as our substitute, before we can enter into service. All of us are baptized into Christ and serve under His high priesthood. Just as the Levites were presented as living sacrifices, every Christian is called to live that way (cf. Rom 12:1). And especially those who are called to office in the church ought to remember both the necessity of their cleansing in Christ as a prerequisite to their call and the weightiness of being designated for that call by God Himself.

Purpose: substitution, work, plague prevention (v16–22). As we learned back in 3:12–13, the Levites were substitutes in the place of Israel as a whole—sanctified unto God against the backdrop of the plague of the firstborn (v16–18). Here, they are saving Israel from a different sort of plague. They are a “gift to Aaron and his sons” (v19), because the priesthood must administer Israel's coming near to the holiness of God. (“sanctuary,” v19).

This is a weighty assignment indeed, because by those who come near, YHWH must be regarded as holy (cf. Lev 10:3), and it is especially Aaron and his sons who distinguish the holy and the unholy, and between the clean and the unclean (cf. Lev 10:10). When Nadab and Abihu added in the slightest to what God had commanded, they were incinerated with miraculous fire (cf. Lev 10:1–2).

So the priests have their hands full administering the drawing near itself. But there's so much demanding logistical work to support the tabernacle service. This is the work for which the Lord gives the rest of the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons. The word translated “work” in v19 (and 22, 24, 26) is actually the word for “service,” which can mean other types of service, but most often means “worship” and is usually the original language word behind “worship” in our English Old Testaments. The Levitical labor in earthly things is very much in service of the worship that is conducted for Israel by Aaron and his sons.

This is similar to the purpose of the diaconate and the eldership in the New Testament. The difference there is that the Great High Priesthood of Jesus has ushered in the priesthood of all believers. So every believer now comes into the holy of holies; Christ's spiritual-worship-officers (elders) oversee this worship, especially by prayer leadership and the ministry of the Word (cf. Ac 6:4). Similarly, every believer has a duty to serve the Lord as they can in His church's earthly maintenance and earthly mercies. The deacons are set over all of that business (cf. Ac 6:3) as a gift to the apostles (and, later, the elders) in much the same way that the Levites are a gift to the priests in Numbers 8. What a blessing YHWH's command was for the priests, and what a blessing was the people's and Levites' obedience (v20–22).

Prime: service done in the prime of life (v23–26). Finally, v23–26 indicate to us the mental and physical strenuousness of the work. They had to be 30 years old to participate in transport or setup/takedown (cf. 4:3, 23, 30, 35). But at the age of 25 they were strong enough and wise enough to enter into the regular service (v24). Then, at the age of 50, they were forced into a semi-retirement (v25) in which they could do other things to help keep what God had commanded, but they would no longer provide labor for the actual worship acts administered by the priests.

There are important principles here. We see the duty to train in anticipation of serving the Lord. We see the wisdom of waiting patiently to ordain or be ordained (cf. 1Tim 3:10, 5:22). We see how important it is to give the Lord's service the prime of our life, the years of sharpest mind and strongest body. We see that those whose abilities for particular tasks have diminished should find less taxing ways to serve and make room for the next ones that the Lord has raised up.

Most importantly, this entire ordination teaches us important things to appreciate about Christ's ministry. He properly prepared for it, was called to it, and consecrated Himself for it. He was all of the offerings, all at once, that atoned for us and brought us near. He gave Himself up in the prime of earthly life and even now in glorious, eternal prime, He always lives to intercede. Hallelujah!

What service would lie ahead of you in this life, in God's ordinary providence? How are you training for it now? How can one be cleansed and atoned for, for the service of the Lord? How have you availed yourself of this cleansing? How do you continue to lay hold of it before the Lord? In what season of life are you right now (pre 25, prime years, or post 50)? How are you applying the lessons of this chapter to that? What implications does the priesthood of all believers have for your duty to serve the church in earthly maintenance and earthly mercy? What officers has Christ given you to oversee that service?

Sample prayer: Lord, thank You for giving to us Christ as our Great High Priest, and giving a priesthood, under Him, to every member of His church. Cleanse us and atone for us by Him, and give us to train and to serve in a manner appropriate to every season of our life. Grant that the proper earthly maintenance of Your church would result in blessed worship that draws near to You in the way that You Yourself define as properly hallowing You. And grant all of this, we ask, in Jesus's Name, AMEN!

Suggested songs: ARP15 “Within Your Tent, Who Will Reside” or TPH404 “The Church's One Foundation”

(The following is a machine-generated transcription. PLEASE BE AWARE of—and patient with—transcribing errors. If there is something confusing or obviously erroneous, you are invited to listen to the audio recording via hopewellarp.org)

Numbers 8, verse 5 through 26. These are God's words. Then Yahweh spoke to Moses saying, take the Levites from among the children of Israel and cleanse them ceremonially. Thus, you shall do to them to cleanse them? Sprinkle water of purification on them. And let them shave all their body and let them wash their clothes.

And so make themselves clean. Then let them take a young bowl with its grain offering of fine flour mixed with oil. And you shall take another young bull as a sin offering. And he shall bring the Levites before the Tabernacle of meeting. And you shall gather together, the whole congregation of the children of Israel.

So you shall bring the Levites before Yahweh and the children of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites. And Aaron shall offer the Levites before Yahweh like a wave

offering. From the children of Israel. That they may perform the work of Yahweh. Then the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the young Bulls.

And you saw for one as a sin offering. And the other as a burnt offering to Yahweh. To make a tournament for the Levites. And you shall stand the Levites before Aaron and his sons. And then offer them like a wave offering to Yahweh. Thus, you shall separate the Levites from among the children of Israel.

And the Levites shall be mine. After that, the Levites shall go in to the service. After that, the Levites shall go into service, the Tabernacle of meeting So you shall cleanse them and offer them like a wave offering. For they are wholly, given to me from among the children of Israel.

I've taken them for myself, instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the children of Israel. For all the firstborn among the children of Israel are mine. Both man and Beast. On the day that I struggle, the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I Sanctified them to myself.

I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn of the children of Israel. And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the children of Israel to do the work for the children of Israel in the Tabernacle of meeting. And to make atonement for the children of Israel.

That there be no plague among the children of Israel when the children of Israel come near. The sanctuary. Thus Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children of Israel did to the Levites. According to all that Yahweh. Commanded Moses concerning the Levites So, the children of Israel did to them, And the Levites purified themselves and washed their clothes.

And then Aaron presented them like a wave offering before Yahweh. And Aaron made atonement for them to cleanse them. After that, the Levites went in to do their work. In the Tabernacle of meeting before, Aaron and his sons. As Yahweh commanded, Moses concerning the Levites. So they did to Then Yahweh spoke to Moses saying.

This is what pertains to the Levites. From 25 years old and above one, may enter to perform service in the work of the Tabernacle of meeting. And at the age of 50 years, they must cease performing this work. And shall work? No more. They may minister with their Brethren in the Tabernacle meeting to attend to needs.

But they themselves shall do no work. Thus, you shall do to the Levites. Regarding their duties. So far, the reading of God. Inspired. And In Aaron twerked.

So, as Israel is getting ready to depart, we have already seen A number of censuses, including Those censuses of. Uh, the Levites by comparison to the firstborn. Of the children of Israel and the number almost matching up and Uh, providing a Redemption price by which The account could be balanced.

So that the Levites would be taken in the place of the firstborn. So, that literally every household in Israel now. Would be represented in the ministry of the Levites and we've also seen the census of the Levites that pertained to their work as far as. Um, Uh, set up and take down and transportation.

Of the Tabernacle structure itself. And now, we have instruction. About the work that the Levites are going to do. Uh, supporting the service of the Tabernacle. They themselves are not the ones through whom. The people of Israel come near. The people of Israel come near by means of the animals that are substituted for them.

And The ministry of Slaughtering the animals. And actually performing the sacrifices is something that belongs to the priesthood to Aaron and his sons very specifically but there's a lot more that must be done as you can imagine as far as wrangling animals and cleanup and making sure that That everything is where it ought to be here hauled away, or when it's they're finished with it or whatever, there's a lot of logistical labor, there's a lot of manual labor Uh, and so just as we see later in Acts chapter 6, Where you have the apostles, who must attend to prayer and the ministry of the word and they say, we are not going to leave this business in order to wait tables, but we will attend to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

We have a precedent here. That the Levites are given to the sons of Aaron. They are. They? To stand, or Uh, Aaron is to stand. Uh, before Uh, Aaron and his sons. Sorry. Aaron offers them in verse 11 but it's Moses who stands them. So verse 13. Um, in verse 13, Moses is to stand the Levites before Aaron and his sons and offer them like a wave offering to Yahweh.

And the Levites then are given as a gift. Uh, to Aaron and his sons verse 19. I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons And in other places we have seen and we'll see. Uh, that the Levites would also administer. Uh, that which is given for the poor.

Uh, so there really is a Um, So the Levites really are a predecessor to the office of the diaconate. Uh, Help with the distribution to the poor and especially in this chapter in this context they take care of those physical logistical things that are not actually a part of the worship leading itself.

So that the priesthood. So that Aaron and his sons, Can attend. Uh, The people's Drawing Near to God through the substitute. Um, The Levites are given to them as a gift. To handle other logistical things. Very similarly. It is very serious. Uh, for those who are Elders in the church, That they attend to the ministry of prayer.

And the teaching of the word, And they do, so, Uh, with the carefulness of those who know that these are the things in which Jesus, the high priest are one remaining high priest. Leads our worship from. So it's very important that it be done properly on Earth. So that we may genuinely join with Christ and be led by Christ from Heaven.

Similarly, then in this type and this foreshadowing that we have. In the Tabernacle service, it was so important. That the high priest and the high Priestly family, that Aaron and his sons lead the worship properly, perform the sacrifices properly, do nothing, but what the Lord had commanded and we've already seen how important that was.

The whole reason for needing to learn about the cleanliness code and the Holiness code was because the Tabernacle was defiled on its first full day of regular service, By the offering by nadab and abahu. Of the unauthorized fire, which Yahweh had not Uh, command it. And so also in this passage, we have several times Uh, that the one of the purposes here is that there would be no plague upon the children of Israel when they draw near to God in the sanctuary.

This is a life-saving regulation. Just as the regulative principle is a life-saving regulation. Well, one of the things that enables Aaron and his sons to attend, well, To their Ministry and worship leadership. Administering, the people of Israel drawing near to God in his holy place in his Sanctuary. One of the things that enables them to do so is the ministry of the Levites.

Uh, the Levites here are presented as A Living Sacrifice. Now, we've had that word. Or that phrase recently in our Romans, Preaching in Romans 12, 1 offer your bodies as living sacrifices well this is what the Levites would know. Would remember From the day of their ordination. Uh, when the hand laying and really, it's the hand leaning ceremony.

If you remember back to when we were first starting to, Uh study the offerings and hear about think about the offerings in the Book of Leviticus and there's the laying The hand of hands on. The animal that's going to be the substitute. We talked about how that's a leaning.

That's a letting Your weight rests upon them. There would be pressure there. And the Levites. I'll do this themselves with the bowls that are offered in their behalf one as

an atonement for sin, and One as a substitute in whom they Ascend, so there's an Ascension offering and the sin offering for them here.

Uh, but Before that. They would remember the experience. You can imagine. Uh, you know how many thousands of Levites and um, How many hundreds of thousands of Israelites? And rather than, Each Israelite household be represented before God in their firstborn. Who is the heir before God, and has a headship role?

Uh, as far as civil. Um, In the civil sphere, he has a headship role. Instead of each family gathering around him. Uh, each family would be gathered around a levite. And it must have been quite an assembly because he said, bring all of the Levites to the Tabernacle, then bring the whole assembly of the children of Israel to the Tabernacle And let the whole assembly lay their hands on the Levites.

Uh, and at first that sounds like chaos to us. Because you're thinking of assembly of several million people laying their hands on Um, on the Levites, but really it was one household per Levi. It wasn't it. Uh, there would be Um, There would be some stragglers who would have to attach themselves to another one.

You remember the, the small remainder that was left over. Uh, but this would be very poignant, very Uh, significant. Uh, leave a significant impression upon the Israelites. Uh, each of whom. Was laying his hand. The pressure on the Levite. Um, And it would be very poignant in the memory of the levite as well of that day.

The day that The other Israelites. Uh, came and he could remember the feel Of the hands on him and the pressure. Uh, that was rested on him and he would know that he is being offered to God, not like the two Bulls, praise God, because he wouldn't have his throat slit.

And then we set on fire. Uh, but he was as dead to his own service, his own life. As those bowls would be. He was now to devote himself to the support of the Priestly Ministry. So that the worship of God could probably properly be led. In the church in this, of course, is What our Lord Jesus has done.

He Uh, not only the great high priest, but he had no helper. He was his own helper, he devoted himself, Just as the Levites. Um, Here at the edge of 25. And you remember, Entering in upon the Priestly Ministry would be at the age of 30. Uh, Jesus says both.

Is our great high priest and it was at the age of 30 that he was baptized. And he went through. A ordination. As it were. Uh, because he was going to be our substitute. And our faith. Rests upon liens upon lets the weight of our pressure and our need.

Rest upon the Lord Jesus Christ. As our high priest as the levite. Or the Fulfillment of the levitical priesthood, and In which he did everything. Uh, that was necessary for our atonement and as our sacrifice, The one who takes away, our sins is in offering and trespass offering for us.

The one in whom we Ascend, The. Uh, in whom we have peace with God and fellowship and enjoy. God's own portions. Um, Uh, or enjoy portions with God from The same fellowships all of the different things. The Lord Jesus, of course is the ultimate fulfillment. Of these Levites. And so for us a couple primary applications one, Uh, that you would remember and rest upon Uh, the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who brings you near to God.

And praise God. There's no plague. When you come near through him, he fulfills his Priestly Ministry perfectly correctly. Uh, he has offered himself as A sufficient abundant toning sacrifice once for all. Uh, and he continues interceding. Um, he pleads the merits. Worthiness of that sacrifice and Uh, make sure that everything That he secured.

And being our substitute everything that he secured for us will surely be obtained and applied. And completed. Um, But then in the second place an application here, especially since We are in a season of Um, ordaining. Deacons That we would. Pray to the Lord that he would. Help. The men whom we have as deacons to oversee our own Ministry of service.

Um, because The deacons are not the ones. The Fulfillment of the political priesthood. The deacons are not the ones who do. All of the logistical work, they oversee it. The whole body are priests. This doctrine of the priesthood of all believers where Jesus has made us all, A royal priesthood and kings and Priests unto, our God.

That we would. Prepare, and to be ready. To do whatever is necessary to Facilitate the ministry and the worship of the congregation that the Lord would be worshiped. Well, Uh, whereby we would look to him. Uh, to come in power and save many and to grow his people in the grace and the knowledge of Christ and all of the wonderful things.

For which he has appointed the worship. But especially That the Lord would be glorified properly in it. And that Christ himself as both the Lord, and the one through whom we come to the Lord. Would be glorified properly. Uh, The worship. And so there's a preparation and a dedication here.

Uh, that Applies to us. As well. Let's, Our Father in Heaven. We pray that you Help us. To remember and rest upon the Lord Jesus as our substitute. Thank you. That you have accepted his service. In our place and reward us. According To what he has done. And thank you that.

Although, our service does not earn anything from you. You have given to us to serve to be living sacrifices. To participate. Um, Your worship Drawing Near to you. And the support of The ministry of the means of Grace. And so we pray that your Holy Spirit would help us.

Uh, to take. Now, what we do in your church and our role in your church, Um, Seriously, and treat it. Waiterly. Like these Levites also. We're called to do, so help us, Lord we ask In Jesus name, amen.