

## INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS CHAPTER 8

This chapter is concerning the lamps or lights of the sanctuary.

- I. The burning lamps in the candlestick, which the priests were charged to tend, **#Nu 8:1-4**.
- II. The living lamps (if I may so call them), The Levites, who as ministers were burning and shining lights. The ordination of the priests we had an account of, Leviticus 8. Here we have an account of the ordination of the Levites, the inferior clergy.
  1. How they were purified, **#Nu 8:5-8**.
  2. How they were parted with by the people, **#Nu 8:9,10**.
  3. How they were presented to God in lieu of the firstborn, **#Nu 8:11-18**.
  4. How they were consigned to Aaron and his sons, to be ministers to them, **#Nu 8:19**.
  5. How all these orders were duly executed, **#Nu 8:20,22**. And, lastly, the age appointed for their ministrations, **#Nu 8:23-26**.

Ver. 1. thru Ver. 4.

Directions were given long before this for the making of the golden candlestick (**#Ex 25:31**), and it was made according to the pattern shown to Moses in the mount, **#Ex 38:17**. But now it was that the lamps were first ordered to be lighted, when other things began to be used. Observe, 1. Who must light the lamps; Aaron himself, he *lighted the lamps*, **#Nu 8:3**. As the people's representative to God, he thus did the office of a servant in God's house, lighting his Master's candle; as the representative of God to the people, he thus gave them the intimations of God's will and favour, thus expressed (**#Ps 18:28**), *Thou wilt light my candle*; and thus Aaron himself was now lately directed to bless the people, *The Lord make his face to shine upon thee*, **#Nu 6:25**. The commandment is a *lamp*, **#Pr 6:23**. The scripture is a *light shining in a dark place*, **#2Pe 1:19**. And a dark place indeed even the church would be without it, as the tabernacle (which had no window in it) without the lamps. Now the work of ministers is to light these lamps, by expounding and applying the word of God. The priest lighted the middle lamp from the fire of the altar, and the rest of the lamps he lighted one from another, which (says Mr. Ainsworth) signifies that the fountain of all light and knowledge is in Christ, who has the *seven spirits of God* figured by the *seven lamps of fire* (**#Re 4:5**), but that in the expounding of scripture one passage must borrow light from another. He also supposes that, *seven* being a number of perfection, by the seven branches of the candlestick is shown the full perfection of the scriptures, which are able to make us wise to salvation.

2. To what end the lamps were lighted, that they might give light *over against the candlestick*, that is, to that part of the tabernacle where the table stood, with the show-bread upon it, over against the candlestick. They were not lighted like tapers in an urn, to burn to themselves, but to give light to the other side of the tabernacle, for therefore candles are lighted, **#Mt 5:15**. Note, The lights of the world, the lights of the church, must shine as lights. Therefore we have light, that we may give light.

Ver. 5. thru Ver. 26.

We read before of the separating of the Levites from among the children of Israel when

they were numbered, and the numbering of them by themselves (#Nu 3:6,15), that they might be employed in the service of the tabernacle. Now here we have directions given for their solemn ordination (#Nu 8:6), and the performance of it, #Nu 8:20. All Israel must know that they took not this honour to themselves, but were called of God to it; nor was it enough that they were distinguished from their neighbours, but they must be solemnly devoted to God. Note, All that are employed for God must be dedicated to him, according as the degree of employment is. Christians must be baptized, ministers must be ordained; we must first give ourselves unto the Lord, and then our services. Observe in what method this was done:

I. The Levites must be cleansed, and were so. The rites and ceremonies of their cleansing were to be performed,

1. By themselves. They must *wash their clothes*, and not only bathe, but *shave all their flesh*, as the leper was to do when he was cleansed, #Le 14:8. They must *cause a razor to pass over all their flesh*, to clear themselves from that defilement which would not wash off. Jacob, whom God loved, was a smooth man; it was Esau that was hairy. The great pains they were to take with themselves to make themselves clean teaches all Christians, and ministers particularly, by repentance and mortification, to *cleanse themselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit*, that they may perfect holiness. Those must be clean that bear the vessels of the Lord.

2. By Moses. He must *sprinkle the water of purifying upon them*, which was prepared by divine direction. This signified the application of the blood of Christ to our souls by faith, to purify us from an evil conscience, that we may be fit to serve the living God. It is our duty to cleanse ourselves, and God's promise that he will cleanse us.

II. The Levites, being thus prepared, must be brought before the Lord in a solemn assembly of all Israel, and the *children of Israel must put their hands upon them* (#Nu 8:10), so transferring their interest in them and in their service (to which, as a part, the whole body of the people was entitled) to God and to his sanctuary. They presented them to God *as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable*, to perform a *reasonable service*; and therefore, as the offerers in all other cases did, *they laid their hands upon them*, desiring that their service might be accepted in lieu of the attendance of the whole congregation, particularly the first-born, which they acknowledge God might have insisted on. This will not serve to prove a power in the people to ordain ministers; for this imposition of hands by the children of Israel upon the Levites did not make them ministers of the sanctuary, but only signified the people's parting with that tribe out of their militia, and civil incorporations, in order to their being made ministers by Aaron, who was to offer them before the Lord. All the congregation of the children of Israel could not lay hands on them, but it is probable that the rulers and elders did it as the representative body of the people. Some think that the first-born did it because in their stead the Levites were consecrated to God. Whatever God calls for from us to serve his own glory by, we must cheerfully resign it, lay our hands upon it, not to detain it but to surrender it, and let it go to him that is entitled to it.

III. Sacrifices were to be offered for them, a sin-offering first (#Nu 8:12), and then a burnt-offering, to make an *atonement for the Levites*, who, as the parties concerned, were to lay their hands upon the head of the sacrifices. See here,

1. That we are all utterly unworthy and unfit to be admitted into and employed in the service of God, till atonement be made for sin, and thereby our peace made with God. That interposing cloud must be scattered before there can be any comfortable communion settled between God and our souls.

2. That it is by sacrifice, by Christ the great sacrifice, that we are reconciled to God, and made fit to be offered to him. It is by him that Christians are sanctified to the work of their Christianity, and ministers to the work of their ministry. The learned bishop Patrick's notion of the sacrifice offered by the Levites is that the Levites were themselves considered as an expiatory sacrifice, for they were given to *make atonement for the children of Israel*, (#Nu 8:19), and yet not being devoted to death, any more than the first-born were, these two sacrifices were substituted in their stead, upon which therefore they were to lay their hands, that the sin which the children of Israel laid upon them (#Nu 8:10) might be transferred to these beasts.

IV. The Levites themselves were *offered before the Lord* for an *offering of the children of Israel*, #Nu 8:11. Aaron gave them up to God, as being first given up by themselves, and by the children of Israel. The original word signifies a *wave-offering*, not that they were actually waved, but they were presented to God as the God of heaven, and the Lord of the whole earth, as the wave-offerings were. And in calling them wave-offerings it was intimated to them that they must continually lift up themselves towards God in his service, lift up their eyes, lift up their hearts, and must move to and fro with readiness in the business of their profession. They were not ordained to be idle, but to be active and stirring.

V. God here declares his acceptance of them: *The Levites shall be mine*, #Nu 8:14. God took them instead of the first-born (#Nu 8:16-18), of which before, #Nu 3:41. Note, What is in sincerity offered to God shall be graciously owned and accepted by him. And his ministers who have obtained mercy of him to be faithful have particular marks of favour and honour put upon them: *they shall be mine*, and then (#Nu 8:15) they shall *go in to do the service of the tabernacle*. God takes them for his own, that they may serve him. All that expect to share in the privileges of the tabernacle must resolve to do the service of the tabernacle. As, on the one hand, none of God's creatures are his necessary servants (he needs not the service of any of them), so, on the other hand, none are taken merely as honorary servants, to do nothing. All whom God owns he employs; angels themselves have their services.

VI. They are then given as a gift to Aaron and his sons (#Nu 8:19), yet so as that the benefit accrued to the children of Israel.

1. The Levites must act under the priests as attendants on them, and assistants to them, in the service of the sanctuary. Aaron offers them to God (#Nu 8:11), and then God gives them back to Aaron, #Nu 8:19. Note, Whatever we give up to God, he will give back to us unspeakably to our advantage. Our hearts, our children, our estates, are never more ours, more truly, more comfortably ours, than when we have offered them up to God.

2. They must act for the people. They were taken to *do the service of the children of Israel*, that is, not only to do the service which they should do, but to serve their interests, and do that which would really redound to the honour, safety, and prosperity of the whole nation. Note, Those that faithfully perform the service of God do one of the best services that can be done to the public; God's ministers, while they keep within the sphere of their office and conscientiously discharge the duty of it, must be looked upon as some of the most useful servants of their country. The children of Israel can as ill spare the tribe of Levi as any of their tribes. But what is the service they do the children of Israel? It follows, it is to *make an atonement for them, that there be no plague among them*. It was the priests' work to make atonement by sacrifice, but the Levites made atonement by attendance, and

preserved the peace with heaven which was made by sacrifice. If the service of the priests in the tabernacle had been left to all the first-born of Israel promiscuously, it would have been either neglected or done unskilfully and irreverently, being done by those that were not so closely tied to it, nor so diligently trained to it, nor so constantly used to it, as the Levites were; and this would bring a *plague among the children of Israel*--meaning, perhaps, the death of the first-born themselves, which was the last and greatest of the plagues of Egypt. To prevent this, and to preserve the atonement, the Levites were appointed to do this service, who should be bred up to it under their parents from their infancy, and therefore would be well versed in it; and so the children of Israel, that is, the first-born, should not need to come nigh to the sanctuary; or, when any Israelites had occasion, the Levites would be ready to instruct them, and introduce them, and so prevent any fatal miscarriage or mistake. Note, It is a very great kindness to the church that ministers are appointed to go before the people in the things of God, as guides, overseers, and rulers, in religious worship, and to make that their business. When Christ ascended on high, he gave *these gifts*, #Eph 4:8,11,12.

#### VII. The time of their ministration is fixed.

1. They were to enter upon the service at twenty-five years old, #Nu 8:24. They were not charged with the carrying of the tabernacle and the utensils of it till they were thirty years old, #Nu 4:3. But they were entered to be otherwise serviceable at twenty-five years old, a very good age for ministers to begin their public work at. The work then required that strength of body and the work now requires that maturity of judgment and steadiness of behaviour which men rarely arrive at till about that age; and novices are in danger of being lifted up with pride.
2. They were to have a writ of ease at fifty years old; then they were to return from the warfare, as the phrase is (#Nu 8:25), not cashiered with disgrace, but preferred rather to the rest which their age required, to be loaded with the honours of their office, as hitherto they had been with the burdens of it. They shall *minister with their brethren in the tabernacle*, to direct the junior Levites, and set them in; and they shall *keep the charge*, as guards upon the avenues of the tabernacle, to see that no stranger intruded, nor any person in his uncleanness, but they shall not be put upon any service which may be a fatigue to them. If God's grace provide that men shall have ability according to their work, man's prudence should take care that men have work only according to their ability. The aged are most fit for trusts, and to keep the charge; the younger are most fit for work, and to do the service. Those that have *used the office of a servant well purchase to themselves a good degree*, #1Ti 3:13. Yet indeed gifts are not tied to ages (#Job 32:9), but *all these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit*. Thus was the affair of the Levites settled.