

Priests and Levites¹



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 14

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Numbers 9; Numbers 18; Numbers 19; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 14:6–12.

MEMORY VERSE: “The Lord spoke to Aaron. . . . ‘I am your share. I am what you will receive among the people of Israel’ ” (Numbers 18:20, NIV).

GOD PUT A STOP TO KORAH'S REBELLION (WAR AGAINST GOD). And the test of the staffs had ended. God showed everyone that Moses and Aaron were the leaders He had chosen. But it became necessary to describe more carefully the separate duties between the priests and Levites. Each group had their special work to do, and the Lord clearly drew the lines between those duties. All these duties disappeared a long time ago. But there still are lessons we can learn from them for today.

For example, think about how special and serious these duties were. They teach us how we need to take seriously our special duties, whatever they are.

Notice, too, just how much these people needed one another and the nation, as a whole. We certainly can learn lessons from that closeness today as a church group.

Also, pay attention to how important grace² is in these chapters. Read about the gifts given these people who did not even earn them. They had these positions only because God gave those positions to them. They had done nothing to deserve them in and of themselves.

What a powerful symbol³ of the gospel!⁴

1. Levites—Hebrews from the tribe of Levi.

2. grace—God's gift of forgiveness and mercy (kindness) that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

3. symbol—an object, mark, sign, or person that stands for, or means the same thing as, another object, idea, or thing.

4. gospel—the good news that Jesus saves us from our sins; the good news about salvation.

SUNDAY—NOVEMBER 15**THE DIVIDING OF LABOR
(Exodus 19:5, 6)**

How meaningful are the words in Exodus 19:5, 6 to us today, as a church, in spreading God's message to the world? Does this calling require a full surrender?⁵ Read 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 14:6–12.

In Numbers 18:1, the Lord wanted to give a promise to the worshipers that they would not die (Numbers 17:13). But they would have to come to the sanctuary⁶ through His specially chosen priests. The priests would act as mediators⁷ between them and the Lord. The priests were a special group from the rest of the Levites. The priests were responsible for making sure that no one should come into the tabernacle⁸ who did not belong there. In this way, the tabernacle would not be defiled.⁹ This would quiet down the fears of the people who were afraid that in coming near the tabernacle they risked death.

What special honors were made in the roles given these men in Numbers 18:1–7?

It is important to understand that all the nation was to be a "kingdom of priests." But only certain people



The priests served as go-betweens for God and His people.

were honored with special roles. A good example is the setting apart of the Levites and the family of Aaron from the rest of Israel. And then we find the separation made between Aaron's family and the Levites. Clearly, in New Testament times, this kind of practice with the Levites was no longer in use. But we find in the New Testament special duties in the church (1 Corinthians 12:28–31; Ephesians 4:11).

What are your gifts? How could you better use them to serve your local church?

5. surrender—the act of giving one's whole life to Jesus to love and serve Him and to obey His holy law.

6. sanctuary—the home of God on earth in early Bible times. Here the high priest offered prayers and the blood of animals to God for the sins of the people of Israel.

7. mediators—priests who served as "peacemakers" between God and His people.

8. tabernacle—the place of worship or house of God in the wilderness (empty land; tent).

9. defiled—to be made impure (not pure); foul or bad.

MONDAY—NOVEMBER 16**THE GIFTS IN GOD'S SERVICE
(Numbers 18:1–7)**

The Lord's instruction in Numbers 18:1–7 contains several important points. First, the Lord makes it clear that He is the One placing people in these positions. Perhaps God wanted to make this point because of the past problems with Korah and his followers and also with Miriam and Aaron against Moses. There should be no question as to why certain people were given special duties. They were appointed (chosen) because God put them there—period.

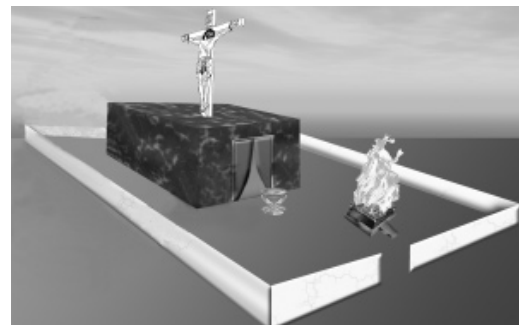
Notice, too, another reason the Lord wanted to make certain jobs special and separate. It was so that His "anger will not fall on the people of Israel" (Numbers 18:5, NIV). Here, again, we notice God's mercy¹⁰ even among such powerful judgments.¹¹ God tries to save His people, not judge or destroy them. The whole plan of salvation¹² from start to finish shows the Lord's desire to save sinful beings from sin (John 3:16–18).

What word is used to describe what the Levites are to the priesthood and what the priesthood was to Aaron's family? What lessons should we learn from it?

When you think of a gift, you think of something that is not earned. It is

completely by grace. This gift was an honor given to these people. This gift is given not because of anything they do but simply through God's grace. In the end, the Lord needed someone to do this work. And in His wisdom, these were the ones He chose.

Of course, with this holy task came holy responsibilities (duties). Issues of life and death, both of the body and of the spirit, were involved here. This is because the tabernacle was the place where God lived on earth. The sanctuary also was the model (example) for what Jesus would do here on earth and for His ministry (work) in heaven (Hebrews 9). It was like a miniature (tiny) Calvary being played out through the examples of the earthly sanctuary and its service. The future of souls lay in the balance. This is why the Lord placed great value on the positions given to these men.



The sanctuary service was an example of what Jesus would do here on earth on the cross and His work in heaven as our High Priest.

Think about your talents, whatever they are. No matter how hard

10. mercy—kindness we do not deserve.

11. judgments—the punishments received for doing wrong.

12. plan of salvation—what God has done and is doing to save us from sin.

you work to develop them, they are still gifts. They are given to you by God. What are you doing with those gifts? Are you using them for yourself or for the good of others and for the spreading of the Lord's work? Might you need to do some serious soul searching and changing?

TUESDAY—NOVEMBER 17

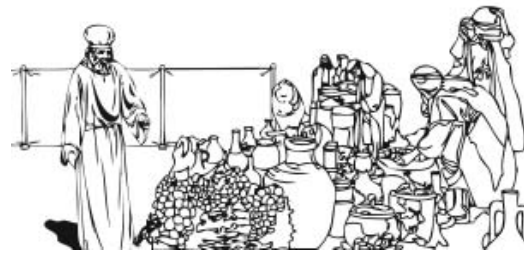
**SANCTUARY SUPPORT
(Numbers 18:8–20)**

The Lord has shown the difference between the two groups of religious workers—the priests and the Levites. Next He gives instruction about how they were to be supported through the offerings the people brought to the Lord. The positions of the priests and Levites were full-time. So, they did not “serve tables” (Acts 6:2, KJV) or do other work to support themselves. The support had to come from elsewhere.

Which points in Numbers 18:8–20 hold the most meaning for you?

Many interesting thoughts come through these verses. For example, notice how closely the Lord related the offering given to Him with what was given to the priesthood. The offerings and gifts were made to Him, but He gave them to the priests. So, by giving the offering to the Lord, the people were at the same time giv-

ing them to the priests. This practice shows the close connection between the Lord and the priests, who served as living bridges between God and the people.



God gave to the priests the offerings the people gave to Him.

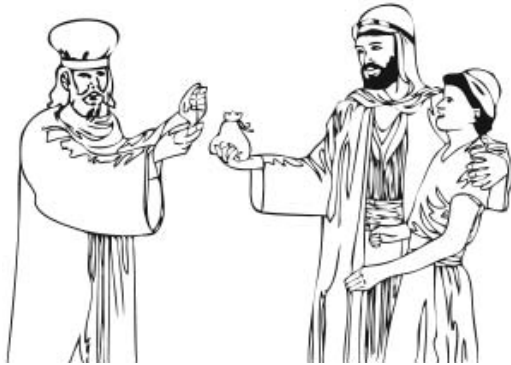
At the same time, we notice the priests as people too. They served in this honored position. But they were still depending on the people they served for their support. The people gave the priests their best oil, wine, and grain. So, in this way, the giving reminded the priests of their responsibility (duty) to serve these people faithfully. They also remembered not to take advantage of¹³ the position they had been given.

Also, to save a child or an animal by means of money was one of the ways the Lord taught Israel to understand what a substitute¹⁴ was. It taught the people to believe that Christ would give His life as a Substitute for sinners (read 1 Peter 1:18, 19). Salt, added to every sacrifice, was a symbol that showed God's unchanging covenant (promise; relationship) with His people (read Leviticus 2:13).

13. take advantage of—to make use of someone or something for one's own gain.

14. substitute—someone or something that takes the place of another person or thing. Jesus is our Substitute because He died for our sins.

What kind of work for God have you been given to do? How faithful are you in doing the duties that others are trusting you with? How could you be more faithful in doing your work?



To save a child or an animal by money was one way God showed Israel how He meant to take our place on the cross.

WEDNESDAY—NOVEMBER 18

THE TITHING¹⁵ PLAN (Numbers 18:21–32)

The tribe of Levi had no land. But they were given 48 cities. Thirteen of the cities were for the families of the priests (Joshua 21:19). The Lord declared that He was their “part” instead of land (Numbers 18:20).

The priests received part of the offerings brought to the Lord. According to Numbers 18:21–32, how else did the Lord provide for both priests and Levites?

Returning a tithe¹⁶ to the Lord of the money or goods one earns (Leviticus

27:30) was a very old practice. It is first mentioned in the Bible when Abraham gave tithes to Melchizedek, king-priest of Salem (Genesis 14:18–20; Hebrews 7:1, 2). Jacob promised the Lord he would give “the tenth” of all he would earn in the future (Genesis 28:22). And now the Lord changes the use of Israel’s tithe. He now declares it should go to support the entire Levitical tribe, including the priests’ families.

The Levites were paid in tithe, but they tithed too. Their tithe went to Aaron. The Levites were to give the “best part” of what they received as tithe. So, tithe went toward the support of the priesthood. It also helped the Levites remember that they depended on God. It also helped them remember that all they received was from Him too. They needed to show their thankfulness to God by faithfully returning the “tithe of the tithe.” If the people always needed to remember their dependence upon the Lord, then the Levites needed to do so much more!

What point should be learned in Numbers 18:32 about the holiness of the Levites’ work?

In God’s plan, everyone had their part. Everyone had something to do. The priests and the Levites had their holy duties to carry out in the service and ministry (work done for God) in the sanctuary. And the people had their work in the paying of a faithful

15. tithing—giving back to God one-tenth of what one earns.

16. tithe—one-tenth of what one earns.

tithe. The tithe was a small thing for the people to give in return for what the Levites and priesthood did for them. In a sense, all the different groups were dependent upon the work of one another. And all were dependent upon the Lord.

THURSDAY—NOVEMBER 19

THE RED HEIFER (YOUNG COW) (Numbers 19)

In Numbers 19, we read about the sacrifice of a perfect red heifer that never had been yoked.¹⁷ What lessons about the sanctuary service¹⁸ can we learn from it?

This heifer was to be red, a symbol of blood, Christ's blood. It had to be born without anything wrong with it too. It was never to have carried a yoke,¹⁹ another symbol of Christ. He was a spotless sacrifice. He chose freely to do the work of atonement (sin-payment and forgiveness). There was no burden or heavy yoke upon Him. This is because He was not under the control (power) of anyone except the Father, and He was over all the law.

The red heifer was taken outside the camp and killed. So Christ also suffered (was killed) outside the gates of

Jerusalem (Hebrews 13:12). Calvary also was outside the city walls. This location shows that Christ did not die for the Hebrews alone but for all people (Romans 5:12–20). He preaches to a sinful world that He has come to be its Savior. He also encourages all people to accept the salvation He offers.

After killing the heifer, the white-robed priest took the blood with his finger as it came from the body of the victim. The priest then sprinkled the blood toward the tabernacle seven times. In the same way, Christ in His own spotless righteousness (holiness) gave His blood. Then He entered into the heavenly sanctuary²⁰ to work for the sinner's good. And there Christ's blood is brought into the service of reuniting²¹ God to us (read Hebrews 10:21–23).

The body of the heifer was burned to ashes. The ashes symbolized (showed) a full sacrifice. The ashes were then gathered up by a clean and pure person who had not touched a dead body. He put the ashes in a clean place outside the camp. These were used for the ceremony of cleansing.²² When the ceremony of cleansing was to be done, the ashes were placed in a vessel (bowl or cup; container). The vessel was filled with water from a running stream. Then a clean and pure person dipped a

17. yoked—when two draft (work) animals are joined at the heads or necks by a wooden bar or frame for the purpose of making them work together as though they were one animal.

18. sanctuary service—the offering of animal blood as a payment for sin. The animal blood was offered in place of the sinner's blood. This service represented Jesus' dying on the cross for our sins. After Jesus died, this service was not needed.

19. yoke—a wooden bar or frame by which two draft (work) animals (such as oxen) are joined at the heads or necks for working together.

20. heavenly sanctuary—the place in heaven where Jesus works as our High Priest before the throne of God.

21. reuniting—joined together again as one heart and mind and spirit.

22. ceremony of cleansing—read Numbers 19:9–19. A ritual (service) to purify (make clean) a person who had come into contact with a dead body.

bunch of hyssop²³ in the water. He then sprinkled the water from the vessel upon the tent in which a person had died and on any person who touched the dead body, or a bone or a grave. He did this on the third and seventh days of one week. After the week had passed, then the unclean were made pure again.

The cleansing²⁴ water was sprinkled on the unclean. It symbolized the blood of Christ. His blood had been spilled to cleanse (make pure) us from all kinds of sin. The many sprinklings show how complete the work is that is done for the repenting²⁵ sinner. All that he has must be made holy. The sinner's own soul should be washed clean and pure. But he or she also should seek to be made pure and holy in all parts of his or her life.

Think about your life. What things still need to be made pure? What are you holding on to that you should let go of, and why?

FRIDAY—NOVEMBER 20

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “God’s plan in the tithing system is beautiful, simple, and fair to all people. All may take hold of it in faith and courage because it comes from God Himself. His plan is not only simple, but it is useful to all, as well. And it does not require a great deal of education or learning to understand and do it. All may feel that they can act a part in carrying forward the important work of salvation. Every man, woman, and youth may become a treasurer for the Lord. And every one

of them may be responsible for meeting the needs of the treasury. . . .

“Great things are done by this system. If one and all would accept it, each would be made a watchful and faithful treasurer for God. And there would be nothing lacking in carrying forward the great work of preaching the last message of warning to the world.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, page 223.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① What are some of the issues about tithe in the church today? Why is tithing so important, not just for the work of the church but for the spiritual health of the one who pays tithe?
- ② Go back over Thursday’s study on the red heifer. What does it tell us about Christ’s death and His ministry for us? What does it tell us about our need to be cleansed from sin? What has Christ done that helps us to win the battle over sin?
- ③ Think about your home. Are there things there that you need to cleanse (get rid of)? These things could be defiling your home—books, DVDs, music, magazines. Whatever they are, why should you get rid of them?
- ④ What are ways that we can help young people in our church use their God-given talents for the Lord? How can we help guide people to use their gifts for the right purposes? What is our duty in helping them?

23. hyssop—an herb used in Bible times for cleansing purposes.

24. cleansing—having the power to make something pure and clean.

25. repenting—being sorry for your sins and turning away from your sins.