

Redeemed to Serve

Numbers 3:14–20, 40–51

I've never heard a series of sermons on Numbers before. I've never *preached* one either in almost 50 years of ordained ministry. As we go through the book of Numbers my intent is to seek to understand the text and see how it touches on themes that are developed throughout Scripture and impact us today. Let's look at several. The first is:

1. Worship

Last week we talked about priests and Levites. In the Bible, the word *priest* denotes *one who offers sacrifices*. Only Aaron and his sons could be priests and offer the sacrifices of God. The Levites assisted the priests. They also guarded the Tabernacle and stood between the sanctuary and the rest of Israel, so that no unauthorized person would approach and die. Both priests and Levites were financially supported by the tithes of the other tribes of Israel. All of this is called “the work of the tabernacle” (v. 7)—a work that was central to the people of God. God had taken them out into the wilderness to learn how to worship him. Today, worship is the church's central task. In obedience to the fourth commandment we meet one day out of seven, rain or shine, to worship God. A secular person might think: *why all this emphasis on worship?* The answer is: God's worship is important to him! God doesn't want us to just think about him when it suits us. He wants his people's *worship*. He wants us to realize that everything we are and have comes from him. He is our Creator and Redeemer. In him we live, and move, and have our being. He wants us to take an active part in the assembly of his people and to keep the importance of his worship before us always. Moreover, God's worship isn't a free-for-all. God himself determines how it is to be ordered. All worship is to be ordered according to his holy Word.

In the independent churches in which I grew up there was a lot of talk about evangelism and inviting friends to church and sharing the gospel, but almost no mention of worship. The church I grew up in had lots of snappy performance music in its services, and people came from great distances to enjoy the show, so to speak. The church rationalized it by saying that the music attracted people, and while they came for the music, they heard the gospel. But some of the music was shallow with man-pleasing lyrics and little gospel content. Performance music overshadowed congregational singing. There was no consideration of God's people teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, as Scripture teaches.¹ There was no singing of the Psalms—none whatsoever. How can the church ignore a plain command of God?

¹ Col. 3:16

Now, wanting to attract people to come hear the gospel is admirable. But the end doesn't justify the means. God wants us to worship him *according to his Word*, even if it makes our worship services different from what people around us have a taste for. Sometimes, when people from Baptist backgrounds visit this church, they remark that there are certain things that we do that they are not used to—a call to worship; the recitation of the Lord's Prayer; the reading of the law, prayer of confession and assurance of pardon; the recitation of the Apostle's Creed; weekly communion, a benediction. They wonder why we do these things. They have never seen worship organized around the basic pattern: God speaks and we respond, God speaks and we respond. The church I grew up in had none of these practices. When I graduated from high school I wanted to train for future ministry. I completed Bible school and still had no idea what worship was. I was clueless.

The bottom line is that if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you need to be part of a church that *worships*. Jesus told the woman at the well: "The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to *worship* Him."² Let that sink in. *God is seeking worshipers!* Not just people that dabble in the Christian faith, but people who understand that our lives are to be God-centered, that gathering with his people in a faithful church that worships according to his Word is not an option but the very core of what we do as believers. Week in, week out, we gather with God's people to worship him, unless providentially hindered. Worship is part of the rhythm of the Christian life.

Another theme is:

2. Substitution

As we go through our text today, there's a little two-word phrase that occurs four times. It's so short that we might overlook it, but it's really important. It's the little phrase "instead of." If your Bible is open, look for it in verses 12, 41, and 45. In the Hebrew it's a single word: תָּחַת. In all four instances it is God himself who speaks. In verse 12 he says, "Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel *instead of* every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel." He comes back to this theme in verse 41: "You shall take the Levites for Me . . . *instead of* all the firstborn among the children of Israel." And then again in verse 45 we see it two times: "Take the Levites *instead of* all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites *instead of* their livestock."

Here is the doctrine of substitution. Here's the background. In verse 13 God said: "On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel." Here is a picture of the Gospel. All the firstborn

² John 4:23

deserved to die because they were sinners, having inherited the guilt and condemnation of Adam's first sin, and having sinned repeatedly themselves. As the Holy Spirit reveals in Romans: "that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become *guilty* before God" (Rom. 3:19). People don't like to hear this, but it is the truth. People like to think that little babies are born sinless and innocent. That is a popular notion, but it is unbiblical. Now who can resist the sight of a precious newborn—a dear, sweet creature that has never consciously sinned against his neighbor—but in the sight of God, that newborn is under the condemnation of Adam's first sin. "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."³

Humans die because they sin—even newborns. The soul that sins shall die. Preborn and newborn infants do die, proving that they are sinners under the guilt and condemnation of a holy God. So it was at the time of Moses. ALL the firstborn in the land of Egypt—both Israelite and Egyptian—deserved to die, but God provided that the Passover lamb would be killed *instead of*—in the place of—the firstborn in each home that had the lifeblood of that lamb smeared upon the doorposts and on the lintel above the door. The lives of those whose head of household obeyed God's instructions were saved, but the firstborn of every house lacking the blood was killed by the death-angel. There was a lot of anguish and tears in Egypt that night. But do not miss the central truth: God struck the firstborn of Egypt with the stroke of *judgment*—a foreshadowing of the final judgment, when Christ shall sit to judge all the peoples of the earth. But the LORD God sanctified to himself all the firstborn in Israel, whose head of household followed God's instructions and slaughtered the Passover lamb, collected the blood in a bowl and painted it around the door in obedience to God's command.

The doctrine of substitution finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Because we are sinners, we deserve to die. We are spiritually dead and cannot respond to the Gospel. But the stroke of Justice fell on Christ. He died for our sins according to the Scripture. The Savior died *instead of* his elect. And we who look to him in faith are saved. That is the doctrine of substitution.

Are you looking to Christ in faith, or are you hoping to earn your own way to heaven by your good works? If you call upon Christ to save you, you are saved. If you try to earn your own salvation, you are lost. That is the teaching of the Bible. God says: "On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I *sanctified* to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I am the LORD" (v. 13). "Sanctified" means *set apart to God*. Why did God set apart Israel's firstborn, while condemning others to death? All were equally

³ Rom. 5:12

guilty before his holy law. Why was Israel spared while Egypt was judged? Clearly, the God of heaven is perfectly just. He cannot be unjust; it is contrary to his nature. Genesis asks: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”⁴ and the answer cannot be anything but “Yes, of course, the divine Judge cannot do *anything other* than what is right.” Do not think that Israel’s firstborn were innocent, while Egypt’s were guilty. All were equally guilty, yet only Israel was spared. God *sanctified* to himself all the firstborn in Israel, foreshadowing what David would later say in the Psalms: “But know that the LORD hath *set apart* him that is godly for himself” (Ps. 4:3). That is what God does: Out of the mass of humanity, dead in trespasses and sins, he sets apart his elect and draws them to himself in time, giving them the faith to believe and appropriate the gospel. “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”⁵ The only way a guilty sinner can receive the perfect righteousness that alone qualifies a sinner to enter heaven is by having his sins washed away in Christ’s shed blood and the perfect righteousness of Christ credited to him by faith. Our best works fall short of God’s standard of absolute perfection. Only the righteousness of Christ is flawless in the sight of a holy God. Only the righteousness of Christ can take a sinner to heaven.

This is good news to the person who believes it! If salvation depended on our personally qualifying for heaven, there would be no hope for anyone. Even those who devote themselves to good works—who try their hardest, every moment of every day, to live a godly life—can never be assured that they have done enough. If our assurance of heaven is based on what *we* do, then we can never know we’ve done enough. “Try your hardest and do your best” is *not* the gospel! The gospel—the Good News—is not what the sinner does for God but what God does for the sinner. As stated by the apostle Paul, the gospel is: “Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures . . . he was buried . . . and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.”⁶ The gospel is not: “You *do*” but “Christ *did*”—he died and rose again in the place of unworthy sinners. There are mysteries in the Bible, but the gospel is not mysterious. It is plain and unmistakable. But sin-blinded eyes cannot accept it. Fallen man thinks he must *do* something to merit eternal life. “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit.”⁷ Lord, give us eyes to see! Amen.

God says, “All the firstborn are Mine” (v. 13)—God’s property! Biblical religion is not self-centered but God-centered. This rubs against the grain of most

⁴ Gen. 18:25

⁵ Rom. 4:3

⁶ 1 Cor. 15:3–4

⁷ 1 Cor. 2:9–10

Americans, who are seeking validation of their own self-religion—personal empowerment, self-awareness, self-discovery. Many people approach religion with the attitude “What’s in it for me?” If there seems to be nothing for them, then they aren’t interested. But let me tell you, this church—Grace OPC here in Lansing, Michigan—has exactly what *every person* needs, and that is the gospel. If they come here, they will hear the truth that they are sinners. They cannot merit eternal life. They cannot make themselves right with God. That the only one who can fit them for heaven is the Lord Jesus Christ who loves his people with an everlasting love and came to earth, becoming man, so that he could die in the place of men. If we believe on him, we will never perish but receive the free gift of eternal life.

As one of our congregation points out in one of his recent devotionals, “We are living in a time where people can accept almost any spiritual idea imaginable, as long as no one calmly says there is only one true God and only one Savior. That is what suddenly makes people uncomfortable. . . . What unsettles the world is the exclusive truth that God alone is God and Jesus Christ alone is Lord.”⁸

3. Service

The Levites were called “to do the work of the tabernacle” (v. 7). This is fleshed out in vv. 14–39. Levi had three sons, “Gershon, Kohath, and Merari” (v. 17). Each family was responsible for caring for and transporting a different part of the tabernacle and its furnishings. Gershon and his family were to camp to the *west* of the tabernacle. They were responsible for the tent curtains, coverings, entry screens [KJV: “hangings”] and cords (ropes). Kohath and his family were to camp to the *south* of the tabernacle. They were responsible for the furnishings—the Ark, table, lampstand, altars, and veil. Merari and his family were to camp to the *north* of the tabernacle. They were to carry the structural parts: the boards, bars, pillars, sockets, vessels. The families of Moses, Aaron and Aaron’s sons had the most important position. They were to camp on the *east*—at the entrance of the tabernacle, keeping watch over the sanctuary.

God sovereignly declared that the tribe of Levi’s full-time job was to serve him in the tabernacle. It would have been perfectly just for God to have said, “The firstborn son of *every* family of Israel shall serve me in my tabernacle.” Yet he wanted the *Levites* to serve him. Growing up in the tribe of Levi, supported by the tithes and offerings of the other tribes, young Levites would be able to learn their duties by watching their fathers and uncles. They would not only *hear* the oral instructions but would *see* the levitical duties being performed daily, day after day. They would learn by *doing*, under the care of more experienced men. This was God’s way; it was right, and it made sense.

⁸ Kevin Lee Carey, “The World Was Fine until Someone Said This,” <https://oneverseatatime.substack.com/p/the-world-was-fine-until-someone> (accessed 5-9-26)

Fallen man is innately selfish. He believes that life revolves around him. He thinks to himself, *Why should I have to serve God? My philosophy of life is: you only go around once, so grab all the gusto you can.* The religion of the Bible is unappealing to the natural man, who thinks that man's chief end is to be happy and to live for self.

But the religion of the Bible is God-centered, not man-centered. We are not saved simply to enjoy the good life and bask in our salvation. We are saved to *serve*. "Serve the LORD with gladness." The purpose of all of life is to glorify *God*—glorify him by serving him in whatever we do. Humans ought to serve God every moment of every day—that is what is just and right; the God of heaven is the One who gave us life, and we ought to be forever thankful. Whatever we do, we are to do all to the glory of God. But the first day of the week is special: on the first day of the week we are to gather with his church and worship him *corporately*, as the body of Christ (*corporate* means as a *body*). God wants his people to gather to worship him in the manner that he has taught in his Word. Lord's-day worship is a foretaste of the worship of heaven. The Bible says, "I was *glad* when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD."⁹ If you are not glad to gather with the saints for public worship, you surely won't like heaven, where the saints surround the throne of God and sing praises to the Lamb! If you don't like worship, you wouldn't fit in.

The census in chapter 1 numbered all the males from twenty years old and above—*all who were able to go to war in Israel*. By contrast, the census of the Levites described in our present chapter was of "every male from a month old and above"—a census that was not overly intrusive and didn't interrupt families as they bonded with their newborn.

In chapter 2 each tribe was assigned their place where God wanted them to camp, relative to the tabernacle. Three tribes were to camp on the east side of the tabernacle; three tribes on the south side; three tribes on the west side; and three tribes on the north side.

Now, in chapter 3, we discover that there was to be an inner ring of Levites protecting the tabernacle—the throne room of God. The outsider who came near was to be put to death.¹⁰ God is a God of absolute holiness. Man is not to barge into the presence of God but enter only on God's terms. God's *throne*—representative of his personal presence—was in the midst of his people. This is what set Israel apart from all other nations on the face of the earth. And he is still in our midst by faith: "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen."

4. Redemption

⁹ Ps. 122:1

¹⁰ Num. 3:10

Verse 39 gives the total count of the male Levites: 22,000. Verses 40–43 give the account of the census of all the firstborn Israelites from one month old and older: 22,273—273 more than the firstborn of the Levites. Since the firstborn of the other tribes outnumbered the Levites by 273, each extra firstborn had to be *redeemed* for five shekels of silver. What this meant was that the firstborn of all Israel didn't have to serve in the tabernacle; the Levites would do that in their place. Moses collected the 1,365 shekel redemption money and gave it to Aaron and his sons as the LORD commanded (v. 51).

The word *redeemed* is an important Bible word. Twice in the Psalms we learn that God has “redeemed” his people “from the hand of the enemy.”¹¹ In the book of Revelation the saints in heaven sing a new song: “Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast *redeemed* us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

All people belong to God by reason of creation, but those whom God saves become his own special people by right of *redemption*: “You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, *His own special people*, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9–10).

May we who look to Christ proclaim the praises of our Savior both now and forever. Amen!

¹¹ Pss. 106:10, 107:2