

“Thanking God for the Ministries He’s Given Us”

Numbers 4

The Book of Numbers is appropriately named for the two main censuses of the Israelites in Ch. 1, which is the original generation that came out of the exodus from Egypt. And then in Ch. 26, almost 40 years later, the next generation who will enter the Promised Land are counted. But there’s also the counting of the Levites in Ch.’s 3-4 because of their special service concerning the Tabernacle (or Tent of Meeting).

In Ex. 25-40 Moses received the instructions from God on how to build the Tabernacle. In Leviticus we learn what kind of sacrifices are made at the Tabernacle and why, as well as what laws and holy days to observe. In Numbers 3-4 God tells Moses He’s going to pick the tribe of Levi to serve in the Tabernacle. Moses and Aaron were descendants of Levi. God chose Aaron to be Israel’s first priest (and high priest) and only direct descendants of Aaron could serve as priests. The Levites were chosen to assist the sons of Aaron. The main difference between direct sons of Aaron (priests) and Levites was the priests could go into the holy place but the Levites could not.

When we read Ch.’s 3 & 4, we need to read it with the knowledge that some of these Levites, from Kohath in Ch. 16 will rebel against Moses and Aaron and they wanted to be in charge like Aaron and his sons. As we see what their responsibilities were here in Ch. 4, it’s apparent that some became discontent with their roles. Discontentment is rooted in a thankless attitude. We were reminded that God chose the Levites by grace alone to be those who would help with the ministry at the Tabernacle. No one earned their ministry responsibilities based on human effort or character. God sovereignly assigned them.

There’s a clear application to us who, as we saw last week from 1 Pet. 2:5 that now we are all God’s priests offering up spiritual sacrifices of praise to God.

⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... ⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We have all received spiritual gifts given by God’s grace from the Holy Spirit:

^{1 Cor. 12:4} Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

Our gifts have been assigned to us. Our human talents came to us ultimately through God, who made us. Whether it’s the Levites who were apportioned specific ministry responsibilities from

God, or you and I who have been appointed spiritual gifts by God's Spirit, we all need to be thankful. To thank God for His gifts presumes we are thankful for our salvation since that's the only way we are able to serve God. We're reminded here again:

Never Stop Thanking God for Your Salvation **(3:1; 4:1)**

Ch. 4 begins, *The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,*

Why was God speaking to Moses and Aaron? Because God chose Moses and Aaron to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. The reason they were where they were now was because God rescued all of them. The reason why they have a ministry to serve God at all was because God redeemed them. Sadly, as we know, many Israelites grumbled about the conditions of their freedom. Sometimes they wished they could go back to their former way of life because the past always looks better when we're facing temporary hardship.

Do you really want to go back to being oppressed into forced labour? Think about this for a minute. With no land of your own and no future hope of freedom? Discontentment is rooted in our spiritual dementia when we forget that God rescued us from a purposeless life. God gave us hope and eternal life and put His Spirit in our hearts and now we know true joy and purpose in this life, let alone a great future with no suffering or pain in God's presence. If 94% of Canadians are unsaved, think of how blessed we are to have been given spiritual understanding of who Jesus is, why He came and died for our sins and what we get to look forward to. We still experience temporal hardship since we live in a world impacted by sin and sinners, but Jesus said to take courage when tough things happen because He overcame them and therefore, so will we. (John 16:33).

God established holy days in Israel to remind them about their salvation. At every Passover Feast, the children were expected to ask this question as stated in Deut. 6:20-25,

²⁰ In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?" ²¹ tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²² Before our eyes the Lord sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. ²³ But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers.

Like Israel, God rescued us and now gives us the pleasure of serving Him. We see this illustrated for us here when God divides the ministry responsibilities of the Tabernacle between Levi's three sons, Gershom, Kohath and Merari. And while most of these duties are physical – we see the words 'carry' and 'work' and 'cover' and 'service' numerous times – if it's for God, then it's always holy.

All Ministry is Holy **(3:11-13; 4:1-20)**

Back in Ch. 3:11 when God explained why He chose Levi's sons to be the priests' helpers, He said this:

¹¹ The Lord also said to Moses, ¹² "I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine, ¹³ 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 man or animal. They are to be mine. I am the Lord.”

The verb ‘set apart’ in Hebrew is *kadosh* or translated “holy” when an adjective. God sets us apart to Himself and our ministry is set apart for Him. It is holy, even carrying furniture and pounding tent pegs in the ground and hanging tent curtains. The holiness of the work is emphasized in vv.4-14 as only Aaron and his sons can handle the holy objects in the tent of meeting that must be properly covered so as not to be seen and handles were in place so as not to be touched. Instead of first-born Gershon’s family getting the great responsibility of carrying the ark and furniture, second born Kohath’s family are given this responsibility.

The New Testament writers use “holy” to describe our set apartness for God and our need to live a holy/set apart life.

¹ Pet. 1:14 As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵ But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶ for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” [quoting Lev. 11:44-45]

The apostle Paul also describes us to live a holy life using sacrificial language in Rom. 12:1-2

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Our holiness is not just confined to ministry within the context of the church or parachurch but all of life is now seen as ministry. Our life is to be a living sacrifice. That means we constantly need to be alerted to showing and speaking as if we are set apart for God to a world that doesn’t know God. Pounding tent pegs into the ground was holy because it prepared people to encounter God. So every act of obedience done in faith is holy ministry because we’re preparing either, God’s people to encounter God through worship and the Word or we’re pre-paring unsaved people through a visual or verbal witness to come and encounter God for the first time. That’s what makes all ministry holy: either in the background or foreground we are always preparing or helping people to encounter the one true God.

Verses 1-20 focus on Aaron and their sons handling of the ‘holy objects’, all the things inside the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies that must be properly covered before the Kohathites can carry it with handles. They are severely warned not to touch any of the holy objects because to touch it brings death. This actually happened in 2 Sam. 6:6-7 when David first sought to bring the ark to Jerusalem. David and the priests failed to properly prepare it for moving, putting it on a cart being pulled by oxen. When an ox slipped and the cart wobbled, a man named Uzzah went to stop it from falling but was struck down by God. They later learned how the right way to carry it on poles and it finally came to Jerusalem with much celebration.

When Isaiah saw a vision of God (in Is. 6) and the six-winged seraphim who constantly cry out ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts ...’ two of their six wings cover their faces. In other words, they are not to look into the face of God. God is holy. We are to treat Him as such and since He lives inside us by His Holy Spirit, we are to seek to be holy in all that we do.

If all ministry is holy then it seems rather obvious but is worth stating

All Ministry is Necessary **(4:21-33)**

The Kohathites got to carry the Holy Place furniture. What about Gershom's family? They were assigned to carry all the curtains. The holy place was set apart with curtains and a covering on top. The outer court where the sacrifices were done was also covered with curtains. The Gershomites were responsible to listen to Aaron and his sons in handling all that.

And what about the Merarites? They carried the posts, the bases, the ropes and the tent pegs which anchored the structure, where worship could happen. And to put it up the Merarites would go first, setting the bases, making sure the posts were secure so the Gershomites could hang the curtains and coverings and then when that was in place the Kohathites would bring in the furniture and the priests would set it up. And when they moved out they'd do it all over again, exactly the same thing in the same order by the same people.

Everyone's work was necessary for worship to happen properly. Yes, it may have been more exciting to carry the ark than it was tent pegs or curtains, but without the tent pegs nothing would stay together. Your ministry role may be very routine or background but without it things would not go well.

Why do we need to read about how many were counted? Because each one counted! Each one was important and were necessary in preparing people to strengthen their relationship with God. Even the ordinary, mundane, routine parts of ministry.

If we take one or two of those mundane, background, routine parts of our ministry out and something falls apart. Which pre-vents us or distracts us from hearing from God clearly in worship, Word and fellowship. When we're unprepared spiritually and head out to work or school or sports or clubs, we most likely will either miss an opportunity to represent God to others or do it poorly. And then we spiritually chastise ourselves for being ill-prepared. Our roles are different. Our relationships are with different people. But our responsibility is the same: use our gifts in our roles and jobs and relationships to prepare people to draw near to God. Stay thankful that you get to do that as God's purpose in life.

And we don't do ministry alone and God chose a family to work together as a team to help people draw near to God.

Do we ...

Thank God for Our Ministry Family **(4:33-49)**

Moses, Aaron, Levi and his 3 sons were all family. We often overlook that. The rebellion in Ch. 16 is between family members. But whether its our biological families or our spiritual families, we have little choice over our family. God brings us together to work together and so we need to be thankful for the family we have – both of them.

We don't know if Gershom, Kohath and Merari got along well as children or their children got along with their cousins. And now God divides the responsibilities between the three. Ironically, it's not Gershom's family or Merari's family that will be jealous of Kohath's role. It's Kohath's grandson Korah's rebellion against Aaron's sons and grandsons' roles. It's always sad to hear of family discord or estranged family members.

We have the family we live with. We have our 'work' family; people we work with day to day that we develop relationships with. Some we get along great with and work well with, others . . . not so much. We have recreational 'families'. A team, a club, a group. We join a group or team and we don't always click but for the sake of the group or team we work together. And of course we have our 'church' families, which of all these families is the only one that's eternal. Some of us sadly will not see all our biological family members in eternity; nothing is sadder than that. But we will spend eternity together, which means we should thank God for each other. Because what we're doing together matters for eternity.

Be thankful for those whom God has given us to live with, work with, play with which makes those relationships healthier, for sure. But how much more valuable is our relationships as God's children? Did you know Jesus prayed for His ministry family hours before His crucifixion knowing they would abandon Him at His arrest?

John 17:6 "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. . . .⁹ I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. . . . protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.

Jesus acknowledged God's sovereignty in those God gave Him to work with. And Jesus didn't ask God why He gave Him followers who wouldn't always listen to Him. Instead He prayed for them to remain strong and grow as one with Him and each other. Jesus served them as well as served with them.

The next time we're tempted to grumble about our ministry or about someone else's lack of involvement or failures in their tasks, remember to serve them like Jesus and pray for their strengthening like Jesus did, even when they blow it. There is no perfect biological family or perfect church family. God brings us together to serve each other for His glory and our mutual need to help each other draw closer to God

The main purpose the Levites had in serving at the Tabernacle is really the main purpose we have in serving God in all of life. Which is to help people draw near to God. The Levites work at the Tabernacle was to assist the priests in offering the sacrifices of the people for their sins so people can be forgiven and draw near to God. They prepared people to get closer to God. Isn't that our role in all of life whether its work, family, recreation and church is to use our spiritual gifts, abilities and resources to either help people find a relationship with God through Jesus Christ or help one another draw closer in our relationship with God?

The Levites were chosen by grace to serve God and represent others to God. We are saved by grace. We are called, predestined, justified and will be glorified one day. Our spiritual gifts and talents and resources and relationships and jobs and children are all grace, grace, grace. That's why we need to stay thankful and be content with God's assigned tasks for us.

The Kohathites who would get the responsibility to carry the furniture could not look at it. And later on a few of them grew discontent and thought, they too should be able to handle them and see them. Some of Kohathites failed to appreciate the grace of God in their life. A few grumbled enough to spread their bitterness which resulted in a major confrontation and loss of life. The root of thanklessness, bitterness and grumbling spreads quickly, even among God's people. It can infect us and affect others and cause us to lose our joy in life.

Thank God for His grace in your life and be content with what God has for you right now. God called us to serve Him and glorify Him together. Our tasks change over time; we move; we change jobs; kids grow up, we retire, but if we're still alive we need to help people encounter God in their life.

I hope that almost everyday you thank God for His hand on your life. That you thank Him like David said in Ps. 16:11

You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand