

1. Let me start this lesson with a line from Chapter 17, Verse 12 that says, "We will die! We are lost, we are all lost." Those Israelites collectively realized here they need God in order to live forever as well as to guide them through the wilderness. The disobedience issues from the last lesson are coming to an end in these chapters. As I was trying to understand the significance of these two chapters I kept coming back to that phrase from Verse 12. Let me explain:
  - a) It finally sunk in to the Israelites that God ordained Moses and Aaron to be their leaders and the tribe of Levites were to be the priests. Since this issue is finally settled in Chapter 17, Chapter 18 then goes on to explain how the rest of the Israelites are to use the tribe of the Levites in order to seek forgiveness of sin and how the Levites themselves are to seek forgiveness of their own sins. Think of this section as a big lesson on realizing that one needs God for the forgiveness of sin and how He wanted them to complete that action.
  - b) OK John, good for them I suppose. What does any of this have to do with me? Let's call it a chapter about "realization". By the way, that word is my lesson title. As a Christian, the first step is to realize and accept God's existence. If He exists, then we begin to wonder, what does He want from us? That leads me to the word "realization": It is the realization that He wants to control all aspects of our lives to live His way.
    - i) Part of that realization is that we as individuals need Him to guide us.
    - ii) Part of that realization is that salvation demands obedience to Him.
    - iii) Part of that realization is that we must accept His way of doing things not only to be saved, but in order to live a life that is pleasing to Him.
    - iv) Finally, it is the realization that without Him, our life is "lost". That is what the Israelites realized at this point in their journey, and that is what we must realize.
      - a) That is why I mentioned the "We will all die, we are all lost" reference.
2. Let's assume for the moment, we all realize we need God and we do seek Him with our lives.
  - a) Why should I study this chapter if I do try to please God with my life and I do realize that Jesus is both God and in charge of my life? After all, I don't pay tithes to the Levite priests and it is not important to my daily life that Aaron's rod budded which is the key point of Chapter 17. All of this may be interesting ancient history that I may accept as fact, but what good does it do me to read and learn about this stuff?
  - b) To answer, let's remember the big picture of the book of Numbers: These Israelites had to go through their own wilderness experience in order for them to reach their Promised Land. For the Christian, the Promised Land is not about heaven, but about learning to trust God with every aspect of our lives. In order to achieve that goal, God tries to teach us how to get organized His way and understand that in order to live a life pleasing to Him, we must surrender every aspect of our lives to Him.
    - i) I suspect that the concept of complete surrender is sinking in at this point in the story. That is why the Israelites cried out "We are going to die and we are lost".
    - ii) In order to achieve complete surrender to God, one usually has to hit rock bottom in one's life with the realization that we can't make it through our lives without His guidance. In effect, the Israelites hit their own rock bottom in these chapters. That is why Chapter 17 marks the end of this generations' rebellion to God in this book. That is why Chapter 18 lays out once again, how the system of priests are to function among the Israelites.
  - c) The point for us is to realize that we can't live without God. It is the constant reminder of having to turn over every aspect of our lives to Him in order for us to make a difference for Him. That is what Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" (Gospel of Matthew, Chapters 5-7) was effectively all about: Learning to give God control of every aspect our lives.

3. Let me expand a little on the "Sermon on the Mount" concept, as it just occurred to me how that ties really well to this lesson in Numbers.
  - a) In the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 4, it was all about Jesus own wilderness time where He was tempted by Satan for 40 days. To keep it simple, Jesus past that test and He didn't have to spend 40 years in the wilderness because unlike these Israelites, He accepted God the Fathers' will for His mission on earth. That is why Chapter 5 through 7 of Matthew's Gospel (which is all about submission) comes right after Chapter 4. Jesus could preach the Sermon on the Mount because Jesus has completed His own wilderness experience.
  - b) OK, John, you've lost me. These two chapters in the Book of Numbers tells a somewhat famous story of Aaron's rod budding and then tells about how the tribe of priests are to function amongst all the Israelites. Yet, here we are discussing the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus going through His own wilderness time. What's the connection?
    - i) This leads us back to the point about "realization". The Israelites realized at this point in their journey, that they had to fully let go of what they wanted to do in their lives and learn to trust God in order to lead them.
    - ii) Jesus showed us that it was possible to survive through a time of wilderness by fully trusting God the Father during His own time of testing. Jesus could then preach, "The Sermon on the Mount" because He not only understood the idea of complete surrender, but showed how it was possible to survive through it. That is what that sermon teaches, examples of complete surrender of our life to God.
    - iii) My point is simply that Jesus gave an example of how to survive through one's own time of struggles by completely trusting God the Father through such times and that is the lesson the Israelites are dealing with at this point in the story.
    - iv) With that strange introduction completed, let me start Verse 1.
4. Chapter 17, Verse 1: The LORD said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> "Speak to the Israelites and get twelve staffs from them, one from the leader of each of their ancestral tribes. Write the name of each man on his staff. <sup>3</sup> On the staff of Levi write Aaron's name, for there must be one staff for the head of each ancestral tribe. <sup>4</sup> Place them in the Tent of Meeting in front of the Testimony, where I meet with you. <sup>5</sup> The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout, and I will rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites."
  - a) Before I talk about these verses, let me put this chapter in context. First, Chapter 17 is a short chapter of only 13 verses. I could have combined it with the last lesson, but then that lesson would have been too long. Instead I'm combining it with the next chapter as to see the context of why God talked about the duties of the priests right after this chapter.
    - i) To put this chapter another way, God says in effect, "I've had enough of all of this rebellion. I am going to show a sign that will bring all of it to an end".
    - ii) If you recall from the last lesson, we had "Korah's rebellion". This was the story of a cousin of Moses who essentially put up a challenge against Moses for leadership. By the end of the last lesson, about 15,000 people had died, which is essentially all of the people who choose to rebel against Moses. If one has any doubts about who God called to lead the Israelites, one would think the last chapter would end it all.
    - iii) The point here is simply that despite all of the death, people were still grumbling. There were probably still many Israelites who were thinking, "I've had enough of this God stuff and I don't want to die in this wilderness. Therefore, I won't let God take over my life and I in effect want to go back to slavery in Egypt.
    - iv) The point for you and me is about the issue of complete surrender. Sometimes even seeing death all around us is not enough to completely let go and trust God. It always comes back to "will". Is it our will to trust God or not? I am convinced God is constantly asking us, "Do you trust Me now, even through this?" That is the type of the test the Israelites are facing at this moment in their lives and that is what God is trying to teach us here.

- b) With that speech out of my system, I would say it is time for me to talk about the verses themselves at this point. Somehow and someway God made it clear to Moses that the leader of each of the twelve tribes was to get a stick, and write the name of that tribe on the stick. At this point, it is time for a quick discussion about sticks.
- i) If one is going on a long walking journey, one often has a long stick to hold as one is walking. One uses it to push off the ground when walking. You may recall that Moses used such a stick when performing miracles in Egypt. You may know the stories from the book of Exodus how God turned Moses' stick into a snake and it ate the serpents that turned into sticks of the Egyptian priests. You may also recall how God told Moses to raise his stick to turn the Nile river into blood and he even raised his stick when the Red Sea parted. (Ref: Exodus Chapters 4, 7 & 14.)
    - a) My point is simply that Moses understood that God uses sticks in order to demonstrate His power.
  - ii) OK, so each of the tribes of Israel picked out a stick and put their tribal name on that stick. I understand from reading the text that these 12 sticks, plus another stick that represented the priestly tribe of Levi was to be placed by the tabernacle.
    - a) I could give another whole lecture here how one of the two tribes had a "two for one split" which is why there were actually 13 tribes of Israelites, but most of you know that by now. For my newcomers, God in effect had a list of 13 tribes to choose from when He wanted the Israelites to be divided into twelve tribes as one tribe in effect had a split.
- c) The point of this whole exercise is stated in Verse 13. God in effect makes the statement that He will bring all of the grumbling against Him to an end by each of these 12 sticks being placed in the tabernacle (central worship structure) and the rod that God chooses will bud. The question for me is how will this act bring the grumbling to an end?
- i) I have to admit, that whole thought seemed strange to me. We just had about 15,000 people die, and that act was not enough to get everyone to stop grumbling. Yet, placing the sticks of the leaders in a place where no one could see them except for the high priest will get everyone to stop grumbling? How will that happen?
  - ii) Yes, I am sure word will get out to all of the Israelites that Aaron's rod is the one that budded and not the other tribes. We will read more of this miracle in the next set of verses. What I wondered is, "How will this work, and death didn't?"
  - iii) As I thought about this, I kept thinking about Jesus' comment in effect that if a person rises from the dead to tell others about following God the Father, that in effect is not good enough. (Based on Luke 16:31). The point of that story is that if people refuse to believe the words of Moses (i.e., study their bible), then even if they saw a person rise from the dead, that is not good enough. I am sure that some of the Israelites literally saw Jesus alive again and still refused to believe.
    - a) My point is simply that the 15,000 or so that died in the last chapter was not enough evidence to get people to say, "that's it, we have to trust God", but somehow this act of Aaron's stick producing new life will be enough to get the Israelites to trust God is a strange statement to make.
    - b) The question is in effect, "Why is death not enough to convince people of the need to completely trust God with their lives, but a relatively small miracle of a budding stick enough to convince people that in effect, "That's it, we are going to die, we are in big trouble without Him?"
  - iv) This is the thought I want each of us to keep in mind as we go through the rest of this short chapter: The miracle itself is not as interesting as the fact the Israelites changed at this point. I hold the view that if God wanted to make a dead stick sprout fruit, no big deal. But to get people to change their hearts (and God not violating our free will) is something that is worth noting through this chapter.

5. Verse 6: So Moses spoke to the Israelites, and their leaders gave him twelve staffs, one for the leader of each of their ancestral tribes, and Aaron's staff was among them. <sup>7</sup> Moses placed the staffs before the LORD in the Tent of the Testimony.
  - a) Before I can discuss why this miracle happened, we have to actually let it happen. In these verses, we get the instructions from Moses to the leaders of the twelve tribes to go collect their sticks with their names on them and place them within the tent.
  - b) Remember that no one was allowed inside this tent other than the High Priest (Aaron) and his sons and Moses on occasions. My point is the leaders of the twelve tribes did not actually get to see the miracle that is about to happen. However, all of the Israelites did watch the 15,000 people die in the last chapter, so I'm sure they are all thinking at this point, if Moses asks us to turn in a stick for our tribe, we don't want to cross him or even question his order with that simple order to complete.
  - c) How I visualize this is Moses then taking the sticks, say one or a few at a time, going inside the tent and placing them next to the most holy object in that tent, "the ark of the testimony". After that ritual was completed, Moses told everyone to go home.
6. Verse 8: The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Testimony and saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the house of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds. <sup>9</sup> Then Moses brought out all the staffs from the LORD's presence to all the Israelites. They looked at them, and each man took his own staff.
  - a) I personally suspect Moses didn't get a good night sleep that night as he was probably curious as to what God was going to do. Therefore, the next morning, he organized the same leaders and Moses himself went into the tabernacle, got out the 13 sticks (one that represented the tribe of the Levi and the twelve for the other tribes) and presented them.
  - b) The actual miracle itself was that Aaron's stick produced almonds and almond leaves while none of the sticks of the other tribes did likewise. I have no idea whether or not that stick was from an almond tree or not. The point is this was a miracle, straight and simple. There is no human explanation for such an event happening.
  - c) In case you were interested, almonds usually bloom in late winter. They typically have white leaves coming out first and then the almonds in their shells. There is no natural explanation for a stick to produce such things in one night. This text has to be explained as a miracle, pure and simple. This miracle was personally witnessed by the leaders of all the tribes and I'm sure the word then spread to all the tribes themselves.
7. Verse 10: The LORD said to Moses, "Put back Aaron's staff in front of the Testimony, to be kept as a sign to the rebellious. This will put an end to their grumbling against me, so that they will not die." <sup>11</sup> Moses did just as the LORD commanded him.
  - a) The previous few verses have been pretty much "straight text" of telling the story. To me, here is where it gets interesting. One would think that if God wanted this blossoming stick to be a sign to everyone, it should hang out in the open where everyone could see it. Yet it was placed back inside the ark as stated in the New Testament (Hebrews 9:4) where no one could see it. The big question of course, is how could this miracle stop everyone from grumbling against God? My answer is "God knew something the Israelites didn't."
  - b) Let me add the last two verses of this chapter, and then I'll focus on the "why" question.
8. Verse 12: The Israelites said to Moses, "We will die! We are lost, we are all lost! <sup>13</sup> Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the LORD will die. Are we all going to die?"
  - a) As I read this, I kept thinking, why would the miracle of the stick blossoming, get the Israelites to cry out "We will die! we are all lost." I mean the deaths that happened during Korah's rebellion didn't get this reaction. Yet, one small miracle of a stick blossoming fruit now gets all of the Israelites to cry out, that they are lost and they will die. I admit that the transition is strange and why would this miracle as opposed to everything else that has happened get people to hit rock bottom? In life, it is usually the "one more thing" that gets us to lose it, and that is what we have here.

- b) Last Sunday in church, I heard a sermon from someone who is going through all sorts of troubles and he said how a small thing finally set him off. I know when I go through my own trials it is usually the one more thing that gets me angry. My point is simply that when we go through major trials, often it is that one more thing that gets us to say in effect, "I can't take it anymore. That is my limit".
- i) That is what I suspect happened to the Israelites at this point. It was not so much the fact that the stick blossomed. It was the one more thing of proof that that the Israelites have to accept the fact that God commanded the Levites to be the tribe of priests and that Moses was the leader. In other words, it wasn't any one thing that got the Israelites to say, "That is it, we are going to die" it was the one more thing that got them to say in effect, we give up. We have to accept our own wilderness experience and we have to accept that God is going to rule over us. We have to accept the fact that God has sentenced us to die in this wilderness due to our own rebellion and only our children will enter that Promised Land.
    - a) To put it simply, the cry of "We will die" is an acceptance of God's will.
  - ii) So does this mean the Israelites never complained again? Hardly. We have the story of the biting snakes coming up in Chapter 21, and they grumbled again about their condition. However, they never again questioned Moses' leadership.
  - iii) Think of it this way: Do we as believers in God still go through our moments of doubts? Of course. Do we still complain about our lives even though we accept the idea of Jesus dying for our sins and He is in charge of our lives? Of course. Does God approve when we grumble? No, but He wants to guide us through the wilderness times of our lives and that is the point here.
  - iv) The blossoming stick worked in the sense that the Israelites no longer questioned Moses and Aaron's leadership or the system of priests to take away sins. This stick in effect, was the straw that broke the camel's back and made the Israelites go to a point of complete trust in God. That is what this chapter teaches.
  - v) The point for you and me is of course, how far does God have to take us, before we are willing to completely let go and trust His will for our lives? No matter what happens in our lives, God is going to constantly test us as He did these people with the question, "Do you trust Me, now, even through this"?
  - vi) The point is God wants complete surrender of our will to His and He will test us and allow us to go through all sorts of difficult trials in order for us to realize like the Israelites, "we too are going to die", so we might as well accept His ruling over our lives if we are going to die anyway.
- c) I want to end this chapter with something I learned many years ago from a wonderful pastor out of the San Francisco bay area, Ray Steadman. He once said, a good Christian is constantly fearless, continually cheerful and constantly in trouble.
- i) I can't think of a better summary of living the Christian life and I'm convinced that God was driving the Israelites to live this way as well.
  - ii) The Israelites at this point were not fearless or cheerful, but they were in a lot of trouble. In order to be fearless and cheerful, first one has to hit rock bottom, which requires a complete surrender of their lives to God. I believe this was a turning point for a lot of those Israelites. They already believed in God due to the miracles of the past, but this last one was what drove them over the edge to say in effect, "That's it. We're going to die anyway, we might as well learn to trust God with every aspect of our lives." It is only when we let go and trust in Him that we can be fearless and cheerful in our eternal outlook.
  - iii) That is why God declared in this chapter that this miracle of almonds starting to grow from a dead stick would get all of them to trust in Him. It was the "one more thing" that drove them to trust in Him. Ok, then time for Chapter 18.

9. Chapter 18, Verse 1: The LORD said to Aaron, "You, your sons and your father's family are to bear the responsibility for offenses against the sanctuary, and you and your sons alone are to bear the responsibility for offenses against the priesthood.
- a) To start these verses, first notice who God is talking to: Directly to Aaron. This is not God giving instructions to Moses to relay to Aaron, but direct instructions. I suspect that later Aaron told Moses how God had spoken to him and that is how these instructions were later written as included here in the book of Numbers.
    - i) So why Aaron? The short answer is that he was the high priest. Despite his faults and the mistakes he has made (lots, if you know the story of Aaron), this is the role that God had called him to be. Therefore, it was important that God communicate directly to Aaron directly. God said effect here is what I have called you to do. Realize that whatever God has called him or us to do, He also provides us with the ability and the means to carry out those instructions, and that is the point here.
  - b) With that speech out of my system, let me get back to Verse 1. In effect Aaron is told two things in this verse: He is told that all of the Levites are to bear the responsibility of any actions against the sanctuary. (Translation: All of the Levites are in charge of protecting the Tabernacle structure that is the center of this camp.) The second thing is that Aaron and his sons are to bear responsibility for the priesthood. (Translation: When there is a sin issue to be dealt with among the Israelites, Aaron and his sons have to deal with it.)
    - i) OK, that would be interesting if I was an Israelite living a few thousand years ago out in the wilderness. What does it have to do with me?
  - c) Think of the first command about "guarding the outside" this way: If we have been called to be a Christian, we are called to be a good witness for Jesus. There is a great quote from First Peter 3:15 that says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks about the hope we have (in Jesus)". (Based on NIV translation.) This does not mean all of us Christians have to be experts in bible theology, but we should have enough faith not only to believe in Jesus but to also express that faith to anyone who asks.
    - i) Just as all the Levites are called to protect God's presence, so in effect, He calls on all Christians to protect His name by our willingness to state why we have faith in Him to anyone who asks. That is how we apply Aaron's command to our lives.
  - d) The second part was about a "higher calling" for Aaron and his descendants. It is about the willingness to pray and give animal sacrifices for the sake of other believers. What does that mean for us? It means that God gives us both the privilege and responsibility to pray and help other people. The point is it should be our desire to pray for others and to help support others. In such roles, we too are acting as supporting priests to our God.
    - i) But, I am not a "high priest", or say, even part of my church staff. Isn't this duty just for the "High Priest"? Yes, in the sense that say, a pastor or priest of a church is in charge of guiding the members of that church. In that sense, the duties being described here is just for those called in the professional ministry. However, this verse can also apply to any believer who desires to pray or help other people.
      - ii) OK then, Verse 2.
10. Verse 2: Bring your fellow Levites from your ancestral tribe to join you and assist you when you and your sons minister before the Tent of the Testimony.<sup>3</sup> They are to be responsible to you and are to perform all the duties of the Tent, but they must not go near the furnishings of the sanctuary or the altar, or both they and you will die.<sup>4</sup> They are to join you and be responsible for the care of the Tent of Meeting--all the work at the Tent--and no one else may come near where you are.
- a) Verses 2 through 4 expand upon the commentary from Verse 1. Think of these verses as a list of "do's and don'ts" of those who assist the priests. God is telling Aaron here is how your fellow Levites are to assist you, and here is what they cannot do as your assistants.

- b) Before I go any further, notice the phrase "both they and you will die" in Verse 3. If one wants a motivation not to violate these laws, that is a pretty good one right there. When the tabernacle was first set up, two of Aaron's sons died for a lack of obedience. (That is from Leviticus 10:1-2.) That event occurred probably a few months prior to this chapter. My point is simply that commands from God are not to be taken lightly.
  - c) To put these verses another way, think of Aaron and his sons being responsible for what is inside the tabernacle. Think of all the Levites as being responsible for guarding the outside of the tabernacle so that no one can enter other than Aaron and his sons.
    - i) So why is all of this guarding necessary? First, remember the practical reason. This place was filled with items made of gold and other valuable materials.
      - a) More importantly, it symbolized the idea that the only people who can approach God is the one's that He ordained to approach Him.
    - ii) To put that in our vocabulary, a perfect God knows all things and He knew before time began who would be saved and dedicate their lives to serving Him. Since we are not all knowing creatures, from our perspective, we make that decision.
  - d) OK John, this structure does not exist today and neither does the Jewish priesthood in that type of single leader structure. Why should I care about any of this stuff?
    - i) The important idea is to remember, "Who God ordains, God ordains". Remember that the Israelites declared, "We are going to die" which is in effect a surrender of their will for God's will. This whole chapter is in effect God saying, "You want to do things My way? Then let those who are in charge of worshipping Me (God) do their jobs, and here are more details on how that system is to be set up. "
    - ii) Does that mean I have to accept my church's leaders or my government's leaders without ever saying anything on that matter? Well, if we have the duty or the privilege to vote or being involved in such decisions, we should not take those duties lightly and pray our way through them. Still, once such leaders are picked, we must learn to accept God's will in those decisions and whether we like them or not, we have to accept that they are now the leaders and support them.
    - iii) Think of it this way: If God calls us to support our local church through giving of our time and resources, then we should do what He calls us to do. The issue for us Christians comes back to the concept of "Do we want to please God or not?" If we do want Him to be in charge of our lives, then in effect, here are the rules. One of those rules is that our leaders are "God ordained" and if we choose to be part of that local church or say, live under that government system, then we must accept the idea that whether we like them or not, they are the leaders of the moment.
  - e) Now that I've established all of that, let's move on to the next set of Verses.
11. Verse 5: "You are to be responsible for the care of the sanctuary and the altar, so that wrath will not fall on the Israelites again. <sup>6</sup> I myself have selected your fellow Levites from among the Israelites as a gift to you, dedicated to the LORD to do the work at the Tent of Meeting. <sup>7</sup> But only you and your sons may serve as priests in connection with everything at the altar and inside the curtain. I am giving you the service of the priesthood as a gift. Anyone else who comes near the sanctuary must be put to death."
- a) To read these verses, remember that God is speaking directly to Aaron. To paraphrase, "Aaron, you are in charge of the worship service for about two million people. One day your oldest son will take over that role. If I (God) call you to do this role, I will make it possible for you to perform it. Also, all of your fellow Levites (the priestly tribe) have been given to you to assist you in your duties. It is a gift from Me to you. If anyone else comes near the sanctuary that I have not ordained, that person will be put to death."
    - i) I would admit if God told me something like that, I would be both excited and scared at the same time. The previous loss of two of his sons would get me to take all of this seriously. I would also realize that I was picked for leadership.

- b) OK John, so Aaron was chosen to be the leader and the Levites were chosen to assist him. This is all interesting ancient history that most of us know and accept as fact. How is any of this relevant to my life? (If I ever teach live in front of crowds, I am going to encourage the crowd to yell out at times, "What does any of this have to do with me?" as that phrase has become my tag-line for teaching the bible.)
- i) Think of it this way: What are we going to remember about this chapter, say an hour from now? Most likely that the Israelites finally surrendered their will to God and now He is laying out His plan of how He is to be worshipped.
  - ii) The reminder to us is that we can't approach God any old way we feel like it. He wants us to come to Him on His terms, not ours. It means for example, we can't choose to ignore these set of rules and only obey those set of rules. It means for example, we can't have His forgiveness without accepting His complete payment for our sins. It means we must accept He is in complete charge of our lives.
  - iii) OK then, but what about all this stuff about Aaron being the high priest and all the other Levites being the helpers? Does that mean our church has to elect our own pope or we must accept "the" pope as being the head of the church? That whole debate misses the point: Aaron represents the Jewish High Priest before God the Father. Who does the New Testament say is our High Priest? Jesus Himself. The book of Hebrews spends chapters dealing with this topic. The idea is that we can approach God the Father because Jesus is our advocate (someone arguing on our behalf) before God the Father. (See Hebrews 4:14, 5:10 and 6:20 as examples.)
    - a) In other words, this whole Jewish structure, points to another "High Priest" as someone who is our intercessor between God the Father and us. So why do I need Jesus, why can't I pray directly to God the Father, why do I need to remind myself that every so often that we pray, "In Jesus name"? It is to remember that we are imperfect people. Having Jesus in between God the Father and ourselves is the reminder that it was His payment that even allows us to approach God the Father.
- c) There is something else to notice in these verses that supports the same concept. Again, remember that God the Father is speaking to Aaron. There are moments in these verses where God the Father refers to Himself and uses the term "myself" to describe Himself. Yet in the middle of Verse 6, the text says the Levites are dedicated to serving the "LORD". That word "LORD" is all in capitals and represents the most holy name of God.
- i) Jewish people will argue that God the Father is simply switching from describing Himself as "Me" to a more formal "LORD" in order to emphasize its significance. As a Christian, I will argue that Jesus is LORD, and the idea of the text is that the Levite priests are dedicated to serving a preincarnate Jesus as Lord of their lives.
  - ii) In other words, the Levites did not grasp the concept of Jesus as the Messiah, but only that they should serve the Lord, which is God. My point is I see this change from a self-describing pronoun "Myself" to "LORD" in one verse as a clue pointing to the coming Messiah as head of the church and in effect the High Priest.
  - iii) Think of it this way: The Levites were called to serve the High Priest. Aaron in this section of the bible, is a model of Jesus as our High Priest. Now here are all of the other people called to be priests given over to serving this High Priest.
  - iv) My point is all of this is a wonderful model of how the Christian church is to be structured with Jesus as being the head of the church and we Christians who in effect are all called to be priests (servants of God) are called to dedicate our lives to serving Him. Hopefully, we all see this picture.
  - v) But John, what about the other Israelites? If they are not called to be priests, how are they to serve God? Think of them as a picture of believers called to use what spiritual gifts God has given us to make a difference for Him.

12. Verse 8: Then the LORD said to Aaron, "I myself have put you in charge of the offerings presented to me; all the holy offerings the Israelites give me I give to you and your sons as your portion and regular share.<sup>9</sup> You are to have the part of the most holy offerings that is kept from the fire. From all the gifts they bring me as most holy offerings, whether grain or sin or guilt offerings, that part belongs to you and your sons.<sup>10</sup> Eat it as something most holy; every male shall eat it. You must regard it as holy.
- a) While I was busy trying to teach us how Aaron is a model of Jesus here and the rest of the priest are a model of church, we still have to come back to the literal stuff being described here. A natural question Aaron may have at this point is, if I am going to be doing all of this service for You (God), how do I eat? How do I support the family?
    - i) That is what these verses explain. Part of the animals and food that you, Aaron are to offer to Me (God) you (Aaron) are to keep for your service.
    - ii) Think of it this way: A lot of animals are going to be offered to God in order to show the Israelites dedication to Him. However, there would be too much food for Aaron to eat all of it by himself. Therefore, Aaron has the legal right to trade part of that food for whatever else he needs to survive. That is what is being implied here in these verses.
  - b) OK John, it is time for us to yell out again, "Why should we care about this stuff?" (I'm glad you are getting the hang of it by now.) After all, I don't pay my pastor in animals. The point is whatever we give to our local church is in effect "Holy" because we are giving it to God. Still, that pastoral staff has to eat too, and they have the right to use the money collected for their own needs and their family needs. That is what is stated here.
    - i) At the same time, notice God is saying to Aaron, "what is given to you must be considered holy", which means separated for His use.
    - ii) Let me try this another way: Do I have a problem with pastors who lead large churches and then collect a large salary? Not in principal. However, whatever is collected must be treated as holy. I am not saying I expect my pastor to live close to starvation and give away everything. The point is "balance". Yes the priests or pastors have a right and a duty to take care of themselves and their families. At the same time, what they receive is to be treated as "holy" and not wasted.
  - c) Two more quick thoughts here and I'll move on. First, note the text says that what is not "kept from the fire". Some offerings were to be completely burnt up in order to show one's complete dedication to God. Others were partially given in order to symbolize one's spending time with God. The point is simply that what was not burnt up, belonged to the priest. What they could not eat, it is implied that they could do with as they pleased, as long as it was not violating other biblical laws.
    - i) My second point is this food was only for the High Priest and his sons. What if the high priest had daughters? Verse 11 covers that issue.
    - ii) Before I go there, what about your whole discussion of Jesus as our High Priest. Doesn't that argument fall apart when it talks about the sons of the High Priest? Yes it does and let me explain: As I stated earlier, New Testament is very clear that Jesus is our High Priest. That is a main topic in the book of Hebrews. However, until Jesus came on the scene, God did call one family to be top priests, and a male member of that family did exist from the time of Aaron all the way until the time that the main Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70AD.
      - a) In case you care, what was significant about that temple destruction was that all of their family historical records were lost. No one could prove today if they are or not a direct descendant of Aaron. That is why modern Judaism still has priests, but there is no official "High Priest" as there is no record of any direct descendants of Aaron.
    - iii) Meanwhile, it is time for us to move on to Verse 11 of this chapter.

13. Verse 11: "This also is yours: whatever is set aside from the gifts of all the wave offerings of the Israelites. I give this to you and your sons and daughters as your regular share. Everyone in your household who is ceremonially clean may eat it.
- a) Notice in this verse the word "daughter" is mentioned for the first time in this chapter. The point is simply that part of the food the High Priest receives can also go for the daughters to eat as well as the sons as long as they are ceremonially clean.
    - i) Translation: If a son or daughter sins, they have to go hungry for a while. That alone is a pretty good motivation to be obedient to God.
    - ii) So are you saying that if we sin, we should go hungry for a bit? I am saying that once we become aware of a sin, we should confess it and turn from it before we go back to our regular lives.
  - b) Before I move on let us remember what is a "wave" offering. This was an animal or a food offering that was literally waved between the altar and the priest. It was a symbolic way of saying, I am so grateful for how my life is being blessed that I want to express gratitude to God for that blessing. If the Israelites gave something to the priest to express that idea, which is why animals and other things were literally waved back and forth over the altar.
    - i) The point here is once that ritual was completed, the priest and his entire family was free to eat it afterwards.
    - ii) So John, this appears to be a pretty good gig. One does a bunch of rituals and then one gets to eat all of this food. Remember the cost that comes with this lifestyle: The text said earlier that violations of the rules can be a death sentence. That just means that one has to always take one's relationship with God seriously and be grateful for the blessings that come with that position.
14. Verse 12: "I give you all the finest olive oil and all the finest new wine and grain they give the LORD as the firstfruits of their harvest. <sup>13</sup> All the land's firstfruits that they bring to the LORD will be yours. Everyone in your household who is ceremonially clean may eat it.
- a) Meanwhile, we are reading of more blessings be given to the head priest for this job. The short version is the priests were to get the first of whatever the land of Israel produces. In practical terms, if one was a farmer back then, the first and best of what was picked, was then given to the priests.
  - b) This gets us back to the whole issue of giving to the church. The New Testament never specifies anywhere the Christians are required to give say ten percent of their income to the church. However, the term "giving" is used a lot in the New Testament. That means that Christians should give and give generously of the first of whatever they earn.
    - i) For my newcomers, this is not a plea to send me any money. My point is just to teach the biblical principals being taught here.
    - ii) With that said, one of the greatest habits I have developed is that of giving to either my local church or other Christian causes. I take the view that when I get paid, a percentage then goes to the church first, and then I get to spend based on what is left afterwards. I have yet in my life to see one Christian starve who got into the habit of giving part of their earnings to God.
    - iii) So why God first? It is a test of trust. It is saying to God, I am trusting You to provide for my future, and I'll give you part of what I earn now to show that I am trusting You to continue to provide for me and my family. Notice the Israelites were never called to give everything they own to Aaron. The idea was simply about learning to develop trust in Him and one way of showing that trust was giving part of what we earn.
  - c) Again, the text ends with the reminder that only those in the household who were "holy" were allowed to share in the "first fruits" that were given to Aaron and his family.
    - i) The point is if the priest saw someone in his family commit a sin, that person was not to eat that food until that sin was confessed.

15. Verse 14: "Everything in Israel that is devoted to the LORD is yours. <sup>15</sup> The first offspring of every womb, both man and animal, that is offered to the LORD is yours. But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals. <sup>16</sup> When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs.
- a) At this point, I can speed it up a little, as we are just getting some specific details about what can and cannot be offered to the priests. Again, the ancient historical rituals are not as important as the principals that are behind these commands.
  - b) The point here about these verses is that God wanted the Israelites to always remember that He took the firstborn sons of the Egyptians and at the same time spared the firstborn Israelites by the blood covering during that original Passover event. What that meant was when a husband and wife had a first born son, they were to pay a ransom price of five shekels or twenty gerahs (whatever that was) to the priest. This had nothing to do with making the priests rich or the people poor. It was the reminder that just as God spared the first born sons in Egypt, so God is sparing their first born sons and it should cost us something to remember that fact.
    - i) So do we have to pay at church for our firstborn sons? No, because again, Jesus paid the full price for our sins and there is no additional price to be paid. With that said, we should never lose our gratitude over that fact.
    - ii) As for the redemption of animals, that is the topic of the next set of verses.
16. Verse 17: "But you must not redeem the firstborn of an ox, a sheep or a goat; they are holy. Sprinkle their blood on the altar and burn their fat as an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD. <sup>18</sup> Their meat is to be yours, just as the breast of the wave offering and the right thigh are yours. <sup>19</sup> Whatever is set aside from the holy offerings the Israelites present to the LORD I give to you and your sons and daughters as your regular share. It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the LORD for both you and your offspring."
- a) It may help to remember that the Israelites were mostly animal herders back then. Most of them supported themselves by raising animals for their food and clothing needs. My point is that a newborn animal was a fairly common thing for the Israelites not only during the wilderness years, but for many centuries before and after this time.
    - i) Therefore, a lot of animals were given to the Levites to be sacrificed. Imagine if one had little kids and they watched the animals give birth. Then you have to tell your children we are given that newborn animal to the priests to be killed. The lesson is about understanding how costly sin is to our lives.
    - ii) The related point is again, all of that food becomes payment to the Levite priests for their service and their families get to share in that food.
  - b) These verses also have this strange reference to an everlasting covenant of salt. The point is that salt is used as a preservative. Salt does not break down in fire and lasts for a long time. It is symbolic of the fact that this relationship between a High Priest and those who trust in God will in effect last forever. Jesus stated the fact that sacrifices had salt added to them as a preservative. (See Mark 9:49.)
17. Verse 20: The LORD said to Aaron, "You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites.
- a) If one reads through this section, a few times, one gets the impression as I stated earlier, that this is a pretty good gig if the Israelites continued to do as God commanded.
  - b) What that means for us is simply if we continue to honor God the way He wants us to honor him, those in the professional ministry will be supported. This is not a dig deep lecture on giving. This is just a reminder to support those who are making a difference for God. (For me, I don't ask for money, but I desire all the prayer support I can muster.)
  - c) Meanwhile, the bad news for the priests is they can't own real estate. The point is they have to be dependant upon everyone else for support and not a physical piece of Israel.

18. Verse 21: "I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the Tent of Meeting.<sup>22</sup> From now on the Israelites must not go near the Tent of Meeting, or they will bear the consequences of their sin and will die.<sup>23</sup> It is the Levites who are to do the work at the Tent of Meeting and bear the responsibility for offenses against it. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. They will receive no inheritance among the Israelites.<sup>24</sup> Instead, I give to the Levites as their inheritance the tithes that the Israelites present as an offering to the LORD. That is why I said concerning them: 'They will have no inheritance among the Israelites.' "
- a) At this point, remember my opening lesson line: ""We will die! We are lost, we are all lost." God is responding to that cry for help pretty directly in these verses. God is saying effect, "Only the Levites may come close to Me. The Levites don't get to own any land, but they do get all of the animal sacrifices and keep part of them for their own survival."
    - i) Ok, good for them I suppose. Let us all yell at this point, "What does any of this have to do with my life?" Hopefully, that makes us feel a little better.
      - a) The point is that God does call some people into the professional ministry and He expects the rest of believers to financially support that ministry.
      - b) Again the New Testament never calls on us to give a tithe (10%), but it does call on us to be givers. I'll leave it between God and ourselves as to which ministries He is leading each of us to support.
    - b) Now let me comment on the phrase, "A lasting ordinance for generations to come" from Verse 23. To state the obvious, not all Jewish people live in Israel and there is no official temple, nor has there been such a Jewish structure for about 2,000 years now.
      - i) Historically, the Jewish priests were not allowed to own any part of the land of Israel (other than their places to live). The idea for those of us who do give our lives to serving Him is "God Himself is our reward for our service to Him."
      - ii) Still, the system of a set of priests has survived throughout history in both Judaism and Christianity so in that sense, it is a lasting ordinance.
19. Verse 25: The LORD said to Moses,<sup>26</sup> "Speak to the Levites and say to them: 'When you receive from the Israelites the tithe I give you as your inheritance, you must present a tenth of that tithe as the LORD's offering.<sup>27</sup> Your offering will be reckoned to you as grain from the threshing floor or juice from the winepress.<sup>28</sup> In this way you also will present an offering to the LORD from all the tithes you receive from the Israelites. From these tithes you must give the LORD's portion to Aaron the priest.<sup>29</sup> You must present as the LORD's portion the best and holiest part of everything given to you.'
- a) My very loose translation: Just because one is a priest, does not mean that one is now exempt from giving. The Levites were required to give 10% of what they got for their service directly to Aaron and his family for his work.
  - b) Notice the word "LORD" is used five times here. The idea is that what Aaron and his family received for being the High Priest really belonged to God Himself, and Aaron got to share in that blessing in exchange for doing God's work. Now think of Jesus as our High Priest. What we give to our priests they must give a portion to God Himself to remind themselves of their commitment to always be serving Him.
20. Verse 30: "Say to the Levites: 'When you present the best part, it will be reckoned to you as the product of the threshing floor or the winepress.<sup>31</sup> You and your households may eat the rest of it anywhere, for it is your wages for your work at the Tent of Meeting.<sup>32</sup> By presenting the best part of it you will not be guilty in this matter; then you will not defile the holy offerings of the Israelites, and you will not die.' "
- a) Time for more of my very loose translation: The Levites (priests) are to give the best of what they collect to High Priest. The priests are then free to do what they want with the rest. That just means we give God the first (best) of what we earn, and He promises to bless our lives by our trust in Him for our service to Him.

21. I will be the first to admit, I went pretty fast through the last set of verses. I figure what most of us will remember a short time from now is that, the Israelites finally figured out that God was in charge of their lives, and they had to accept the Levites as God's system to seek His forgiveness for their sins. God set up a system for the Levites to get paid for this service, and still keep every body's focus on Him through this system.
- a) OK, good for the ancient Israelites I suppose. OK, one last time, "Why should I care about any of this stuff?" Yes we get the idea that Aaron was a model of Jesus in some ways. Yes we get the idea of giving to support the ministry. Still, why should we learn all of these details about how the Israelites supported the Levites and everyone gave 10% in order for the priests to support themselves?
    - i) The answer comes back to "We will die! We are lost, we are all lost." The idea is to remember that all of us have been called to serve God with our lives. With that idea understood, we have to worship God "His way" and not anyway we feel like it. That just means in order for us to be blessed by God we have to "put our money and our time where our mouth is" to steal another famous cliché. If we can remember that concept, the details in effect, fall into place. If we can remember that we are all lost without God, that should drive us to want to (not have to, but want to) live to make a difference for Him. That is the point of this lesson.
22. Heavenly Father, help us to use our lives to make a difference for You. Help us during the times of our own wilderness experience to trust in You through such times. Help us to remember that without You, we too, are lost and will die. Help us to use whatever resources You have blessed us with to make a difference for You in this world. Help us to remember that the most valuable thing You give us is time. Help us to use part of that time to make that difference and then trust that You will take care of all of our needs if we put that trust in You. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.