

Sermon on Numbers 3 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Numbers 3:40-51

Over the weekend I was reminded of my imperfection and need for cosmic intervention. The rain beat me.

As you may know, when we bought and renovated our house we converted the garage into a bedroom. But the floor being that of a garage is designed to move any water toward the front. So the low point of the floor is where we have a sliding glass door.

But in our yard, the low point is evidentially our driveway. Where saturated soil can't take anymore, a lake of water forms and water seeps through the sealed wall we put in.

We haven't just left it as it is. We have some really interesting strategies in place to move the water. Twelve feet of gutter drains putting the rain deep in the yard. Sandbags on the wall to help create more of a barrier. Even the family physically pushing the water further away into the street or yard. Ultimately, I just needed the rain to stop!

These steps, these measures are temporary at best and won't fully solve the problem because the water will find a way back in... I need a better solution. I need it to be dry, to apply some flexseal, to have better flood control.

So much of life is like this. Recognizing problems, trying temporary solutions, needing a permanent fix.

Longing for relationship in a hook-up culture. Put yourself out there and none of what you experience matches the good desire you have.

Putting my worth in vocation. Thinking the next promotion is going to solve my anxiety or correct the sense I have that I am an imposter.

Thinking children will solve the marital tension, or finally give me some joy (which they do), and being so exhausted and delirious that you have another one!

Even in relating to God, we can devise a universe to our own liking that leaves me with no compass for the journey and no leverage to get better.

In all these things and more, we try to fix the difficult problems, to solve them with our own ingenuity, our perseverance, our metal... and these efforts may work for a while or a long time... but the rains come and water finds its way.

This morning we don't have advice on the lesser solutions - there are appropriate places for that - but we do have the answer to the solution that is over and above all solutions. That actually provides the basis to solve things that are off. The one that sets everything else in order, and gives us a better perspective when the water rises.

It is actually a priest we need. Someone to link us to our Creator, to make sense of it all.

Jesus is the perfect priest we need for redemption and life.

Numbers 3

This is the story of Israel in the wilderness, of the generation that will miss the Promised Land and the one that will enter it.

In these first chapters we have seen a census, the count of men able to fight in each tribe. We have seen their order, how they were to camp and travel.

And now we have the introduction of the priestly class. Levites, those responsible for Israel's worship and the keeping of the Tabernacle.

In our reading we've jumped ahead a bit through the count of the Levites. Made up of the Gershonites, Kohathites, and Merari.

Numbers 3:5–10 “And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [6] “Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him. [7] They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. [8] They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle. [9] And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and

his sons; they are wholly given to him from among the people of Israel. [10] And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall guard their priesthood. But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death.” (ESV)

This account is laying out a pattern for God’s people and subtly pointing to something better.

The Imperfect Pattern

The outlines and regulations, the laws and commands given by Yahweh for worship are the structuring of a pattern of relationship. How God and his people relate, how they experience covenant promises and the appropriate response to redemption.

Remember this is the wandering in the wilderness that comes after the exodus from slavery in Egypt.

Here, in worship, the Levites represent the people. They are themselves part of the pattern.

Helpful NT description:

Hebrews 9:2–7 “For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. [3] Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, [4] having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron’s staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. [5] Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

[6] These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, [7] but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.” (ESV)

There are a few things of the Levites that stand out that shape the pattern.

They represent the *firstborn of Israel*.

Numbers 3:11–13 “And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [12] “Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, [13] for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the LORD.” (ESV)

“When God sent the destroying angel to go through Egypt and kill all of the firstborn sons in the land, he passed over the firstborn sons of Israel. The firstborn of Egypt were struck down, while God spared the firstborn of Israel from death. As a result, the firstborn in Israel belonged to God.”

Declaration that they are not their own but belong to God.

We might wrestle with that - ‘shouldn’t they have agency to be their own etc’ - belonging is what humanity was made for, so it is good, where the greatest good is experienced.

Belonging to God they are representative of Israel. Their sacrifices are for the whole. Vouching for the tribes. Their work accounted as the work of the nation.

Substitutes - Levites in the place of Israel.

Mediators between God and man. And their work inside and outside the Tabernacle shows them to be the barrier between God and the people.

Numbers 3:38 “Those who were to camp before the tabernacle on the east, before the tent of meeting toward the sunrise, were Moses and Aaron and his sons, *guarding* the sanctuary itself, to *protect the people of Israel*. And any outsider who came near was to be put to death.” (ESV)

“Only those whom God had chosen and appointed could serve as priests: anyone else who tried to approach God was subject to the death penalty”

More than just representing Israel, the Levites do the works of worship, in the place of the whole, in the place of the other tribes.

They act as this protection for the tabernacle and the people because God is holy. As we briefly touched on last week, God is so different, so perfect, so holy, that sin can not be in his presence. Israel knows of his holiness, those swallowed up by it. It's why they keep outsiders away and offer sacrifice.

Exodus 15:11 “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” (ESV)

So far above us. Beyond us. Yet comes near.

Levites serve as the buffer. Strictly living, ordered worship.

And this arrangement costs Israel something. As substitutes for the firstborn of Israel they are owed a *redemption price*. Five shekels to pay for the work

“They are a reminder that when God rescued his people, he did so with a price. Someone had to substitute for the Israelite firstborn if they were not to die. In fact, in the plan of God there were two aspects to this redemption. In the first place, someone had to pay the price of the death that Israel deserved in their place, which was the role of the Passover lamb. Second, though, someone also had to pay the price of the life of obedience that Israel owed, by being completely given over to God in their place. That was the part that the Levites had to play in all of this. In the redemption of the firstborn, it was not so much a matter of “do or die” but “do and die.” The job of the Passover lamb was to die; the job of the Levites was to live, completely devoted to God.” Duiguid

But the pattern was imperfect. These priests were imperfect.

They wouldn't all follow it and would pay for it.

Numbers 3:4 “But Nadab and Abihu died before the LORD when they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD in the wilderness of Sinai, and they had no children. So Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests in the lifetime of Aaron their father.” (ESV)

Even in the wilderness, carelessness in serving a holy God can be fatal. There is consistent stumbling and getting things wrong. Generations later the people

would lose the pattern all together. Never quite enough to cover sin, to make things right before God.

This week I was in Pasadena for Gospel Coaching training and I wasn't prepared for how significant of an experience it would be. The weight of the issue people face - and these are just the coaches practicing our skills with each other! The ways we try to be our own priests. To order everything perfectly. To make no mistakes. To make the right sacrifices... to be pleasing to God.

We bail our own water when we need someone else to do it.

We spent two days bailing water as a family. Stacy posted some video of the kids doing it, and Roger, practicing shepherding as an elder texted a link to the pump he bought for his yard. (I ordered it!)

We could make some progress, when the rain slowed, but our bailing was insufficient to hold back the tide. This is life for us. We strive, we bail the water but what we need is a pump.

The wilderness teaches us this.

Levites as part of a pattern pointing beyond it.

The establishment of this pattern of worship and relating to God in the wilderness is a lot like parenting... not to scare you! We parent setting a pattern for our kids hoping they mature following it, with bread crumbs to find their way home.

For Israel, some will follow the crumbs into the Promised Land, but the pattern isn't perfect, many will miss out.

Wilderness whispers that becomes echos pointing to a permanent solution.

What the people need, what we need to relate to God, is a perfect priest.

The Perfect Priest

Reading these stories, the accounts of God's people in the Old Testament, we should always be looking forward. They all point to something better.

Needing a *representative* that is spotless, a *substitute* to take our place, a *redemption price* to be paid that we could never afford. For those outside of Israel.

A better covenant. A better priest.

Spoiler, it's Jesus!

The Old Testament points to a better prophet, to a better King, and a better priest.

The sacrifices of the tabernacle, even the temple, performed by the Levites are insufficient to fully cover the sin of humanity (the sacrifices God's people would begin to take for granted).

Hebrews 10:3–4 “But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. [4] For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” (ESV)

Yahweh, God sends his son to dwell among us and be our perfect priest.

Hebrews 9:11–15 “But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) [12] he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. [13] For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, [14] how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

[15] Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.” (ESV)

Like Israel, redeemed, brought out of the slavery to sin and rejection of God, given a life in him, hope for the future, and the strength to get through the wilderness. Jesus our *representative*, living perfectly obediently in our place. As our *substitute*, taking on death that we deserved. And the *redemption price* paid by his blood shed for us.

Israel's journey tells the story - their need, of the temporary solutions they employed, always coming up short. We too are on the journey, all of life unfolding that we would go looking for the solution.

Acts 17:24–27 “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, [25] nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. [26] And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, [27] that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,” (ESV)

Not our own. Made to seek him.

He has come among us. To free us. Give us a way of life. To bring us into the promise.

Hebrews 10:11–14 “And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. [12] But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, [13] waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. [14] For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” (ESV)

Because this is true, we live differently, we journey differently, we face the floods of life differently. Secure, kept, covered by Jesus.

Made perfect by our perfect priest.

We can stop bailing the water, the pump will do the work. Our substitute has by his perfection made us spotless, given us life to live in new ways, trusting, giving him glory. Telling other drenched souls where to get dry.

Jesus is the perfect priest we need for redemption and life.

Hebrews 10:19–23 “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, [20] by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, [21] and since we have a great priest over the house of God, [22] let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. [23] Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.” (ESV)

Recognize the pattern. The need for a representative, a substitute and a redemption price.

Run to the perfect priest. Believe in Jesus. He is for you.

Live - with hope, identity, purpose, worship. Tell somebody.

Jesus is the perfect priest we need for redemption and life.

Set your house on the rock, so when the rains come it will stand.

The fix is in. Be free. Free others. Draw near to our King.