

The Firstborn of God
(Numbers 3-6)
Expository Lessons from the Book of Numbers

I. Review from the Introduction

- a. Reasons why it is important for Christians to study this book include.
 - i. The 40 years in the Wilderness is the map of the Christian life.
 - 1. **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**
 - 2. **Hebrews 3-4**
 - 3. **Jude v. 5**
 - ii. This book includes important, faith-building prophecies about Jesus.
 - iii. We will be able to understand the New Testament much better if we understand the stories from Numbers that Jesus and the apostles refer to, including:
 - 1. The bronze serpent in the Wilderness
 - 2. Important events in the lives of Moses and Joshua
 - 3. Balaam and his donkey
 - 4. Korah's rebellion
 - 5. The various sins that the Israelites became ensnared in, during their time in the Wilderness, when they hardened their hearts.
- b. Studying the book of **Numbers** reminds me of something my friends did when I lived in Alaska: panning for gold.
 - i. There are gold nuggets in the sediment of some streams in places like Alaska and Maine. Since gold is heavier than other rocks, it sinks to the bottom of the pan when you slosh around some sediment.
 - ii. You may need to sift through a fair amount of sediment to find the gold you are looking for. It takes determination and perseverance. However, when you find the gold nuggets it is all worth it!
 - iii. Let me assure you that there are spiritual 'gold nuggets' contained in the book of **Numbers**, but we will need to sift through some other material to discover these treasures!

c. Timeframe for the book

- i. Israel spent forty years in the Wilderness, before reaching the Promised Land.
 - ii. The first year of their time in the Wilderness was covered in the book of **Exodus**.
 1. It took about two months to get from the Passover and the Red Sea crossing to Mount Sinai.
 2. Ten months encamped at Mount Sinai, during which the Law was received and the tabernacle was built.
 3. Exodus ends with the tabernacle being constructed and the cloud descending to fill it, at the end of **Exodus 40**.
 - iii. The book of **Leviticus** also covers events of the first year, including the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests, Moses receiving various laws from God, and instruction on holiness.
 - iv. The book of **Numbers** covers most of Israel's remaining thirty-nine (of their forty) years in the Wilderness.
- d. The book is called '**Numbers**' because it begins with a general census of the twelve tribes (not including the Levites). The book includes other numberings of the people, including more than one numbering of the Levites, plus another general census near the end of the 40-year period.

II. The Descendants of Aaron, the High Priest and Brother of Moses

- a. Some might not find the first four chapters of **Numbers** to be the most exciting! Therefore, we will summarize parts of this text in order to get to and focus on the 'gold'.
- b. Read **Numbers 3:1-4**.
 - i. Aaron had four sons. The first two (Nadab and Abihu) had been struck dead while offering an inappropriate sacrifice of incense in the tabernacle.
 1. (Interestingly, from this point on the priests were forbidden from drinking alcohol, perhaps related to this event. Is it possible that Nadab and Abihu were drunk while offering sacrifices?)
 - ii. Read **Leviticus 10:1-5**.

- c. The lineage of Levi down through Moses and Aaron is provided in **Exodus 6:16-27**.
 - i. Levi, one of the twelve of Jacob, had three sons: Gershon, Kohath and Merari.
 - 1. Their descendants will define the three divisions among the Levites, as discussed further in this lesson.
 - ii. Moses, Aaron and Miriam were the children of Amram and Jochebed, both of whom were descended from Levi through the line of Kohath.
 - iii. Aaron had four sons, from whom the priesthood will descend.
 - iv. Korah, who will be encountered later in **Numbers**, was a cousin of Moses and also a descendant from the line of Kohath.

III. The Lord will Consider the Levites as His 'Firstborn'

- a. Read **Numbers 3:5-10**.
 - i. The priesthood and the tabernacle liturgical ministry were reserved for Aaron and his descendants.
 - 1. Others who attempted to usurp that role were to be put to death.
- b. Read **Numbers 3:11-13**.
 - i. God says He is personally taking the Levites *instead of* (in the place of) all of the firstborn.
 - 1. The Levites will take their place and will serve as "a ransom from them".
 - 2. The Lord had claimed ownership of all the firstborn at the time of the original Passover, and the Levites were now taking the place of all the firstborn. Therefore, all the Levites were now set apart (sanctified) as the firstborn to the Lord.
- c. **Question:** What is the meaning and significance of the expression "the firstborn"?
 - i. In ancient times, the firstborn generally was supposed to receive the greatest inheritance and blessing (think Jacob and Esau, or Ephraim vs. Manasseh in **Genesis**). Is that what this is referring to?
 - 1. While most wills today are written to provide for all the children to "share and share alike" in the disposition of their deceased parent's assets, the custom of primogeniture (eldest

son or eldest child receiving the dominant share) was not replaced in Western Europe and America until the 18th to 20th centuries.

- ii. Today, many believe that birth order can play an important role in determining how we think about ourselves and relate to others. This goes back at least to 1874, when Francis Galton noticed that firstborn offspring were over-represented among scientists in England. There have been thousands of studies on this, and many books written. It is a highly controversial subject, to be sure. Here are some of the popular ideas in circulation regarding birth order:
 - 1. The firstborn have their parents undivided attention when they are infants. Also, parents tend to be more strict with their first child and then loosen up over time with the offspring who follow.
 - a. Classic firstborn attributes include being reliable, being high achievers, taking on responsibility, and having a slightly higher IQ.
 - i. (Some negative attributes can include being arrogant and bossy!)
 - b. Only children tend to be like 'super firstborn'.
 - 2. Middle children tend to compare themselves against their older siblings. Classic traits include being social, having a wide circle of friends, and being peacemakers.
 - 3. Youngest children can be fun-loving, less disciplined, and attention-seeking. Perhaps parents tend to be more permissive with their youngest offspring and sometimes indulge them to a greater degree.
- iii. However, the real question is: "*What does God mean* when He says, 'My firstborn'?"
 - 1. For that, we will need to consider what the Lord said at the Passover and other references to "the firstborn" in Scripture.
- d. What the Scriptures say about "the firstborn".
 - i. Read **Exodus 4:21-23**.
 - ii. Read **Exodus 11:4-7**.
 - iii. Read **Exodus 13:1-2** and **13:11-16**.

1. All of the firstborn are to be “sacrificed to the Lord”, in the sense that they will belong to the Lord.
 - a. We are not talking about human sacrifice here. Instead, the firstborn is redeemed with a substitutionary sacrifice.
2. Read **Luke 2:22-28**.
 - a. Jesus, as the firstborn of Mary, had to have an offering made. Since the family was poor, they could use the alternate offering of two pigeons or turtle doves.
 - b. This all pointed back to the story of the *Passover lamb* that redeemed Israel, God’s firstborn.
- iv. Read **Numbers 8:17-19**.
- v. Consider also **Numbers 18:15-19**.
 1. The firstborn of clean animals (bulls, goats, sheep, etc.) was to be sacrificed to the Lord. Their meat would go to the Levites as support and food.
 2. However, the firstborn of *unclean* animals was to be redeemed, for example, via money paid or a clean animal being sacrificed in its place.
- e. Jesus is described as “the firstborn” of God in two senses. He was the *firstborn of the Father*, over all creation. He is also the *firstborn from among the dead*, in being resurrected first (with many to follow).
 1. Read **Hebrews 1:5-6** (which may point back to **Psalms 89:21-30**, designated **Psalms 88** in the LXX)
 2. Read **Revelation 1:4-5**.
 3. Read **Colossians 1:15-18**.
- f. We are described as being in “the church of the firstborn”.
 - i. “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.” (**Hebrews 12:22-24**, NKJV)

- ii. As we are described by Peter as being members of a royal priesthood (borrowing from language used in **Exodus 19**), we should see ourselves as foreshadowed by the Levites, the priests set apart for the Lord, the firstborn of God.
 - 1. “But 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 Peter 2:9**, NKJV)

IV. Census of the Levite Clans

- a. After the initial general census of the twelve tribes in **Numbers 1 and 2**, several censuses are taken of the Levite clans.
- b. First, a census is taken of all Levite males above one-month-old.
 - i. Summarize **Numbers 3:14-39**
 - ii. Read **Numbers 3:39**.
 - 1. Total census count = 22,000.
- c. Second, a census is taken of all the firstborn of Israel’s twelve tribes.
 - i. Read **Numbers 3:40-43**.
 - 1. Total = 22,273
 - ii. Summarize **Numbers 3:44-51**.
 - 1. There is to be a one-for-one redemption of all the firstborn of Israel, by the Levites.
 - 2. Because there is a shortage of Levites to redeem all the firstborn of Israel, the excess number (273 people) is to be covered by redemption money: five shekels of silver per person, given to sons of Aaron.
- d. Third, a census is taken of all the ‘active duty’ Levites by clan (**Numbers 4**)
 - i. Read **Numbers 4:1-3**.
 - 1. Age range of those in ‘active duty’: 25-50 years old.
 - ii. Summarize **Numbers 4:4-49**.
 - 1. Kohathites: responsible for the ark of the covenant and furnishings of the Holy Place.

2. Gershonites: responsible for tabernacle curtains and court curtains.
3. Merarites: responsible for structural components (pillars, bases, bars, screen, etc.).
4. Total = 8,580

V. Outside the Camp

a. Read **Numbers 5:1-4**.

i. Consider **Hebrews 13:10-15**.

1. Jesus suffering and being crucified “outside the camp” was a sign of disgrace. We (Christians) are called to follow His example in that regard.

b. Read **Numbers 5:5-10**.

- i. This is regarding two elements of repentance: confession and restitution.
- ii. Real repentance is more than feeling sad about something you did. We are also called to confess the sin and restore to the person who was wronged, to make restitution.
- iii. Called to replace what was stolen, and also add 20% to ‘make it right’.
- iv. Consider the example of Zacchaeus in **Luke 19:1-10**.
 1. Jesus lifts up Zacchaeus’ good heart: Zacchaeus makes things right by restoring 4x what he cheated out of others.

c. Summarize **Numbers 5:11-31**.

- i. This is an unusual ‘lie detector’ for a woman suspected of adultery.
 1. Let us *not even come near* committing the sin of adultery!

VI. The Nazirite Vow

a. Overview/summary of **Numbers 6:1-21**.

- i. The vow is voluntary and for a specific period of time.
- ii. Three things to abstain from:
 1. No wine, vinegar nor products that come from grapes.
 2. No haircuts.

3. No interactions with the bodies of dead people.
- b. Examples of people in the Bible who took vows that seem similar (at least in some respects) to the one described here include:
 - i. Samson (**Judges 13:1-5**).
 - ii. Samuel (**1 Samuel 1:10-11**)
 - iii. John the Baptist (**Luke 1:13-17**)
 - iv. Paul the apostle (**Acts 21:23-24**, in the temple area in Jerusalem)

VII. The Wonderful Blessing

- a. Read **Numbers 6:22-26**.
- b. Aaron and his sons are to bless the people in this way:
 - i. “(May) the Lord bless you and keep you;
 - ii. The Lord make his face shine upon you, and be merciful to you;
 - iii. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.”
- c. We still sing this old blessing from **Numbers 6** in our church!