

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD IS DANGEROUS Numbers 3:1-4:49

INTRODUCTION

In his book, “The Holiness of God,” pastor, teacher and author Dr. RC Sproul tells the story of when he was teaching a class of 250 freshmen the OT at a Christian college. At the beginning of the semester he explained that there were three papers due at the end of September, October and November. He made it clear that the papers were due at the beginning of class on the day the paper was due. He told them that if the papers were not on his desk by the time class began, the student would receive an F. The only exceptions were if you were in the hospital sick or for a death in the family.

On the day the first paper was due, 225 students turned in their papers on time. But 25 students stood before him, quaking in terror, begging for forgiveness and asking for mercy. “Please, please give us more time,” they whined. Dr. Sproul relented and gave them a few more days but reminded them that the next paper was due the last day of October. The students were profuse in their gratitude and in their promises to turn in their papers on time in October. On the last day of October, 200 students turned in their papers on time. 50 students came empty-handed. They were nervous but not in a panic like the first time. When Dr. Sproul asked for their papers they were contrite. “O Dr. Sproul it was homecoming week and midterms. Please grant us an extension and we promise it will never happen again.” Again he relented but sternly told them that there would be no extensions on the third and final paper. If they were late it would be an F. The students all praised him and spontaneously began to sing, “We love you Dr. Sproul, O yes we do.” At the end of November 150 students showed up with their papers done. 100 students strolled into class, completely unconcerned. He asked them, “Where are your papers?” One of them said, “Don’t worry Dr. Sproul. We’re working on them. You’ll have them in a couple of days.”

At that moment Dr. Sproul picked up his black grade book and began to go down the list. “Johnson, do you have your paper?” “No sir.” “Johnson, that’s an F,” and he marked F in the book. “Muldaney, do you have your paper?” Again, “No sir.” “Muldaney, that’s an F.” Dr. Sproul recounts that the class reacted with unmitigated fury. They howled in protest: “That’s not fair.” Dr. Sproul responded, “So you want me to be fair? You want justice? Johnson, I seem to remember you turned in your second paper late. That’s an F also.” This immediately silenced the class. The students, after only two experiences of mercy within two months had come to presume upon mercy, to take it for granted so that when justice was administered they were shocked.

Dr. Sproul’s students reacted in exactly the same way all of us naturally react to God’s justice and holiness because we live in his mercy. It is a difficult thing for us to accept that one day God will hold us accountable and execute justice upon us when we daily experience so much mercy and leniency from God. John Stott, the great British pastor and theologian describes our age well in his book, “The Cross of Christ,” when he says, “The kind of God who appeals to most people today would be easygoing in his tolerance of our offences. He would be gentle, kind, accommodating, and would have no violent reactions. Unhappily, even in the church we seem to have lost the vision of the majesty of God. There is much shallowness and levity among us. Prophets and psalmists would probably say of us that ‘there is no fear of God before their eyes.’... We saunter up to God to claim his patronage and friendship; it does not occur to us that he might send us away.”

Most people think it is an easy thing to be loved by God, to be in a personal relationship with God. Most people when told that God loves them do not marvel at such a statement but say, “Of course he does. Why wouldn’t he?” But the picture that the Bible paints for us of God in his relation to human beings is not so friendly. Our passage today, which describes two census’ of the tribe of Levi and outlines their job description is both an assurance of God’s love and a warning of how dangerous it is to travel with God in your midst. The Levites and the priests camped around the tabernacle, between God’s chosen people, Israel and the tent in which God

dwells is a daily reminder that the God who dwells in their midst is not safe (NOTE: you will find a diagram of the arrangement of the camp of Israel in your program. Put it in your Bible.). The dangerous nature of having this holy and just God live with you is expressed several times in the passage.

First, the passage begins by telling us the names of the four sons of Aaron whom God had ordained to serve with their father as priests. The story of their ordination is told in Leviticus 8-9. But then immediately we are reminded that the two oldest sons, Nadab and Abihu were killed by the Lord when they disobeyed God by offering unauthorized fire. If you will remember God sent fire out from the Most Holy place to burn up these two men as they entered the Holy Place with the wrong kind of fire on their censors. They died, we are told, before they had any children. Thus, they were completely eliminated from the people of God, erased from God's book. It is dangerous to work in the presence of a holy God.

Second, in 3:10 & 38 we are told that if any unauthorized person attempts to come near to the tabernacle or attempts to act like a priest that person is to be killed by the Levites and priests. It is a capital crime to come near to the tabernacle in an unclean condition or with the wrong kinds of sacrifices. It is dangerous to come near to a holy God. Third, in 4:15, 18 & 20 the Kohathites, the clan of Levites who are responsible for carrying all the holy furniture of the tabernacle, are told that if they touch or look at any of the altars or lamps or tables that are used in the worship of God, they will die. The point is that every day the Levites and priests were taking their lives and the lives of the people of Israel into their hands. Like airline pilots and heart surgeons and firefighters, if the Levites and priests did not do their job correctly they and others might die, because the God who dwells in their midst is a holy and just God. The presence of the Levites and the instructions given to them are therefore God's response, his solution to the fact of his holiness and human sinfulness. As we consider what we are told regarding the numbers and placement and job of these men we are watching God's gracious response to his people. We are witnessing what God has done in order that he might safely travel in the company of his people.

MAIN POINT

Traveling with a Holy God is dangerous therefore...

I. God provides Jesus to stand guard (3:1-10, 38)

The opening line of chapter 3 is designed to connect this story of God's appointing the tribe of Levi to serve at the tabernacle with the story of God's plan in creating the universe and saving sinful humanity. The phrase, "these are the generations" is the key phrase in the book of Genesis that carries along the story of God's work in his world. It occurs 11 times in Genesis beginning in 2:4 with "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth" and then moving to 5:1, "This is the book of the generations of Adam" and then to 6:9, "These are the generations of Noah." Each time the phrase occurs their follows the story of that person and/or his descendants. Often there is a list of the descendants of the person. The last occurrence of the phrase in Genesis is in 37:2, "These are the generations of Jacob." Following that last use of the phrase is the story of how the sons of Jacob betray Joseph and eventually end up living in Egypt. Here in Numbers 3:1 is the only place outside of Genesis that the phrase is used. This is not accidental. The story begun in Genesis continues here.

The story of Genesis is how God is working to undo the curse brought on the world through the sin of Adam by making Abraham into a great nation and blessing all the families of the earth through him. By the end of Genesis we discover that it is through these twelve sons of Jacob who become the mighty nation of Israel that God is going to work out his plan of salvation. So from Genesis 37:2 all the way to this point the story has been concerned with the twelve sons of Jacob. However, what we discover here, by the use of this phrase is that the work of God's salvation is more specifically tied to the work of these priests and Levites within the community of Israel. God is telling us that his plan of salvation is in some way connected to the work of these priests and Levites as they guard the tabernacle and carry out all the duties and rituals and sacrifices associated with it. If you want to see and to understand how it is that God is going to bless all the nations of the world through the

descendants of Abraham then you have to pay attention to what is going on in the tabernacle and with the priests and Levites.

The key word used in describing the work of the Levites and the priests in vv. 5-10 is the word, “guard.” It is used four times in vv. 7, 8, 10. The Levites are to guard the priests, guard the people (2 times) of Israel and guard the furnishings of the tabernacle. Then, in v.10, Aaron and his sons, the priests, are to guard their priesthood also. In v. 38 Aaron and his sons and Moses are instructed to camp outside the front entrance to the tent of meeting so that they can guard the sanctuary itself, to protect the people of Israel. In both vv. 10 and 38 a necessary part of this guarding function is that if any unauthorized person attempts to come near to the tabernacle or to act like a priest, they are to be killed. What is going on here?

There are two uses of this verb, “to guard” in Genesis 2 and 3 that help us understand the point of the priests and Levites “guarding” the tabernacle. First, in Genesis 2:15 it says, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep (Literally: guard) it.” If you were to compare the language describing the garden of Eden with the language used in Exodus to describe the tabernacle, you would discover a large number of linguistic connections. Dr. Greg Beale has done a thorough analysis of the language and concludes that the tabernacle is symbolic of the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Eden is described like the temple of God. The Garden of Eden is a garden like temple where God and man live together and the tabernacle is a garden like temple where God and man live together. Thus, Adam is put in the garden to serve and to guard it just as the Levites and priests are put in the tabernacle to serve and to guard it. So the Levites and priests are a second Adam in the presence of God by serving and guarding the tabernacle.

The second use of the verb is in Genesis 3:24, “He drove out the man, and at the east of the Garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.” Thus just as the cherubim guard the way to the tree of life, so also the Levites and priests guard the way into the tabernacle. Due to sin humans cannot live in the presence of God in their natural condition. They must be kept away. While the cherubim are there to prevent all entry the Levites and priests are there to prevent all unauthorized entry. The job of the Levites and the priests is described in Leviticus 10:10, “You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean...” Thus the holy God has come to dwell among his sinful people in a garden like sanctuary. He is able to do this because he has chosen and appointed the tribe of Levi and the sons of Aaron to guard the way into his presence by their work of keeping the unclean away from him and by engaging in all of the rituals that God has commanded to cleanse those who are unclean. Like the cherubim, they are invested with final authority to kill any who attempt to draw near to God while yet unclean.

The NT portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of everything that the tabernacle and the priests and the Levites and the sacrificial system and the cleanliness laws typified. Hebrews 10:1 says, “For since the law was the shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.” In other words, all of this is the shadow cast by Christ in his living and dying and rising from the dead. These Levites and priests exist as the shadow of Christ. They exist because Jesus exists. Jesus is the priest who has entered not merely into a man-made tent but into the true temple, the true Garden of Eden, into heaven itself. He is the perfect Adam who works and guards the real garden like temple that is heaven itself. Jesus is the one who determines who can safely draw near to God, who the clean and unclean are. He forbids entry to all who attempt to draw near to God on their own authority, on the basis of their own goodness. He says it is only through him, through faith in himself that anyone can enter into this holy God’s presence. He admits all who are cleansed from their sins by his blood and by the washing and renewal of the Holy Spirit. However, he kills all who attempt to enter into God’s presence apart from faith in him. Just as the priests and Levites guarded the way into the tabernacle and admitted only those ritually cleansed and excluded all those who were not clean so our Lord Jesus guards the way into the very presence of God and admits only those who are made clean by their faith in him and by the washing of the Holy Spirit.

The question is: will Jesus let you in or will he kill you? Only those who have been made holy by Christ's sacrifice and through his intercession will be let in. Are you trusting that you are holy and acceptable to God by what Jesus has done or do you think that God should accept you on your own merits? You will be able to walk right past those cherubim with their flashing swords if you are escorted by Jesus but you will perish if you try to rush past them on your own.

Traveling with a Holy God is dangerous therefore...

- *God provides Jesus to stand guard*
- *And therefore...*

II. God accepts Jesus' life and service in our place (3:11-15, 40-51)

In vv. 12-13 God tells Moses that the reason he is appointing the Levites to guard the tabernacle and the priesthood and the people is because he has taken them in place of all the firstborn male children of Israel. He says that all the firstborn belong to him because the day he killed all the firstborn in Egypt and passed over all the firstborn of Israel he set those firstborn apart for himself. He bought them by not killing them on that night. Think with me for a moment about what God is saying happened on that Passover night as the angel of death went through the land of Egypt. The angel killed the firstborn sons in every Egyptian house but he passed over the homes where the blood of a year old, unblemished, male lamb, which had lived with the family for 2 weeks and whose bones were not broken was spread. The point is that God bought the lives of those firstborn sons of Israel through the blood of those lambs.

But what God says here is that instead of all the firstborn Israelites coming and guarding the tent he has chosen the men of the tribe of Levi in their place. The Levites thus are now set apart to do the work of God while the firstborn of Israel are free to enjoy God's love and blessing and life because of the willing service of the Levites and priests. Don't miss this point: the firstborn Israelites safely draw near to God, have God dwell in their midst through the life and work of the Levites who serve in their place. God accepts the Levites' work on behalf of the firstborn of Israel whom he purchased when he passed over their houses on the night of Israel's Exodus from Egypt. The other thing to notice about this replacement of the Levites for the firstborn of Israel is the perfect one to one correspondence in the replacement. That is the point behind the census of the Levites in chapter 3. God requires that each and every one of the firstborn sons of Israel be represented by a male Levite who is at least one month old. Thus, when the Levites are counted and the total is only 22,000 and yet when the firstborn of Israel are counted there are 22,273 God requires that Israel pay 5 shekels of silver to the priests for each of the extra 273 firstborn who are not represented by the Levites. Again, the point is that each of the firstborn must be redeemed either by the work of a Levite or by the payment of the redemption price.

The NT clearly identifies Jesus with those Passover lambs who were killed and whose blood was put over the doorways of the people of Israel so that the firstborn sons were spared by the angel of death. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 5:7 makes explicit this correspondence, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." Therefore, all who are trusting in Christ, all those who have taken refuge under his blood are equivalent to the firstborn sons of Israel who were spared. We too need to be represented before God by a God-appointed substitute who will do the work in our place.

So the NT presents Christ as our high priest, as our Levite who by his life of obedience to the Father and by his death and by his resurrection and now by his ongoing intercession in the presence of God is doing the work on our behalf. God accepts his work in our place. God accepts Christ's work as our work. We are counted righteous and holy because of Jesus' actual obedience on our behalf. He is the Levite working in the temple as our representative. We are counted as faithful servants of God because he is a faithful servant in our place, as our substitute. Please do not miss that the substitution of Jesus is not for some undefined mass of human beings but for a particular group of humans, for all the firstborn, that is, all the elect of God. Jesus lived and died and now intercedes for particular individuals, just as the Levites represent particular individuals, the firstborn of

Israel. All the firstborn of God through all of time have been counted and Jesus has been chosen to work on their behalf so that they can safely draw near to God through him.

We are able to live with God and draw near to God on the basis of his work as our proxy. This is the application point that is repeatedly made in the NT. Hebrews 10:22 says because Jesus is our sacrifice and our priest, "...let us draw near to God in full assurance of faith..." Ephesians 2:18 says, "For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father." The fact that Jesus is our sacrifice and our priest does not mean that we can now safely ignore God and live our lives as if he is not present. Rather, because Jesus is our Passover lamb and because he is now working as our representative in God's heavenly temple, we must intentionally draw near to God. We should not ignore the tent in our midst but we should come to him to worship and pray and hear his word. We do this personally and in our families and each Sunday as we gather together as the people of God. Not drawing near to God in prayer and worship and to hear his word is to treat the life and death of Jesus with contempt, as if his sacrifice and present intercession are meaningless. So I urge you to draw near to God through Jesus.

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- *God provides Jesus to stand guard*
- *God accepts Jesus' life and service in our place*
- *And therefore...*

III. God provides spiritual leaders to guard us as they guard themselves (3:5-15, 4:1-3, 15-20)

There are two verses in the NT that I have had memorized for decades that I was reminded of as I read this description of the work of the Levites and priests. The apostle Paul says to the elders/pastors of the church in Ephesus: "Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood... be on your guard..." Then he tells his young protégé Timothy as he serves as an elder/pastor, "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them because if you do you will save both yourself and your hearers." Now look at 3:8 and 4:17-20. Pastors/elders are called to watch over the people of God and to watch over themselves in the same way that the priests and Levites are called to watch over the people of Israel and over themselves. The consequence of the Levites and priests failing in either of these works will be the death of themselves and/or of the people. In the same way if pastors/elders fail to watch over themselves or over the people it will result in both they and those who hear them, not being saved, in other words dying.

Just as modern people have a hard time believing that God might have a violent reaction to them if they do not approach him in the right way so modern people have a hard time believing that they need to be led and taught by qualified and gifted men. Our radically individualistic, anti-authoritarian and obsessively egalitarian culture reacts negatively to any assertion that we need to be submissive to the teaching and leading of others. In fact, in the past decade a movement has begun within the evangelical church called the "emergent church" which seeks to organize churches without leaders. The emergent church seeks to form churches where everyone has an equal voice and no one has any authority in the church. This completely ignores both the OT pattern and the clear and unambiguous NT instruction. Paul instructs the people in the church in Thessalonica to "...respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work."

Just as congregations have a difficult time believing they must submit to leaders so it is hard for those who are elders and pastors to do their work as if their lives and the lives of those who listen to them are actually at stake. Both pastors/elders and congregations need to fight the fight of faith. We all need to believe what the Bible says. God has come to dwell among us. He is able to do this because he has appointed Jesus to guard the way and to represent us in his presence. He also has called men to serve as pastors/elders to teach us the way into God's presence and to show us how to live as God's people. The only way we can travel with this holy God is

if we have called and gifted men who actively pursue their calling to watch over themselves and to watch over the flock. We must have men who are willing to preach and teach the word no matter what happens; men who are willing to take the risk to correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction. But we also must be a congregation that values and respects and is submissive to the leadership and teaching of these men. As we are going to see in the story of Israel's journey through the wilderness, the eternal well-being of both the leaders and the congregation depends upon both things happening. May the Lord grant that we be a people who obey our leaders and may he give us men who will take serious their responsibility to watch themselves and all the flock that the Lord has assigned to them.

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- *God provides spiritual leaders to guard us as they guard themselves*

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