

"Are We Ready to Serve God?"

Numbers 8

Whether we realize it or not – most likely not because chapter divisions often separate us from the context – when we come to Ch. 8 we are in the Holy of Holies and God is about to speak to Moses! Go back to 7:89

7:89 When Moses entered the Tent of Meeting to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the atonement cover on the ark of the Testimony. And he spoke with him. 8:1

The Lord said to Moses, ² "Speak to Aaron and say to him, 'When you set up the seven lamps, they are to light the area in front of the lampstand.' " ³ Aaron did so; he set up the lamps so that they faced forward on the lampstand, just as the Lord commanded Moses. ⁴ This is how the lampstand was made: It was made of hammered gold—from its base to its blossoms. The lampstand was made exactly like the pattern the Lord had shown Moses.

God makes a big deal of dedicating the tabernacle for its use with 12 straight days of pomp and ceremony with each tribe bringing expensive gifts and sacrifices to God, symbolizing their unity, enjoying a big barbecue together all to prepare it so that people can know the true God of the world through worship. But doesn't it seem a little anti-climactic that once this is all done, Moses can go into the Holy of Holies and we get to hear what God says to Moses directly, and He tells him where to place the furniture?

Clearly, God has a reason for where everything goes and how it's all supposed to work. And then in vv.5-26 we're told how the Levites are prepared to serve God. This makes sense since Ch. 7 and 8 are one unit and the final teaching before heading out to the Promised Land. Since Ch. 7 illustrated how people approach God through worship, it only follows that Ch. 8 illustrates for how they prepare themselves to serve God. All of us serve God in some capacity; sometimes in a more formal structured way but sometimes in an informal way. Either way, we need to be prepared to serve God every day, whether it's something we plan to do or a situation that pops up in the middle of our day. It could be an opportunity to serve Him by witnessing, helping meet a need or giving wise counsel or encouragement or praying for someone. We still need to have a spirit of readiness because we never know when God might call on us to serve Him.

This ceremony of dedicating and preparing the Levites for serving at the Tabernacle gives us some spiritual principles on how we should get ready to serve God every day. We begin with instructions concerning the Lampstand or Menorah. The menorah was to be placed on the south side of the Holy Place with the lamps giving light to the "front" which contained the altar of incense to the left (west), the table of showbread directly in front (north) and the entrance to the tent on the right (east) [show picture].

There was no window in the Tabernacle, so the Menorah provided the only light and the Menorah represented the light of God Himself. So, clearly God is communicating to all His people an important truth:

Without God's Light We Can Do Nothing
(8:1-4)

As obvious that people needed to see what they were doing, God was enabling His people to serve Him also. God ensures that light is provided so ministry can go on. A very legitimate application to this is that God Himself is the light who enables us and empowers us to serve Him. Many verses speak of God as our light. David said in Ps. 27:1,

*The LORD is my light and my salvation — whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?*

When we get to the New Jerusalem and all sin is gone it's God's light that shines forever (since the sun and moon are gone). We read in Rev. 22:3

³No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever & ever.

He is the light and He provides the light. God empowers us to do the work He asks us to do if we follow Him. How do we know how to follow Him? Ps. 119 says

*¹⁰⁵Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.
¹⁰⁶I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws.*

V.105 literally reads 'your word is a lamp to my foot', singular; God's Word lights the way for each step we take in obedience to Him. Wouldn't it be nice if the New Testament affirmed God's Word lights our way?

The New Testament follows this God/Jesus is light imagery. 1 John 1:5,

⁵This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

Since Jesus is the Son of God and the exact representation of His character, the Bible says Jesus is our light and salvation too. In John 8 Jesus said,

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

God and Jesus are our light and salvation. He provides the light and the ability to do His work when we follow/obey His Word as it lights our path. Without the light no one could serve Him then and no one can serve Him now.

John 15:5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

The New Testament describes salvation as coming into the light and continuing to walk in the light of truth not the darkness of sin.

John 1:6 There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world

Eph. 5:8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light⁹ (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)¹⁰ and find out what pleases the Lord.

While Num. 8 doesn't mention the special oil needed to light the menorah, Ex. 27:20 tells us it was a community effort

²⁰ "Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives for the light so that the lamps may be kept burning. ²¹ In the Tent of Meeting, outside the curtain that is in front of the Testimony, Aaron and his sons are to keep the lamps burning before the LORD from evening till morning. This is to be a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for the generations to come.

So the Levite under the old covenant couldn't do God's work without God's light nor without His power anymore than you and I can today. The big difference is we are now the tabernacle in whom dwells the divine presence of God's Spirit, symbolizing both God's light and power.

The Levites were to assist the priests, and now God speaks about how to prepare them for ministry.

⁵ The Lord said to Moses: ⁶ "Take the Levites from among the other Israelites and make them ceremonially clean. ⁷ To purify them, do this: Sprinkle the water of cleansing on them; then have them shave their whole bodies and wash their clothes, and so purify themselves. ⁸ Have them take a young bull with its grain offering of fine flour mixed with oil; then you are to take a second young bull for a sin offering. ⁹ Bring the Levites to the front of the Tent of Meeting and assemble the whole Israelite community. ¹⁰ You are to bring the Levites before the Lord, and the Israelites are to lay their hands on them. ¹¹ Aaron is to present the Levites before the Lord as a wave offering from the Israelites, so that they may be ready to do the work of the Lord.

We see a wider spiritual principle that applies to us as well, the priesthood of believers called to serve God today:

Without God's Cleansing, We Are Not Prepared to Serve Him (8:5-22)

In order for the servants of God to assist in the Lord's work,

We need to examine our hearts (vv.5-8, 20-21a)

The Levites were washed and shaved – most likely for inspecting any rashes or skin diseases – and then to have sacrifices to atone for any sins. The bulls for the burnt offering were symbolic of offering yourself to God. The sin offering was an animal that dies in your place because you sin. While outward in action, they were a reminder of the need for inward purity because you are coming before a holy God to serve Him.

I wonder if we think that way very often when we are getting ready to serve God in a ministry we're involved in? I know we often ask God to bless our ministries but do we examine ourselves beforehand to see if there is any sin we need to confess or to remind ourselves to give ourselves wholly to God and not just partly? Paul reminds us that our life is now a living sacrifice:

Rom. 12:1 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.

And even as we go to work or school or to the rink or the store, do we think ahead that we might serve someone God is preparing us to serve even though we don't know who? "Lord, help me to be ready to serve people with the gospel or with biblical encouragement." Is there a sinful negative attitude that might hinder me from serving You? Am I more concerned with my wants than other's needs? Forgive me Lord and help me to be ready to serve you. Because when we go out our door ...

We are representing God and each other (vv.9-19, 21b-22)

In vv.9-19 the Levites were presented before the Lord and the people. They had been set apart from the people to serve on their behalf. They represent the people of God to God but they also represent God to the people. That's what ministry is about. Showing God to others but also interceding for each other to God. V. 10 tells us the people place their hands on the Levites. This is a representation ceremony because the Levites were taken from the people to go before the Lord. Aaron was supposed to wave them before the Lord. A wave offering was a representation offering. An offering that was visibly displayed on their behalf. Obviously, Aaron couldn't pick up all the Levites, but it was stated and the people understood this.

8:15 "After you have purified the Levites and presented them as a wave offering, they are to come to do their work at the Tent of Meeting. ¹⁶ They are the Israelites who are to be given wholly to me. I have taken them as my own in place of the firstborn, the first male offspring from every Israelite woman. ¹⁷ Every firstborn male in Israel, whether man or animal, is mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set them apart for myself. ¹⁸ And I have taken the Levites in place of all the firstborn sons in Israel. ¹⁹ Of all the Israelites, I have given the Levites as gifts to Aaron and his sons to do the work at the Tent of Meeting on behalf of the Israelites and to make atonement for them so that no plague will strike the Israelites when they go near the sanctuary."

We forget that we represent God and Jesus by our words and actions. People do make assessments of God and Jesus based on what we say and do. But they also assess our church in general based on our individual witness. One of the greatest encouragements I hear from different people in the community is when you have served someone. Our Odd Job Squad has been a great testimony to the community about all of us. Our float in the parade speaks clearly to our community that we are here for God and Jesus. Each of us represents our church as a whole, so we need to remember that. We don't serve God alone and we need each other.

So the Levites and people and the leaders all obey God:

8:20 Moses, Aaron and the whole Israelite community did with the Levites just as the Lord commanded Moses. ²¹ The Levites purified themselves and washed their clothes. Then Aaron presented them as a wave offering before the Lord and made atonement for them to purify them. ²² After that, the Levites came to do their work at the Tent of Meeting under the supervision of Aaron and his sons. They did with the Levites just as the Lord commanded Moses.

The chapter ends by telling us about the length of service for the Levites:

8:23 The Lord said to Moses, ²⁴ "This applies to the Levites: Men twenty-five years old or more shall come to take part in the work at the Tent of Meeting, ²⁵ but at the age of fifty, they must retire from their regular service and work no longer. ²⁶ They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the Tent of Meeting, but they themselves must not do the work. This, then, is how you are to assign the responsibilities of the Levites."

While there was an official policy for how long you could serve as a Levite, it didn't mean you were done serving the Lord. And I think it's a good reminder for us that

With God's Strength We Can Always Serve Him **(8:23-26)**

Back in Ch. 4:46-47 we read from the census of the Levites that they were count those aged 30 and over but here it's 25. An error? No. Probably they entered into an apprenticeship by 25 to prepare them. But it also seemed that the age limit wasn't a fixed statute because when the Temple was built the age was lowered to 20 and we are told why by David:

¹ Ch. 23:24 These were the descendants of Levi by their families—the heads of families as they were registered under their names and counted individually, that is, the workers twenty years old or more who served in the temple of the Lord. ²⁵ For David had said, “Since the Lord, the God of Israel, has granted rest to his people and has come to dwell in Jerusalem forever, ²⁶ the Levites no longer need to carry the tabernacle or any of the articles used in its service.” ²⁷ According to the last instructions of David, the Levites were counted from those twenty years old or more.

David organized the Levites into 24 divisions and they served two 2-week terms in the course of the year. Since the work no longer involved carrying heavy objects, he felt it was fine to start at 20. And Ezra continued that practice in Ezra 3:8.

But notice here when you turn 55 you weren't done; you had different obligations and responsibilities. It may have been a voluntary thing, too, to retire because we find an aged Simeon in the Temple dedicating baby Jesus to the Lord in Luke 2. And the apostle John was still serving God in his 90's and Caleb at 80 years old and Moses was between 80 and 120 during the wilderness years.

It's great that we have many people retired from their jobs serving God here. Even when I retire, I won't retire from serving God. If I can fill in some pulpits occasionally or teach bible studies wherever we end up I'll do that as long as God gives me strength. Our friend, Pastor Terry Gerow, he's a great example for us pastors. He and his wife go to Florida for the winter and he even preaches while he's down there. He's filling in pulpits around here and mentoring younger men. When it comes to serving God, none of us retire. Our ministries and responsibilities just change over time.

The preparation of the Levites to serve God reminds us of our own need to be right with God before we represent God. And yet it is God who empowers us and shines through us as we obey Him, trusting that He will use us to lead people to Himself and to build each of us up in our faith.

The pattern described here also reminds us of the gospel. Notice you don't get close to God by serving God, you have to be cleansed before you can serve God. No one's good works saves them. Paul said in Eph. 2:8-10

Eph. 2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

When we confess our sins and our need for Jesus, only then can we serve God. Only then do we become God's workmen through whom He can now work through by His Spirit. Listen to Paul's words to Titus,

Titus 3:3 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. 4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. 8 This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.

those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. We have to put our trust in God before we are capable of doing God's good in others. It's something we have to always remember when we want to serve Him.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message, please contact us at oliviet@rideau.net