



ORGANIZED WORSHIP

Numbers 18–19

God's instructions to Israel in Numbers 18–19 emphasize two important principles relevant to His people in every age. We must follow God's revealed order and fill the roles He has for us in His body; and we must always seek purity and holiness in our relationship with Him.

Every church, every family, every organization, and every nation face moments of crisis. Sometimes they challenge the plans or the structures or the leadership involved.

The apostle Paul told the Corinthian church that problems arise in the church so that those who are mature and genuine will be recognized (1 Corinthians 11:19). A crisis has a way of developing a family or a nation, and that's exactly what's happening in the life of Israel.

In our last study, in Numbers chapter 16, we watched the divisive men led by Korah try to wrestle leadership away from Moses and Aaron. The Lord put an end to the rebellion by taking the lives of Korah and his conspirators. God also judged by a plague the people who defended the rebels and accused Moses and Aaron of murder.

And in Numbers chapter 17 the people reacted in fear and said to Moses in verses 12-13: "Behold, we perish . . . we are all undone. Everyone who comes near . . . to the tabernacle of the LORD, shall die. Are we all to perish?" In other words, they're asking, "Is the Lord going to get rid of us and start over?"

Well, chapters 18–19 answer their questions. We're going to see here that God informs them of what is needed in order to approach Him without fear of judgment and death.



Sesostris here holds the kherep scepter

First, the people need to *accept God's organization for worship*. Korah was a Levite—an assistant to the priests—but he wanted the role of priest. He wanted the privileges that belonged to Aaron and his sons and therefore tried to take over a role that did not belong to him. So, in chapter 18, the Lord clarifies the roles of the priests and the Levites.

The Lord begins by speaking directly to Aaron in verse 1:



“You and your sons and your father’s house with you shall bear iniquity connected with the sanctuary . . . you shall bear iniquity connected with your priesthood.”

Aaron and his family have special responsibilities for Israel’s worship and the “sanctuary”—that is, the tabernacle. They are to represent the people before God. Without them interceding, the nation has every right to fear the judgment of God.

The Lord continues in verse 2, saying to Aaron:

“Bring your brothers also, the tribe of Levi . . . that they may join you and minister to you while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony.”

Now the Levites are not priests, but according to verse 6, they are God’s “gift” to Aaron and the priesthood, assistants to the priests. The priests and the Levites are to minister together, but they’re to respect the boundaries that define their offices.

Now what the Lord says in verses 8 through 20 here in chapter 18 has already been stated back in Leviticus. It’s repeated here to remind both the priests and the people of Israel that they are dependent on each other. The people bring the sacrifices and offerings, and a portion of them become the paycheck, so to speak, for the priests.

The Lord says to the priests in verses 9-10:

“This shall be yours of the most holy things, reserved from the fire: every offering of theirs, every grain offering of theirs and every sin offering of theirs and every guilt offering of theirs, which they render to me, shall be most

holy to you and to your sons. In a most holy place shall you eat it.”

In other words, these offerings became their supper. Now, down in verse 21-22, the Lord speaks to the Levites about some new regulations:

“To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting, so that the people of Israel do not come near the tent of meeting, lest they bear sin and die.”

The Levites not only assisted the priests, but they literally protected the people from becoming too careless in their approach to God. And the tithes of the people become, again, their personal paycheck.

All these regulations set forth here in Numbers 18 offer safeguards for the nation. When the people recognize their role in Israel’s worship and follow what God has organized for them, they have no reason to fear His judgment.

The priests, aided by the Levites, represent the nation before the Lord, leading them to find forgiveness and blessing. And as the people follow God’s plan for worship, their sacrifices and financial gifts end up providing for the physical needs of the priests and Levites.

So, there is this wonderful interdependence. The people rely on the priests and Levites, and the priests and Levites depend on the people.

Here is a good lesson for us: As we follow God’s arrangement for marriage and family and work and ministry, we not only discover joy and fulfillment, we more than likely take care of other people in the process.

The first principle here in chapter 18, then, is that the nation needed to accept God’s organizational plan. Second, they needed to *accept God’s demand for purity*.

In chapter 19, God lays out the laws for purification. We already saw back in Leviticus chapter 11 that any contact with a deceased animal or human rendered



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someone unclean and unable to worship in the tabernacle until proper cleansing took place.

Obviously, God has some good hygiene in mind here for the people, but more importantly this serves as a reminder that God is holy and must be approached in holiness.

The Lord says here in verse 13:

“Whoever touches a dead person, the body of anyone who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from Israel.”

This isn't a new regulation, but it's emphasized again. Why? Well, keep in mind that since the people will be in the wilderness for a total of forty years because of their refusal to follow Joshua and Caleb's counsel, an entire generation is in the process of dying—at a rate of 25,000 people a year. As I have already said, their forty-year wandering was nothing more than a forty-year funeral procession.

So, Numbers chapter 19 begins with the Lord's instructions for removing the uncleanness caused by contact with a corpse. Among other things, this involves the sacrifice of a red heifer “outside the camp” (verse 3).

The body of the heifer is to be burned and its ashes collected and mixed with water. Verse 9 calls this, “the water for impurity for the congregation of the people of Israel.” This water is to be applied to those who are unclean due to touching a dead body. Then after a seven-day quarantine, they are pronounced clean, and returned to life as normal, including being allowed to worship again in the tabernacle.

Now we need to understand that this particular cleansing establishes in the hearts of the people a growing *anticipation* for a permanent cleansing that will bring unbroken restoration to true worship.

How is that going to happen? In God's plan, an unblemished sacrifice will be offered outside the camp once and for all, and all who accept that sacrifice—of the Lord Jesus Christ—will be *permanently* cleansed and restored to fellowship with God.

How do you support and complement the spiritual leaders God has given you? Consider going to them and humbly asking if they feel supported or how specifically you can support them. How does assuming leaders feel or are supported play into Satan's hands?

What specific spiritual disciples currently contribute most to your pursuit of spiritual purity? Why do they work so well for you? Which don't, and why? What value is it to yet to be saved friends and family for you and your close believing friends to talk about purity as a lifestyle?

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