

1. My lesson title is the single word "firstborn". Let me explain what that word means, why it is important to the Christian believer, and what it has to do with the text of these two chapters. If one gets the significance of "firstborn", these two chapters will make a lot of sense.
 - a) To explain know it has a double meaning. When we think of a firstborn son or daughter, we think of a family with more than one child and the "firstborn" is describing that child who was physically born first. That is one biblical definition, but not the only one.
 - b) To explain the other meaning, let me give the classical biblical example. In the book of Genesis, Joseph had two sons named Manasseh and Ephraim. In Genesis 41:51, it states Manasseh was born first. Yet in the book of Jeremiah (31:9), God declares that Joseph's second son, Ephraim (Genesis 48:14) is the firstborn. My point here is simply that the word "firstborn" is also used a title for someone who is preeminent. Ok, so what?
 - i) That is why Jesus can be a "firstborn" son of God. It does not mean that God the Father is Jesus' Father in the human sense of giving birth. It simply means that both God the Father and God the Son have always existed and when Jesus came into our world He became "preeminent" over all other humans.
 - ii) Assuming we know that bit of Christian theology, why bring it up here? It is to understand why God cares about those who are "firstborn". He is setting apart the tribe of Levi and calls them "His Firstborn". Again, it has nothing to do with being born first. It just has to do with being preeminent or "set apart for God".
 - c) This leads me back to these two chapters. The main point here is that Moses receives instructions from God to count all the Levite males two times in these two chapters for different purposes. The Levites (one of the Israelite tribes) was to be separated from the other tribes. This text will explain that all the Israelites babies born to the other eleven tribes since the Exodus began, is roughly equal the size of that total number of Levite men counted. God then makes the strange statement that "all of the firstborn are mine".
 - i) That does not mean that God wants to kill all of those babies. What He wanted the Israelites to remember is how He took the lives of the firstborns of Egypt (the 10th plague on Egypt). For the Israelites to always remember that event, God says in effect "The firstborn are mine". Instead of actually taking (dedicating) all of the babies born since the Exodus, God is taking the tribe of Levi instead of them as the number of the Levites is again, about the same as the number of babies born since that plague occurred a little over a year prior to this counting. The point is God is establishing a principal of separating the "firstborns" in order for the Israelites to recall how God separated believers from nonbelievers in Egypt.
 - ii) If God cares about "firstborns", why take the tribe of Levi? If one reads of the birth order of the 12 sons of Jacob (as stated in Genesis 29) who started the 12 tribes of Israel, the Levites were not the first tribe. Why were they picked as the "firstborns" and what does that have to do me? I'll discuss that concept in this lesson.
 - iii) Finally, even if God does care more about "firstborns", what does any of that have to do with my Christian life? I'll give you a clue. In the book of Hebrews (12:23), the entire Christian church is referred to as the "firstborn". Therefore, whoever the firstborn were among the Israelites, it is somehow symbolic of the church itself.
 - d) Let me back up for a moment here. If one reads these two chapters in Numbers, the focus is on the Levites who were to "work" the tabernacle as their jobs as priests. So why focus on the issue of the firstborn? It is to understand how they were separated for God's use, just as we Christians are separated from nonbelievers to make a difference for Him. That is what is the main lesson of these chapters. Speaking of which, it is time to start Verse 1.

2. Chapter 3, Verse 1: This is the account of the family of Aaron and Moses at the time the LORD talked with Moses on Mount Sinai.
 - a) The first thing we are going to read about here is the genealogy of Aaron and his brother Moses. They were both of the tribe of Levi. Remember that when God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, He also called his brother Aaron to be the first high priest. One reason the tribe of Levi was picked to run the priesthood was simply because Moses being a Levi, was familiar with the leaders of his group, and he could help oversee the functions of the priesthood to be performed as God desired they were to be done.
 - b) Another thing to remember is that nobody has moved since the last chapter. In the last two chapters, the Israelites were told how to camp around the central worship structure, which is called the tabernacle. The idea is that God is always in the midst of where we are in our community as believers. The other key point from the last lesson was the emphasis on how the tribe of Judah led the way when this big group was to be on the march. That tribe of Judah was the one from whom Jesus came from. The symbolic idea is for us to have Jesus guide our lives and at the same time God is "within the midst" of us.
 - c) I bring all of this up to point out that even though the Israelites have learned how to camp and march, they are still at the same location. In these two chapters, the focus is shifting from the other Israelite tribes to just on the tribe of Levi. In order to describe the duties of tribe of Levi, the first step is to describe who is leading this tribe. Moses' brother Aaron was the first priest, but it was Moses himself who God instructed on how the priests were to dress, act and lead the worship of God. In effect, that is what Verse 1 is reminding us: That God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai (located in this wilderness) and God gave him all the instructions on how the tabernacle was to be built and that Aaron was to be the first top priest. With that said, we're read for Verse 2.
3. Verse 2: The names of the sons of Aaron were Nadab the firstborn and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar.³ Those were the names of Aaron's sons, the anointed priests, who were ordained to serve as priests.⁴ Nadab and Abihu, however, fell dead before the LORD when they made an offering with unauthorized fire before him in the Desert of Sinai. They had no sons; so only Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests during the lifetime of their father Aaron.
 - a) In these verses, we get a recount of a story from the book of Leviticus Chapter 10. In that story, Aaron's four sons were learning how God is to be worshipped. Two of the sons did something wrong and they died in the process. Know that this event of the death of two of Aaron's sons just happened less than a month before this census of Levites took place.
 - i) The main point of recounting that story here is simply to say in effect, "Don't mess around with this process. It is to be done exactly as instructed and it can a person their life if one fails to exactly obey God's instructions."
 - b) OK, John, it's time for one of your why should I care speeches here: The point for us is that the worship of God is to be taken seriously. That does not mean God will strike us dead if we fail to say, give the right counseling or don't serve communion the right way.
 - i) The idea for us is that God is to be worshipped His way. To put it another way, we come to serve Jesus on His terms, not ours. We can't just say, I believe in Jesus, now leave me alone and let me go live my life. The idea is we are called to serve Him by making the effort to make a difference for Jesus based on what talents we are given and what needs to be done within our local church body.
 - ii) This does not mean, "I have to do everything humanly possible and never ask for help." It does mean that one gets involved to do what can to help others. This is a reminder that one of the secrets to having joy is learning to make a difference in the lives of others. Jesus once said one can summarize the entire law of God with the concept of "Love God and love others". (See Mark 12:30-31). If one can do that, the rest of these laws, are in effect, the details. Speaking of details, it is time to get back to the desert and Moses' instructions.

4. Verse 5: The LORD said to Moses, ⁶"Bring the tribe of Levi and present them to Aaron the priest to assist him. ⁷They are to perform duties for him and for the whole community at the Tent of Meeting by doing the work of the tabernacle. ⁸They are to take care of all the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting, fulfilling the obligations of the Israelites by doing the work of the tabernacle. ⁹Give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are the Israelites who are to be given wholly to him.
- a) In these chapters we establish "rank" within the tribe of Levi. They can be summarized with the statement, "Aaron is the top priest. His firstborn son (there is that word again) will be the next high priest and that concept will continue as long as the central tabernacle structure exists. All of the other men of the tribe of Levi shall assist Aaron in his duties.
 - i) Think about watching a play or a going to a concert where there is only one person on stage. That single person may be the one that everyone is focused on, but there is no way that person can do that show all by themselves. It takes a large team of people to set up the stage, take it down, work the lighting and the sound system.
 - ii) That concept leads me back to Aaron the high priest. Only he and his sons were to perform the rituals involving sacrifices to God. However, there is no way Aaron could do this by himself. It was going to take a large team to "put on the show" and that team was in effect the tribe of Levi, who was to assist Aaron.
 - iii) This comes back to the principal that we can't just worship God any old way we want to. Just as God required a specific set of rituals in order for these Israelites to worship God, so He requires Christians today to come to Him on His terms. The idea for us is that when we live the life the way God wants us to live it, He and He alone gets the credit for the benefit of living as He desires.
 - iv) But John, can't we get involved with any Christian church we want and do we do best in our own church? Yes, but that is not the issue. The issue is about how we deal with sin. It would be like wrongly thinking, "I can willfully sin all I want to because I know I am eternally forgiven of my sins." Yes, we live under His grace, but we should never take that grace for grant it. We should live to please Him based on gratitude for what He has done for us: That is how we are to live the Christian life. How we are to serve Him comes back to the circumstances of our lives and the talents we are given by Him.
 - b) Getting back to the text, think of the ranks in terms of whom we serve. We should pray and serve our leaders. Our leaders serve the people. That is the order being described within the tribe of Levi, and it in effect also within any particular Christian church.
 - c) Meanwhile back to the Sinai desert: The top priest Aaron and his sons were to perform specific rituals for the forgiveness of sins. These rituals were to help all of the Israelites realize that God does forgive their sins. The reason innocent animals were sacrificed is to show in effect, "Sin is painful and sin hurts innocent people. Therefore, by offering the blood up of innocent animals, it shows how painful sin is in our lives."
 - i) We as Christians don't repeat those rituals. That is because God Himself paid the price for sin on our behalf. Yes, these rituals are not required for the Christian believer, but they do teach us the idea of serving others and do point in many ways to how God is to be served and how we are to make a difference for Him.
 - ii) As I said in the introduction, Christians are in effect the "firstborn" as a title. The idea is that just as the Levites are called to serve God, so we as believers are called to draw close to Him in order to make a difference for Jesus in our lives.
 - d) Now that we get the idea that God wants things done "in rank and in order", it is time to come back to the idea of the "firstborns". The next set of verses are going to focus on understanding why the tribe of Levi was chosen to represent the firstborn and why that concept of "firstborn" is to be understood by all Christian believers. As one reads all of this "stuff" about rituals and firstborns, keep in mind the main thing is to understand how God wants obedience in our lives in order to follow Him.

5. Verse 10: Appoint Aaron and his sons to serve as priests; anyone else who approaches the sanctuary must be put to death."
 - a) I wanted to pause and consider this single verse for a moment. It shows how seriously God takes the idea that we can't worship Him "any old way we feel like".
 - i) As to the literal aspect of this verse, no one else may do the duties of the priests, except for Aaron and his sons. Anyone else who tries to do this must be killed.
 - ii) Think of it as a policeman killing someone in the line of duty. For starters, it does show that certain crimes in the bible do call for a death sentence.
 - b) OK John, we don't have rules like this in church today. What's the application? It does not mean we are to kill anyone who wants to do a priestly duty. It just means, who God picks for the ministry is who He picks. Think of someone you know who is in the full time ministry. Did that person do it for the money, or did they do it because they felt called by God to go in that ministry? I once heard Alistair Begg correctly say about the Christian ministry, "If you can do anything else, go do it. If you can't stand the idea of doing any thing else, then you have been called by God to go in the ministry full time." My point is simply that we have to respect who God has called to go in the ministry
6. Verse 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."
 - a) Let me explain what is happening here: To explain, we have to go back to the 10th plague on Egypt. That is when God struck down all of the (literal) first born in Egypt other than those people who smeared lamb's blood on their doorposts. God wanted the Israelites to remember that event so much, He said in effect, all of the "firstborn are mine". God then gives to Moses an "interpretation": Instead of actually committing the first born of every family to God, the tribe of Levi is taken instead.
 - i) OK, why the tribe of Levi? If you know your bible, their common ancestor "Levi" was not the firstborn son of Jacob. Why were they taken? The answer is from the book of Exodus, Chapter 32. When the Israelites sinned (less than a year earlier) by making a golden calf (an Egyptian god deity), the tribe of Levi stood up for the true God in that rebellion. The reward for standing up for God was that they were picked to be the priests instead of every literal firstborn son of the Israelites. (See Exodus 32, Verses 26 to 29 for more details on that story).
 - ii) As far as "first born animal", this is a principal about trusting God. What He is effectively saying to the Israelites is sacrifice their first born bulls and lambs to Me and by showing that dedication, I will bless you. It is sort of a tithing principal to show we trust God to provide for us. The point is when we are willing to give up the first of what we earn, He will bless us for trusting in Him. The New Testament teaches Christians are not "under the law", but when take steps in faith to show that we trust Him, God then goes out of His way to bless us. That's the point.
 - b) Meanwhile, God is saying to the Israelites, "Separate the tribe of Levi for me based on the principal of "first born" (as in preeminence, not in terms of literal first born).
 - i) The point for you and me is just as God has called the Levites to be priests whether they like it or not, so God has called us Christians to serve Him.
 - ii) As I like to joke every now and then, "If you were born a Levite and want to go be a used camel salesmen instead, your parents would say, "You are a Levite, forget about camels. You are off to seminary." If you were born of another Israelite tribe and want to be a priest, your parents would say, too bad, you are not a Levite, so you are going into the family camel business. ☺
 - iii) The idea again for you and us is that to be a servant of God is something we are called to do. It is a full time calling no matter what is our line of work.

7. Verse 14: The LORD said to Moses in the Desert of Sinai, ¹⁵ "Count the Levites by their families and clans. Count every male a month old or more." ¹⁶ So Moses counted them, as he was commanded by the word of the LORD.
- a) I have to admit, I was confused by what these verses teach and I did a lot of research to find a meaning here. In other words, why count the Levites from one month old and up? Why not count from birth and up? Or from when they were adults and started to actually act as the roles of priests? Why one month? After reading a lot of Jewish and Christian commentaries on this, all I can do is give you a speculative (note that word) answer:
 - i) Maybe it was a worry about whether or not a baby would live past the first month. I do know from Leviticus 27:6 that the value set for a boy between the ages of one month (that exact age) and five years is five shekels of silver. This was the weight of Egyptian coinage that the Israelites brought with them out of Egypt.
 - ii) That context of that amount was in effect, "If a person wanted to dedicate a person to serving God, there was a specific cash figure given for redemption." It would be like saying, "Let me give my son to the priests so they could use him for help. If the family who gave the son wanted to buy the son back, the fee was five shekels."
 - iii) The point here is that all the first born men from one month and upwards have now been fully dedicated to serving God whether those men and babies liked it or not. In other words, off to "seminary" they all go. It doesn't mean a one month old baby has to start working. It means they were part of the "firstborn" group.
 - b) So what does any of that have to do with us today? Do we count our babies for service? No, but I do believe people who are called by God to be a priest have that desire within them. I read once about a pope whose parents said, "He was born to be a priest" because ever since he was a little boy, he was endlessly fascinated with Catholic Church rituals and wanted to imitate them. We don't have to force our children to go into any specific Christian service. God calls, who He calls, and such people will know they are called.
8. Verse 17: These were the names of the sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath and Merari. ¹⁸ These were the names of the Gershonite clans: Libni and Shimei. ¹⁹ The Kohathite clans: Amram, Izhar, Hebron and Uzziel. ²⁰ The Merarite clans: Mahli and Mushi. These were the Levite clans, according to their families.
- a) The actual counting of the Levites has not begun yet. What we have here, even from the perspective of Moses, is the history of the tribe Moses belonged to, the Levites. The text is saying that roughly 400 years earlier, when Levi was alive, he had three sons, who were named Gershon, Kohath and Merari. (Who picks these names anyway?) Each of those sons went on to have their own families. At the time of Numbers, roughly 400 years later, the descendants of Levi were broken up into "clans" based on which of those three sons each Levites came from. Those are the names of the leaders being listed in these verses.
 - b) So why should I care about this stuff? First it teaches the principal of the importance of families. It shows how God sees people as part of larger families. Yes it refers to the specific family we are born into, but it also speaks of the family we join as in our church groups that we become part of. More importantly remember I said in the introduction that the entire Christian church is called the "firstborns" in Hebrews Chapter 12.
 - c) The point is just as the Levites were chosen by God to serve Him, so we as Christians are also chosen to by God to be part of His family to be with Him forever. As for the rest of our lives on earth, we are called to make a difference for Him with our lives. Therefore, we too, symbolically become part of this "firstborn" group that is separated for God.
 - d) While we are contemplating that strange idea of how we as individual Christians are now part of this group of "firstborns" (again, that means preeminent, and not literally refer to being born first), the book of Numbers is now going to list by group those who descended from the three sons of Levi and give the number of each size of each clan.
 - i) With that said, it is time to get moving again:

9. Verse 21: To Gershon belonged the clans of the Libnites and Shimeites; these were the Gershonite clans.²² The number of all the males a month old or more who were counted was 7,500.²³ The Gershonite clans were to camp on the west, behind the tabernacle.²⁴ The leader of the families of the Gershonites was Eliasaph son of Lael.²⁵ At the Tent of Meeting the Gershonites were responsible for the care of the tabernacle and tent, its coverings, the curtain at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting,²⁶ the curtains of the courtyard, the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard surrounding the tabernacle and altar, and the ropes--and everything related to their use.
- a) I have to admit that as I read this, it appears boring at first. Why should I care that there are 7,500 people in this group and they camp behind the tabernacle? How does any of that affect my life today? Let me explain the story and then the significance: Remember that all the Israelites were camped around this tabernacle structure. The Levites were to be camped right around this structure and the rest of the Israelites were camped by tribe at a further distance from the tabernacle.
 - b) This tabernacle as described in detail in the second half of the book of Exodus. It only has one entrance and it is to face toward the east. Think of it as the entrance pointing toward the "new day" as the sun rises in the east. Think of the "new day" as when one becomes "born again" and starts to seek God with their lives. They then come to the east entrance.
 - c) OK enough of all of that. This one group of Levites listed in these verses were to camp on the back side, facing the west. So, are they being punished? Hardly. As to who gets to camp to the east, we'll get to that later in the chapter. Let's focus on this group first.
 - d) The Gershonite clan was responsible for the coverings of the tabernacle. We'll get more details of their job in Chapter 4, later in this lesson. First, here is a summary of their job:
 - i) This group of Levites was in charge of the coverings over the tabernacle.
 - ii) Another group was in charge of the furnishings in the tabernacle.
 - iii) A third group was in charge of the boards and beams that support this thing.
 - iv) Finally, there was the head priest and his sons who was in charge of actually working the tabernacle. We'll get into more detail as we go on through the text.
 - e) Now comes the application:. Just as the Gershonite clan was in charge of the coverings, so God calls us to "cover others in prayer". The literal coverings were tapestries and animal skins that covered over this structure. The application is when people want to draw close to God, there should be prayer support for them as they draw close to Him. Think of this specific group of Levites as symbolic of the prayer support for the ministry. That may be why they camped behind the tabernacle, it is symbolic of working behind the scenes.
10. Verse 27: To Kohath belonged the clans of the Amramites, Izharites, Hebronites and Uzzielites; these were the Kohathite clans.²⁸ The number of all the males a month old or more was 8,600. The Kohathites were responsible for the care of the sanctuary.²⁹ The Kohathite clans were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle.³⁰ The leader of the families of the Kohathite clans was Elizaphan son of Uzziel.³¹ They were responsible for the care of the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the articles of the sanctuary used in ministering, the curtain, and everything related to their use.³² The chief leader of the Levites was Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest. He was appointed over those who were responsible for the care of the sanctuary.
- a) Now we have another group of Levites that is to camp on the south side of this structure. This group was in charge of maintenance and transportation of the furnishings. They are to camp to the south side of the tabernacle. If you know about the tabernacle furnishings, the most holy object was the "Ark of the Covenant" which represented God's presence. Other items include a large seven-branch oil lamp, an altar for prayer, another altar for sacrifices and a washtub for the priests. The simple point is this group of Levites camped on the south side of this structure was in charge of carrying all of this stuff.
 - i) The application is people who assist the priests at church service. I think of all of those who work behind the scenes in order for a church service to happen. This reminds me of all the volunteers at any church that make it function as a church.

11. Verse 33: To Merari belonged the clans of the Mahlites and the Mushites; these were the Merarite clans.³⁴ The number of all the males a month old or more who were counted was 6,200.³⁵ The leader of the families of the Merarite clans was Zuriel son of Abihail; they were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle.³⁶ The Merarites were appointed to take care of the frames of the tabernacle, its crossbars, posts, bases, all its equipment, and everything related to their use,³⁷ as well as the posts of the surrounding courtyard with their bases, tent pegs and ropes.
 - a) Next comes the group that camps to the north. This group was in charge of the structure (wood beams, etc.) that is used to hold the tabernacle together. When one thinks about the symbolic structure of a church, I think of the people who actually attend the church. Think of these Levites as symbolically being those who help others draw closer to God.
 - b) In the literal sense they camp to the north and they do the "heavy lifting". I picture these guys as having the muscles among the Levites. The "heavy lifting" in Christian service is helping people draw closer to God. It is when we witness to nonbelievers. It is when we help others draw closer to God through prayer and study. Yes, I could also describe the physical aspects of moving, boards, bases, ropes, etc. But it is more important to show how we are to relate to this group. They represent those who work with the membership of the church to help them draw closer to God.
 - c) Finally we have the leaders camped to east as described in these next verses:
12. Verse 38: Moses and Aaron and his sons were to camp to the east of the tabernacle, toward the sunrise, in front of the Tent of Meeting. They were responsible for the care of the sanctuary on behalf of the Israelites. Anyone else who approached the sanctuary was to be put to death.
 - a) The first image I thought of as I read this was that of a soccer or hockey goalie. Such a player is the final line of defense in playing those sports. So Aaron and his sons were to camp right in front of the east side (the only entrance) to the tabernacle. They were the final defense to keep out anyone else from entering this sanctuary.
 - i) So if this place represents the presence of God, why were only the head priests allowed to enter and work there? The idea is from God's perspective we have to be invited (think "called") to draw close to Him. The way I visualize this is we serve a perfect God who knows all things. Therefore, He knows who will be saved. We, who don't know all things, make our own decisions to serve Him.
 - ii) That is why in the New Testament, it was such a big deal for the curtain within this structure to be torn after Jesus died. (See Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38 and Luke 23:45). The point is the tearing of that entrance is God saying in effect, "Anyone can now approach Me (God) without going through the rituals for cleansing from sin, as Jesus has paid the full price for all sins we will ever commit."
 - iii) Remember that Jesus did was over a thousand years after the time of this event. At this time, God wanted to show how seriously He takes sin. Therefore, one had to go through the ritual of offering innocent animals to show how painful sin can be to our lives. That is in effect, why this whole ritual was set up this way.
13. Verse 39: The total number of Levites counted at the LORD's command by Moses and Aaron according to their clans, including every male a month old or more, was 22,000.
 - a) They call this book, "The Book of Numbers" for a good reason. It is obsessed with adding up people. The point is the total number of Levite men from one month old and upwards was 22,000. That is important as they compare that number to the total number of babies born to the other Israelites since the Exodus took place. Speaking of which:
14. Verse 40: The LORD said to Moses, "Count all the firstborn Israelite males who are a month old or more and make a list of their names."⁴¹ Take the Levites for me in place of all the firstborn of the Israelites, and the livestock of the Levites in place of all the firstborn of the livestock of the Israelites. I am the LORD."
 - a) The point is for all the Israelites to understand that all the Levites were taken (dedicated to be the firstborn) instead of their own firstborn children since the 10th plague occurred.

- b) The important point is that God wanted all the Israelites to know that He is separating the Levites not because they are His favorites, but to teach a principal about the significance of the "firstborn" as a title for those who are called to draw close to Him.
 - i) God is saying in effect, "All the firstborns (literal in this context) belong to me. Since I don't want all the Israelites to actually sacrifice their children, I just want them to count them up and I will take all of the tribe of Levites instead of them.
 - ii) The number of children born since the exodus will be a little larger than the actual number of Levites, and we'll deal with that in the next set of verses.
15. Verse 42: So Moses counted all the firstborn of the Israelites, as the LORD commanded him. ⁴³The total number of firstborn males a month old or more, listed by name, was 22,273. ⁴⁴ The LORD also said to Moses, ⁴⁵ "Take the Levites in place of all the firstborn of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites in place of their livestock. The Levites are to be mine. I am the LORD. ⁴⁶To redeem the 273 firstborn Israelites who exceed the number of the Levites, ⁴⁷collect five shekels for each one, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. ⁴⁸Give the money for the redemption of the additional Israelites to Aaron and his sons."
- a) If one considers the fact that there were roughly 2,000,000 Israelites, it would make sense that there were 22,273 children born in the year and one month since that event happened. It meant that many of these babies were conceived prior to the big "death (10th) plague" of Egypt and the great Israelite march out of Egypt that began that next day.
 - b) God said in effect, "There are 273 more babies than there are Levites alive. Skipping the whole why start with babies who are 30 days old discussion, God required five shekels be collected for each of the 273 more babies than there were Levites called to service.
 - i) So where did they get the money? Remember that this large group is out in the middle of the desert. I suspect that when they left Egypt, a lot of them took these silver coins with them out of habit thinking they would have value.
 - ii) Most likely, all the Israelites took up the collection as they need these five "shekels" (whatever a shekel was) for each of the 273 babies that they were "short".
 - iii) Why this specific figure? That was the price determined as redemption for any child between one month and five years old. (See Leviticus 27:6) The idea was that if a child was dedicated to God or sold into slavery to pay off a debt, the redemption price set was five shekels to buy them back. I'm not sure how much a shekel is worth, but I get the impression it was a significant sum back then.
 - iv) The point is all the Israelites had to pay this sum (five shekels per baby times 273 babies) in order for all the Levites to be considered "redeemed" as firstborns. The point for you and me is simply that because we as Christians are considered "First Born's" (i.e., separated for God's use) and that price to be paid is expensive.
 - v) One can also describe it another way. The most expensive thing one can give God is one's own life. The second most expensive thing is one's time and money. That is what is being represented here by the "five shekel per baby" payment. By giving this cash payment to the Levites for their service, the Israelites were showing God their commitment to Him and their trust in Him to provide for them.
16. Verse 49: So Moses collected the redemption money from those who exceeded the number redeemed by the Levites. ⁵⁰ From the firstborn of the Israelites he collected silver weighing 1,365 shekels, according to the sanctuary shekel. ⁵¹ Moses gave the redemption money to Aaron and his sons, as he was commanded by the word of the LORD.
- a) Bottom line is the price was paid. No children had to be literally sacrificed as the "child price was paid" as already established in the book of Leviticus. In case you cared what the total dollar figure was (so to speak), it is listed in Verse 50. So what did the Israelites do with this money? God said to give it to Aaron and His sons. Since the Israelites were accustomed to using this money as tender, they did so and Aaron was now in charge of it.
 - b) OK, time for Chapter 4, as it fits in the same general topic as this chapter:

17. Chapter 4, Verse 1: The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: ² "Take a census of the Kohathite branch of the Levites by their clans and families. ³ Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work in the Tent of Meeting.
- a) The "short version" is the Levites were counted again in this chapter. This time the count is only to be from age 30 to age 50. Remember that the Levites were separated into three separate groups not counting the family of the High Priest. This second count is to list those who specifically are to do the work of setting up and disassembling the tabernacle.
 - i) If you recall, I said, some of the Levites were responsible for moving what is on the inside. Another group does the coverings. A third group does the structure. The point is only the Levite men in this specific age group were to do this function.
 - b) OK, why only men from age 30 to 50? In Jewish tradition, men in their 20's were trained so they can begin at age 30. I also learned that the Levites over 50 would then instruct the men in their 20's how to perform these functions. In other words, the Levites didn't retire at age 50, they just moved from these jobs to the teaching profession. Know that younger men and older men still were involved in service, but these specific duties being described here were limited to men in this age group.
 - i) So why start at the age of 30? By that time in our lives, we usually get the "youth" out of our system and start to seriously focus on our careers.
 - ii) If you recall the first few verses of Chapter 3, it was the reminder that Aaron's two oldest sons died because they failed to do exactly as instructed. That reminder was there to put the fear of God into all of these workers.
18. Verse 4: "This is the work of the Kohathites in the Tent of Meeting: the care of the most holy things. ⁵ When the camp is to move, Aaron and his sons are to go in and take down the shielding curtain and cover the ark of the Testimony with it. ⁶ Then they are to cover this with hides of sea cows, spread a cloth of solid blue over that and put the poles in place. ⁷ "Over the table of the Presence they are to spread a blue cloth and put on it the plates, dishes and bowls, and the jars for drink offerings; the bread that is continually there is to remain on it. ⁸ Over these they are to spread a scarlet cloth, cover that with hides of sea cows and put its poles in place. ⁹ "They are to take a blue cloth and cover the lampstand that is for light, together with its lamps, its wick trimmers and trays, and all its jars for the oil used to supply it. ¹⁰ Then they are to wrap it and all its accessories in a covering of hides of sea cows and put it on a carrying frame. ¹¹ "Over the gold altar they are to spread a blue cloth and cover that with hides of sea cows and put its poles in place. ¹² "They are to take all the articles used for ministering in the sanctuary, wrap them in a blue cloth, cover that with hides of sea cows and put them on a carrying frame. ¹³ "They are to remove the ashes from the bronze altar and spread a purple cloth over it. ¹⁴ Then they are to place on it all the utensils used for ministering at the altar, including the firepans, meat forks, shovels and sprinkling bowls. Over it they are to spread a covering of hides of sea cows and put its poles in place.
- a) OK, don't panic by this large group of verses. Let me break it down piece by piece:
 - i) First, remember that Aaron was the head guy and his two remaining sons were being trained to not only assist Aaron, but also the oldest remaining son was to be the next high priest. The point here is simply that their job was besides making the sacrifices to God as described in Leviticus was also to cover up the holy items that were located within this structure.
 - ii) Once they were covered up, the tribe of Kohathites, who camped to the south of the tabernacle were in charge of carrying them. The text teaches how the jobs of covering them and transporting them were separated into different groups.
 - b) OK, why not state what you just said? Why give all of the details about how each item is to be wrapped up? For example, what is the spiritual significance of knowing that the main item was wrapped in a curtain, then sea cows and then a blue cloth? The short version is that each of those covering have significance. Let me explain:

- i) First, it reminds us that only the high priest can "see" God. As I stated earlier in the lesson, it wasn't until Jesus rose from the dead that the curtain used to separate the "ark" (representing God's presence) could be seen by anyone but the top priest.
 - a) When it was transported, it was first covered with that curtain. Then the ark was covered in a protective layer, translated "sea cows" here. Other translations say badger skins (KJV) or goatskins (ESV). This was the same material used for the shoes of the Israelites as they went through the desert for forty years. (See Ezekiel 16:10.) Deuteronomy 8:4 states that their shoes did not wear out the forty years this group spent in the desert.
 - b) Finally, the ark was covered in a blue cloth. That told the carriers in effect, "This is something special. It is a death sentence to peak underneath it."
- ii) The other items in the tabernacle were also covered with some sort of beautiful cloth and then with those animal skins. The point is one can only see the beauty from the "inside". Think of it this way: If one saw the entire tabernacle from the outside, it wasn't much to look at. It is only when one goes inside that one sees the gold, silver and tapestry. That is how it is with our relationship with God. It is not until we draw close to Him that we appreciate His beauty.
 - a) That principal even applies to a famous Old Testament description of Jesus, which is in Isaiah Chapter 53 (Verse 2), where it says in the middle of the verse, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him". The idea is that it is only once we get to know Jesus we appreciate His beauty.
- c) OK, why am I not spending a lot of time, giving the blow-by-blow specifics of this text? I figure a day from now, one is going to forget that "this item" is wrapped in purple and then animal skins and "that item" is wrapped in a different color and then skins.
 - i) The main point to remember is simply that the people in charge of transporting these things (think of those who help in a church service) are called to separate roles from those who are actual called to be priests. God loves both groups. The point is about performing the duty correctly that we (for that moment) are being called to perform. Just as Christians are separated to be the "firstborn" (title), so these Israelites were separated to perform specific functions as described here.
 - ii) With that said, we are ready for our next group of verses.

19. Verse 15: "After Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy furnishings and all the holy articles, and when the camp is ready to move, the Kohathites are to come to do the carrying. But they must not touch the holy things or they will die. The Kohathites are to carry those things that are in the Tent of Meeting. ¹⁶ "Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, is to have charge of the oil for the light, the fragrant incense, the regular grain offering and the anointing oil. He is to be in charge of the entire tabernacle and everything in it, including its holy furnishings and articles." ¹⁷The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ¹⁸ "See that the Kohathite tribal clans are not cut off from the Levites. ¹⁹So that they may live and not die when they come near the most holy things, do this for them: Aaron and his sons are to go into the sanctuary and assign to each man his work and what he is to carry. ²⁰ But the Kohathites must not go in to look at the holy things, even for a moment, or they will die."
- a) The point here is in effect another reminder about the separation of duties. It is Aaron and his sons who have the duty to cover and prepare these items for moving and then it is the job of this other specific group of Levites to actually move the stuff.
 - b) The emphasis here is on the fact that if the Kohathites actually look at what they are to transport, they will die. Imagine the temptation to look under the covers of these things while carrying them. The text emphasizes here that for this specific group of Levites, it is a death sentence to actually look under the covers. I believe that is one reason only the men from age 30 to 50 are picked to do this transportation. By age 30, one is more likely to take one's career serious enough to not mess around and always do the right thing.

- c) Verse 16 talks about the oldest living son of Aaron, named Eleazar. (It is easier to type these names than to have to pronounce them. ☺) Since he is the "anointed prince" of this job, he has the important job of protecting some of the sacred items here. Think of it this way: His father, the High Priest was in charge of making the sacrifices. A good way to train the "next in line" was to have him be in charge of preparing these items for transport.
 - d) Remember that this "#2" man was over 30. He was old enough to be in service. Each of the items mentioned here has a major significance. Since I don't want to repeat what is taught in Exodus, let's just say that everything here is significant and each represents our relationship with God the Father. For example, the oil is used for lighting the only light source in this structure. It represents God giving us guidance as to how we serve Him.
 - i) Another item this man was in charge of was the fragrance, which was a unique smelling blend of substances that was burned on an altar inside this structure. That burning represents our prayers to God.
 - ii) Without going much further, the whole idea is about God separating our jobs in order to serve Him. This does not mean that God considers our priests to be more important than us. It just means that everyone can't be the head guy. Different people have to do different functions in order for the "church" to work. In these last few verses, the emphasis is on the job of the top people in this organization.
 - e) With that said, we are now going to come back to another group within the tribe of Levi that was in charge of the coverings over the tabernacle.
20. Verse 21: The LORD said to Moses, ²² "Take a census also of the Gershonites by their families and clans. ²³ Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work at the Tent of Meeting. ²⁴ "This is the service of the Gershonite clans as they work and carry burdens: ²⁵ They are to carry the curtains of the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, its covering and the outer covering of hides of sea cows, the curtains for the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, ²⁶ the curtains of the courtyard surrounding the tabernacle and altar, the curtain for the entrance, the ropes and all the equipment used in its service. The Gershonites are to do all that needs to be done with these things. ²⁷ All their service, whether carrying or doing other work, is to be done under the direction of Aaron and his sons. You shall assign to them as their responsibility all they are to carry. ²⁸ This is the service of the Gershonite clans at the Tent of Meeting. Their duties are to be under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron, the priest.
- a) Something interesting to catch as one studies these chapters: Pause to consider the logic of how all of these groups would work: You would have the leaders camp by the east, as that is the only entrance to this structure, and those leaders have to wrap everything up before moving. Then comes the group to the south who would carry those interior items. Then comes the group to the west that we read about in these verses that take down all the structural coverings. Finally in the next set of verses we read of the group that dismantles and sets up the structure itself.
 - b) OK, John, this would be interesting if I was an engineer in charge of moving this stuff. ☺ How does it any of it affect my life as a Christian? Glad you asked. Notice the emphasis on counting all of these people by their names. It reminds us of the principal that God calls each of us by name. They and us are not just a bunch of numbers to accomplish specific jobs. Just as each group is called by name, so we are each called by our name.
 - i) Yes, each of us are called to specific jobs within our Christian life. Some people enjoy bringing in new members. Others have special gifts for prayer. Others get involved in working behind the scenes at church. Others teach.
 - ii) Just as each person within this group has specific functions and talents as given to us by God, so He desires that we use the talents and desires we have in order to make a difference for Him. To use one's talents, it is often a matter of just doing what one cannot stand not doing anyway. It is a matter of using the most valuable thing God gives us, our time, in order to make a difference for Him.

21. Verse 29: "Count the Merarites by their clans and families.³⁰ Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work at the Tent of Meeting.³¹ This is their duty as they perform service at the Tent of Meeting: to carry the frames of the tabernacle, its crossbars, posts and bases,³² as well as the posts of the surrounding courtyard with their bases, tent pegs, ropes, all their equipment and everything related to their use. Assign to each man the specific things he is to carry.³³ This is the service of the Merarite clans as they work at the Tent of Meeting under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron, the priest."
- a) In this paragraph, we get the final group of Levites who were in charge of setting up and disassembling the support structure (wood beams, sockets, ties, etc) of the tabernacle.
 - b) It may help to remember this principal: All the priests were Levites. Not all the Levites were priests. If one remembers that concept, these two chapters are easier to understand.
 - i) The "priests" were in effect Aaron and his sons. The Levites were of the same tribe, but most of them had different functions. Just like in our church structures, there may be only one priest on stage, but it takes a large group of people to work behind the scenes in order to organize a set of functions to honor God.
 - c) So why all the emphasis on portability? First there is the logical answer that the Israelites were in the wilderness and this structure had to be moved. The more important answer is that God goes where we go. The idea for us is that He wants to be part of our lives and He wants us to take Him with us into every aspect of our lives.
 - i) Therefore, it is important to teach how God cares for each of us "by name" and He cares about whatever role and function we have within Christian service.
 - ii) Don't forget that just as these Levites were called to be the "firstborns", so the Christian believer is called to be the firstborns as we serve Him with our lives.
 - d) Meanwhile, this is the book of Numbers, and we have some more (final) counting to do.
22. Verse 34: Moses, Aaron and the leaders of the community counted the Kohathites by their clans and families.³⁵ All the men from thirty to fifty years of age who came to serve in the work in the Tent of Meeting,³⁶ counted by clans, were 2,750.³⁷ This was the total of all those in the Kohathite clans who served in the Tent of Meeting. Moses and Aaron counted them according to the LORD's command through Moses.³⁸ The Gershonites were counted by their clans and families.³⁹ All the men from thirty to fifty years of age who came to serve in the work at the Tent of Meeting,⁴⁰ counted by their clans and families, were 2,630.⁴¹ This was the total of those in the Gershonite clans who served at the Tent of Meeting. Moses and Aaron counted them according to the LORD's command.⁴² The Merarites were counted by their clans and families.⁴³ All the men from thirty to fifty years of age who came to serve in the work at the Tent of Meeting,⁴⁴ counted by their clans, were 3,200.⁴⁵ This was the total of those in the Merarite clans. Moses and Aaron counted them according to the LORD's command through Moses.⁴⁶ So Moses, Aaron and the leaders of Israel counted all the Levites by their clans and families.⁴⁷ All the men from thirty to fifty years of age who came to do the work of serving and carrying the Tent of Meeting⁴⁸ numbered 8,580.⁴⁹ At the LORD's command through Moses, each was assigned his work and told what to carry. Thus they were counted, as the LORD commanded Moses.
- a) Let me put these final verses this way: Are you going to remember in a few minutes how many men between 30 and 50 camped to the north of the tabernacle? Probably not.
 - b) The point of these final verses is to show obedience to God's command. God told Moses, his brother Aaron and the leaders of this tribe to go count everyone in that age bracket. What we have here is an emphasis on the obeying of that command. As I stated in the last lesson, the text goes out of it's way to commend obedience.
 - c) Let me end the lesson this way: God promises rewards for obedience. That is why this book emphasizes the names of all of these people who agreed to do all of this work. At the same time, the text had a lot of emphasizes on a a death sentence for disobedience. What is the fate of those who refuse to submit to God with their lives? An eternal death sentence. Called to be a "firstborn" is a privilege and a responsibility of all Christians.

23. Heavenly Father, Thank You for calling us to be part of the "Firstborns". Help us to remember that You have separated us from nonbelievers in order for us to make a difference for You. Help us to use the most valuable assets we have: our time and resources in order to make a difference for You. Help us with our problems of the moment, to remember that You are there, You care for our lives, and if we focus on serving You the way You desire we do, You will guide us through whatever it is we have to deal with. Thank You for our eternal lives and help us to use that lives to make that difference for You. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.