

The Levites

Opening Hymn: #275 — “Sweet is the Work”

Numbers 8:18 And I have taken the Levites for all the firstborn of the children of Israel.

When we hear about the Levites, we think about the Tabernacle and the special status this tribe had within the nation. What made them so special? To answer that question we go back to the time when Moses was communing with God in mount Sinai. Because he had been away so long, the people became restless and pressured Aaron to make them a god they could see; the golden calf was the result. God in his displeasure sent Moses down from the mount to deal with the rebellion. Astounded with what he saw, Moses issued this call: “Who is on the Lord’s side? let him come unto me. And all the sons of **Levi** gathered themselves together unto him” (Exodus 32:26). As the “Lord’s army” they went through the nation slaying 3,000 of the worst idolaters.

We don’t know whether they stepped forward because they were truly “on the Lord’s side” or because they thought their kinsman Moses was vulnerable and needed all the help he could get. Certainly they did not flinch when ordered to slay the disobedient among them.

The father of the tribe, Levi himself, was involved in another incident of mass execution, but it wasn’t because of a command from God. In Genesis 34 we read about Dinah, a daughter of Jacob and Leah. Shechem, a local prince in the area, fell so madly in love with her that he said he’d do anything to get her as his wife. He asks his father to talk to Jacob, Dinah’s father, and arrange the marriage. Shechem and his father are told that it can happen only on one condition: he and all the males of the city must be circumcised. They all readily agree and the surgical operation takes place on them all at the same time. Little does Shechem know that this will cause his death:

Genesis 34:25,26 And it came to pass on the third day, when they were sore, that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and **Levi**, Dinah's brothers, took each man his sword, and came upon the city boldly, and slew all the males. And they slew Hamor and Shechem his son with the edge of the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went out.

Simeon and Levi were sons of Leah and therefore full brothers of Dinah. They had plotted this treachery from the start. They had no intention of allowing their sister to marry an uncircumcised foreigner. But rather than say so directly, they deceitfully murdered all the men of the city when they were defenseless. When Jacob learns what they’ve done, he says: “You have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites” (Genesis 34:30).

Later in Genesis when Jacob prophesied about the future of each of his sons, he said, “Simeon and **Levi** are brothers; instruments of cruelty are in their habitations. O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honour, be not thou united: for in their anger they slew a man, and in their selfwill they digged down a wall. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel: I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel” (Genesis 49:5-7).

God did not select Israel to be his special people because they were so good. The opposite was true. “The Lord thy God giveth thee not this good land to possess it for thy righteousness; for thou art a

stiffnecked people” (Deuteronomy 9:6). Notice that the family of Levi was not selected because it was so wonderful.

Here is what one commentator said about this: “Such was Levi by nature and by practice—self-willed, fierce, and cruel. How remarkable that such an one should be singled out and brought into a place of such high and holy privilege! Surely, we may say, it was grace from first to last. It is the way of grace to take up the worst cases. It stoops to the lowest depths and gathers up its brightest trophies from thence. And, oh, what a marvelous contrast between Levi’s position by nature and his position by grace! between the instruments of cruelty and the vessels of the sanctuary!” (C.H.M., *Notes on Numbers*, ppg. 49, 51.)

Here is a good lesson for ourselves. Some draw back from consecrating because they say they are not “good enough.” Indeed they are not, nor is any fallen human being “good enough” for the Lord. We are no more qualified for God’s service than was Levi. Characteristics of unrighteousness and even cruelty undoubtedly lurk within us all. Such evil traits would corrupt us were it not for the grace of God that has been so lavishly bestowed upon us.

The Firstborns

Although the first-born of Israel did not die the night the avenging angel went through the land of Egypt, God still considered them all to be his special possession. But instead of taking all the first-borns from all the tribes, he exchanged them for the entire tribe of Levi. Levi was the smallest tribe. It had exactly 22,000 males who were at least one month old. There were 22,273 first-born males in all the tribes. The formula of substitution required that five shekels for each of the 273 “unredeemed” be paid (see Numbers 3:42-47). From that time forward this became the standard redemption price for every subsequent first-born that came into a family (Numbers 18:16).

The males of the tribe of Levi did the menial work associated with transport of the tabernacle whenever the cloud covering it moved from one place to another. According to Numbers chapter 4, they served from the age of 30 to 50 as we read: “From fifty years old the Levite retires from the labour of the service, and shall serve no more; but he shall minister with his brethren in the tent of meeting, and keep the charge” (Numbers 8:25,26). Here is an interesting observation from another commentator about this age requirement: “Three different thoughts come before the mind in this connection. **First**, it seems to indicate that Levitical service is to be marked by full competence, and that no feature of decline or decrepitude are to appear in it. It suggests the maintenance of a high standard of efficiency, in a spiritual sense, as being the only thing suitable in the service of God. **Second**, it conveys an impression of a time limit to active service. We should labor in the sense of this all the time. Even the Lord said, I must work the works of him that has sent me while it is day. The night is coming when no man can work. (John 9:4) Each of us has his ‘day’ of service; it will soon be over; how important to fill it up rightly! The Levite had the sense all the time that he had a measured period in which to serve, and that the time was coming when it would close . . . Our allotted period of service here in the tent of meeting will soon be over, and we shall never have another opportunity for that service. . . . But a **third** thought seems to be also suggested in this Scripture: namely, that when arduous labor is no longer permitted to the Levite, he retains an honorable place in the ministry with his brethren, and keeps the charge. He is not degraded but rather dignified . . . there comes a time when strenuous toil is no longer possible; it has to be left to younger servants. But how precious is the grace

that still permits an aged, and perhaps invalid, Levite--brother or sister--to ‘minister with his brethren in the tent of meeting, and keep the charge.’ ”—Coates, *An Outline of Numbers*, p. 110.

Although a man had to be at least 30 years old to have an active part in the service of the Tabernacle, in fact the Levites were inducted into service when they turned 25. We read: “This is it that belongeth unto the Levites: from 25 years old and upward they shall go in to wait upon the service of the tabernacle of the congregation” (Numbers 8:24). However, they could not carry the tabernacle and its furniture until they were 30. Quoting again from Coates: “They had, if we may so say, to serve a five years’ apprenticeship in relation to holy things before they were qualified to render the service of which [Numbers] chapter 4 speaks. We must not suppose that a desire or readiness to serve on our part will give spiritual competency. This must be divinely given, and it will be normally in keeping with the spiritual maturity of the servant. A babe in Christ might be fresh in his affections, and fervent in spirit, but something more than this is needed for service of a high order spiritually. The more spiritual any service is, the more does it require spiritual maturity in the one who renders it.”—Coates, *An Outline of Numbers*, p. 32.

No Inheritance in the Land

Because they were considered as the Lord’s possession, the Levites received 48 cities scattered throughout Canaan but no actual territory when the land was divided up (Numbers 35:7). In fact they were considered to be so devoted to the Lord that when Moses numbered the Israelites to determine how many could go forth to war (Numbers 1:3), the Levites were explicitly excluded (see verse 47).

“[The Levites] were consecrated to the priestly office, which in all countries has been exempted customarily, and in Israel by the express authority of God, from military service. The custody of the things devoted to Divine service was assigned to them so exclusively, that ‘no stranger’ --i. e., no person, not even an Israelite of any other tribe, was allowed, under penalty of death, to approach these, and hence they encamped around the tabernacle, that there should be no manifestation of Divine displeasure among the people.”—Jamieson, Faussett & Brown, *Commentary on Numbers 1:47-54*.

The Levites were excused from military service. But that’s not all. I believe they also escaped the death penalty which fell on Israel after the people agreed with the ten spies who said they could never conquer the land. In Numbers 13 Moses selects 12 representatives and sends them on a spying expedition. Upon their return, ten say they can’t go in because the people are too strong; Joshua and Caleb say, with God’s help, they can. The people agree with the ten and want to stone Joshua and Caleb. For this gross violation of faith and trust in God, a terrible judgment falls:

Numbers 14:29,30 Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against me, doubtless ye shall not come into the land, concerning which I swear to make you dwell therein, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun.

If you look carefully at the listing of the 12 spies, the tribe of Levi was not represented. Each spy is named in Numbers 13:4-15 and Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph’s two sons, plus Jacob’s other ten sons **but not Levi** make the number 12. Levi stands apart from what happens. Eleazar and Ithamar, sons of Aaron, had to have been at least 30 years old to “minister in the priest's office in the sight of Aaron

their father” (Numbers 3:4). Since their brothers Nadab and Abihu died when they offered strange fire before the Lord, they began their service at the very beginning of the wilderness experience. Eleazar succeeded his father in the priesthood and worked with Joshua after the nation entered Caanan. So Eleazar, like Joshua, Caleb and probably a great many other older Levites, did not die during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. The Levites had not participated in the spying, in the evil report, and I believe they were also exempt from the judgment of death on those 20 years old and older.

Six Levitical cities had a special function: “And among the cities which ye shall give unto the Levites there shall be six cities for refuge” (Numbers 35:6). “And they appointed [as cities of refuge] Kedesh . . . Shechem . . . and Kirjatharba . . . And on the other side Jordan by Jericho eastward, they assigned Bezer . . . Ramoth . . . and Golan” (Joshua 20:7,8). By selecting Levitical cities for the purpose of refuge, God arranged that all tribal prejudice or bias would be eliminated when someone being pursued should enter the city and ask for asylum. This is the way it worked:

If anyone should accidentally be responsible for the death of another, he was liable to being killed himself by a family member. To save his life he would flee to a city of refuge and ask for protection from those who might kill him. If the authorities hearing the circumstances of the case agreed it was accidental, the person could safely dwell in the city of refuge. In a sense it was a kind of house arrest because if he strayed from the city, he lost the protection it gave him. However, when the high priest died, those in the cities of refuge were emancipated. They could go home and be no longer in danger of death.

These cities of refuge seem to picture what happens to the sinner condemned by divine justice. Where can we flee? Psalms 46:1 reads, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” We “have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us” (Hebrews 6:18). Brother Russell writes:

“From the moment, therefore, that we recognize that we are sinners--that we could not stand approved in the divine presence-- from that moment we realize that the avenger, Justice, is upon our trail, and that it is only a question of time when we will be overtaken and destroyed unless we reach some place of refuge. . . . Christ is the only place of refuge, and to him we have to flee. . . . If we leave the city of refuge, if we abandon our trust in the precious blood which cleanseth us from all sin, we become liable again to the demands of Justice and that without mercy. Divine justice is represented in the avenger, as divine mercy is represented in the city of refuge, and he who would leave the city of refuge necessarily falls into the hands of Justice. . . . We must thus abide ‘until the death of the high priest.’ . . . Soon the entire high priest, its every member, will have died. Then the new dispensation will be ushered in and no longer will we be obliged to own our own imperfection and the need of a covering before justice; from thenceforth having been made perfect by a share in the First Resurrection, having been made like our Lord and Master, we shall be presented before the Father blameless, unreprouvable, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, without any vengeance against us on the part of divine justice. The entire arrangement is of God--Justice is the avenger of sin, and Christ is the refuge and deliverance.”—*Reprints*, p. 3093.

Typical Significance of the Tribe of Levi

The tribe of Levi consisted of two groups: a small number of priests and underpriests, and a great number of non-priests. Only the priests saw the glory and beauty of the inner chambers of the Tabernacle. In fact the priests had to first cover all the articles of furniture before the Kohathite Levites carried them from one place to another (Numbers 4:5-15). Yet both priests and ordinary Levites were treated the same in one respect: none of them received land. Paul writes, “These things occurred to [Israel] typically, and were written for our admonition on whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Corinthians 10:11, *Diaglott*). If these things happened to them as types, what then might this tribe and its service typify?

“In order to have a full and complete picture of what is typified by the tribe of Levi, we must remember how they came into their position of either being priests or of serving the priests. They were all a part of Israel, but God separated them unto himself; he gave them no inheritance in the land. All their rights were withheld from them and they were made dependent upon the other tribes. Why was this? The answer is that they were taken by the Lord as instead of the ‘firstborn’ of all the tribes of Israel. Thus the tribe of Levi became the typical ‘church of the first-born.’ Then out of this typical ‘church of the first-born’ the Lord selected a priestly family, Aaron and his sons, who typified the royal priesthood, Christ and his church. All of the tribe of Levi represented the church of the first-born and the family of Aaron represented the ‘very elect.’ ”—*Reprints*, p. 4745.

Paul writes, “To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven” (Hebrews 12:23). The Levites became the first-born in typical Israel because they were substituted for the literal first-borns. We are told in Hebrews they are “written in heaven.” And that is exactly what we should expect since in the type they did not inherit the land. Thus it is in the reality: one high priest and a small number of underpriests (the church with her head Jesus Christ) has a special spiritual role to play, and a Great Company have a secondary position in the plan of God. Yet both have no inheritance in the land. Both groups are in heaven: the church is seated on the throne, the great multitude is before the throne (Revelation 7:9; 19:6).

What did the Levites do once Israel came into the promised land? There was no tabernacle to disassemble, carry, and then reassemble. In fact they rise in importance in the nation. Under King David the Levites are described as “officers and judges” responsible for all the “business of the Lord, and in the service of the king” (2 Chronicles 26:29,30). Under Hezekiah we are told the Levites “taught the good knowledge of the Lord” (2 Chronicles 30:22). In Josiah’s time the teaching function had become a title: “The Levites that taught all Israel” (2 Chronicles 35:3). When Nehemiah reestablished the broken walls of Jerusalem, the Levites “taught the people” (Nehemiah 8:9). So it will be in the kingdom: those who are part of the “church of the first born,” antitypical Levites, will be used by God to teach the people his righteous laws so all may worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23,24).

A Picture of the Kingdom

The Levites were divided into three families. Each had a specific responsibility for different parts of the Tabernacle. The **Gershonite** Levites were given two wagons and four oxen to transport the curtains, hangings, etc. (Numbers 3:25,26; 4:24-26; 7:7). The **Merari** Levites were given four wagons and eight oxen to transport the boards, pillars, sockets, cords and pins, etc. (Numbers 3:36,37; 4:31,32; 7:8). But no wagons were given to the **Kohathite** Levites: they carried the sacred articles of the Tabernacle upon their shoulders (Numbers 3:31; 4:6; 7:9).

What is pictured by these three families among which there appears to be a clear status difference? We notice first of all that each of these families camped next to the Tabernacle on the north, west, and south sides. Aaron and his house camped at the entrance to the Tabernacle on the east side. It appears to be a picture of the completed work of the kingdom when “the tabernacle of God will be with men” (Rev. 21:3). When all evil and unrighteousness will have been destroyed, there will be four distinct classes:

1. Jesus Christ and his church on the east side (where camped Moses, Aaron, and the priestly family). It is from the east that the sun comes forth each day to shed its healing beams upon the earth beneath (see Malachi 4:2).
2. The Great Company on the north side (Merari, a name meaning bitter, perhaps indicating it is through bitter experiences that they reach their goal [see Revelation 7:14]). Isaiah 14:12,13 implies that God’s throne is in the “north” making that direction synonymous with heaven.
3. The faithful patriarchs and prophets who lived and died before Christ camped on the south side (Kohath is a name meaning allied, perhaps indicating they are allied with the church in heart and mind, though separated in time—Kohath was the grandfather of Aaron and Moses).
4. The entire rescued world of mankind on the west side (Gershon, a name meaning refugees or rescued).

“So, then, first in order as well as in rank amongst these antitypical Levites, or justified ones, will be the Royal Priesthood, to whose care the Millennial Kingdom and every interest will be committed. On their right hand will be the closest of kin--the ancient worthies--whom they shall ‘make princes in all the earth.’ Next on their left will be their faithful brethren of the Great Company. And last of all will be those rescued from sin and death during the Millennium, whose loyalty will have been fully attested in the great trial with which the Millennial age will close. (Revelation 20:7-9)”—*Studies in the Scriptures*, vol. 6, ppg. 128, 129.

Brethren, may we prove faithful in performing our work for the Lord during this age so that in the age to come we may have a part in the great work to bring the world of mankind back to the perfection they lost in Adam so long ago.

Closing Hymn: #309 — “To the Work”