

CHAPTER 3

This chapter and the next are concerning the tribe of Levi, which was to be mustered and marshalled by itself, and not in common with the other tribes, intimating the particular honour put upon them and the particular duty and service required from them. The Levites are in this chapter considered,

I. As attendants on, and assistants to, the priests in the temple-service. And so we have an account,

1. Of the priests themselves (v. 1-4) and their work (v. 10).
2. Of the gift of the Levites to them (v. 5-9), in order to which they are mustered (v. 14-16), and the sum of them taken (v. 39). Each particular family of them is mustered, has its place assigned and its charge, the Gershonites (v. 17-26), the Kohathites (v. 27-32), the Merarites (v. 33-39).

II. As equivalents for the first-born (v. 11-13).

1. The first-born are numbered, and the Levites taken instead of them, as far as the number of the Levites went (v. 40-45).
2. What first-born there were more than the Levites were redeemed (v. 46, etc.).

~~OLD~~ NUMBERS 3:1-13

THE SEPARATION OF THE LEVITES

Here,

I. The family of Aaron is confirmed in the priests' office, v. 10. They had been called to it before, and consecrated; here they are appointed to *wait on their priests' office*: the apostle uses this phrase (~~NEW~~ Romans 12:7), *Let us wait on our ministry*. The office of the ministry requires a constant attendance and great diligence; so frequent are the returns of its work, and yet so transient its favourable opportunities, that it must be waited on. Here is repeated what was said before (~~OLD~~ Numbers 1:51): *The stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death*, which forbids the invading of the priest's office by any other person whatsoever; none must come nigh to minister but Aaron and his sons only, all others are strangers. It also lays a

charge on the priests, as door-keepers in God's house, to take care that none should come near who were forbidden by the law; they must keep off all intruders, whose approach would be to the profanation of the holy things, telling them that if they came near it was at their peril, they would *die by the hand of God*, as Uzza did. The Jews say that afterwards there was hung over the door of the temple a golden sword (perhaps alluding to that flaming sword at the entrance of the garden of Eden), on which was engraven, *The stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death*.

II. A particular account is given of this family of Aaron; what we have met with before concerning them is here repeated.

- 1.** The consecration of the sons of Aaron, v. 3. They were all anointed to minister before the Lord, though it appeared afterwards, and God knew it, that two of them were wise and two were foolish.
- 2.** The fall of the two elder (v. 4): they *offered strange fire*, and died for so doing, *before the Lord*. This is mentioned here in the preamble to the law concerning the priesthood, for a warning to all succeeding priests; let them know, by this example, that God is a jealous God, and will not be mocked; the holy anointing oil was an honour to the obedient, but not a shelter to the disobedient. It is here said, *They had no children*, Providence so ordering it, for their greater punishment, that none of their descendants should remain to be priests, and so bear up their name who had profaned God's name.

3. The continuance of the two younger: Eleazar and Ithamar ministered *in the sight of Aaron*. It intimates,

(1.) The care they took about their ministration not to make any blunders; they kept under their father's eye, and took instruction from him in all they did, because, probably, Nadab and Abihu got out of their father's sight when they offered strange fire. Note, It is good for young people to act under the direction and inspection of those that are aged and experienced.

(2.) The comfort Aaron took in it; it pleased him to see his younger sons behave themselves prudently and gravely, when his two elder had miscarried. Note, It is a great satisfaction to parents to *see their children walk in the truth*, ~~600~~ 3 John 1:4.

III. A grant is made of the Levites to be assistants to the priests in their work: *Give the Levites to Aaron*, v. 9. Aaron was to have a greater

propriety in, and power over, the tribe of Levi than any other of the tribes had in and over their respective tribes. There was a great deal of work belonging to the priests' office, and there were now only three pairs of hands to do it all, Aaron's and his two sons'; for it does not appear that they had either of them any children at this time, at least not any that were of age to minister, therefore God appoints the Levites to attend upon them. Note, Those whom God finds work for his will find help for. Here is, 1. The service for which the Levites were designed: they were to *minister to the priests* in their ministrations to the Lord (v. 6), and to *keep Aaron's charge* (v. 7), as the deacons to the bishops in the evangelical constitution, serving at tables, while the bishops waited on their ministry. The Levites killed the sacrifices, and then the priests needed only to sprinkle the blood and burn the fat: the Levites prepared the incense, the priests burnt it. They were to keep, not only Aaron's charge, but the *charge of the whole congregation*. Note, It is a great trust that is reposed in ministers, not only for the glory of Christ, but for the good of his church; so that they must not only keep the charge of the great high priest, but must also be faithful to the souls of men, in trust for whom a dispensation is committed to them.

2. the consideration upon which the Levites were demanded; they were taken instead of the first-born. The preservation of the first-born of Israel, when all the first-born of the Egyptians (with whom they were many of them mingled) were destroyed, was looked upon by him who never makes any unreasonable demands as cause sufficient of the appropriating of all the first-born thenceforward to himself (v. 13): *All the first-born are mine*. That was sufficient to make them his, though he had given no reason for it, for he is the sole fountain and Lord of all beings and powers; but because all obedience must flow from love, and acts of duty must be acts of gratitude, before they were challenged into peculiar services they were crowned with peculiar favours. Note, When he that made us saves us we are thereby laid under further obligations to serve him and live to him. God's right to us by redemption corroborates the right he has to us by creation. Now because the first-born of a family are generally the favourites, and some would think it a disparagement to have their eldest sons servants to the priests, and attending before the door of the tabernacle, God took the tribe of Levi entire for his own, in lieu of the first-born, v. 12. Note, God's institutions put no hardships upon men in any of their just interests or reasonable affections. It was presumed that the Israelites would rather part with the Levites than with the first-born, and

therefore God graciously ordered the exchange; yet for us he *spared not his own Son*.

~~GEN4~~ NUMBERS 3:14-39

THE SEPARATION OF THE LEVITES

The Levites being granted to Aaron to minister to him, they are here delivered to him by tale, that he might know what he had, and employ them accordingly. Observe,

I. By what rule they were numbered: *Every male from a month old and upward*, v. 15. The rest of the tribes were numbered only from twenty years old and upwards, and of them those only that were *able to go forth to war*; but into the number of the Levites they must take in both infants, and infirm; being exempted from the war, it was not insisted upon that they should be of age and strength for the wars. Though it appears afterwards that little more than a third part of the Levites were fit to be employed in the service of the tabernacle (about 8000 out of 22,000, ~~GEN4~~ Numbers 4:47, 48), yet God would have them all numbered as retainers to his family; that none may think themselves disowned and rejected of God because they are not in a capacity of doing him that service which they see others do him. The Levites of a month old could not honour God and serve the tabernacle, as those that had grown up; yet out of the mouths of babes and sucklings the Levites' praise was perfected. Let not little children be hindered from being enrolled among the disciples of Christ, for such was the tribe of Levi, of such is the kingdom of heaven, that kingdom of priests. The redemption of the first-born was reckoned from a month old (~~GEN4~~ Numbers 18:15, 16), therefore from that age the Levites were numbered. They were numbered *after the house of their fathers*, not their *mothers*, for, if the daughter of a Levite married one of another tribe, her son was not a Levite; but we read of a spiritual priest to our God who inherited the unfeigned faith which dwelt in his mother and grandmother, ~~GEN4~~ 2 Timothy 1:5.

II. How they were distributed into three classes, according to the number of the sons of Levi, Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, and these subdivided into several families, v. 17-20.

1. Concerning each of these three classes we have an account,

(1.) Of their number. The Gershonites were 7500. The Kohathites were 8600. The Merarites were 6200. The rest of the tribes had not their subordinate families numbered by themselves as those of Levi; this honour God put upon his own tribe.

(2.) Of their post about the tabernacle on which they were to attend. The Gershonites pitched behind the tabernacle, westward, v. 23. The Kohathites on the right hand, southward, v. 29. The Merarites on the left hand, northward, v. 35. And, to complete the square, Moses and Aaron, with the priests, encamped in the front, eastward, v. 38. Thus was the tabernacle surrounded with its guards; and thus does the *angel of the Lord encamp round about those that fear him*, those living temples, ~~CHR~~ Psalm 34:7. Every one knew his place, and must therein abide with God.

(3.) Of their chief or head. As each class had its own place, so each had its own prince. The commander of the Gershonites was Eliasaph (v. 24); of the Kohathites Elizaphan (v. 30), of whom we read (~~CHR~~ Leviticus 10:4) that he was one of the bearers at the funeral of Nadab and Abihu; of the Merarites Zuriel, v. 35.

(4.) Of their charge, when the camp moved. Each class knew their own business; it was requisite they should, for that which is every body's work often proves nobody's work. The Gershonites were charged with the custody and carriage of all the curtains and hangings and coverings of the tabernacle and court (v. 25, 26), the Kohathites of all the furniture of the tabernacle — the ark, altar, table, etc. (v. 31, 32), the Merarites of the heavy carriage, boards, bars, pillars, etc., v. 36, 37.

2. Here we may observe,

(1.) That the Kohathites, though they were the second house, yet were preferred before the elder family of the Gershonites. Besides that Aaron and the priests were of that family, they were more numerous, and their post and charge more honourable, which probably was ordered to put an honour upon Moses, who was of that family. Yet,

(2.) The posterity of Moses were not at all dignified or privileged, but stood upon the level with other Levites, that it might appear he did not seek the advancement of his own family, nor to entail any honours upon it either in church or state; he that had honour enough himself coveted not to

have his name shine by that borrowed light, but rather to have the Levites borrow honour from his name. Let none think contemptibly of the Levites, though inferior to the priests, for Moses himself thought it preferment enough for his sons to be Levites. Probably it was because the family of Moses were Levites only that in the title of this chapter, which is concerning that tribe (v. 1), Aaron is put before Moses.

III. The sum total of the numbers of this tribe. They are computed in all 22,000, v. 39. The sum of the particular families amounts to 300 more; if this had been added to the sum total, the Levites, instead of being 273 fewer than the first-born, as they were (v. 43), would have been twenty-seven more, and so the balance would have fallen the other way; but it is supposed that the 300 which were struck off from the account when the exchange was to be made were the first-born of the Levites themselves, born since their coming out of Egypt, which could not be put into the exchange, because they were already sanctified to God. But that which is especially observable here is that the tribe of Levi was by much the least of all the tribes. Note, God's part in the world is too often the smallest part. His chosen are comparatively a little flock.

~~0080~~ NUMBERS 3:40-51

THE SEPARATION OF THE LEVITES

Here is the exchange made of the Levites for the first-born.

1. The first-born were numbered from a month old, v. 42, 43. Those certainly were not reckoned who, though first-born, had become heads of families themselves, but those only that were under age; and the learned bishop Patrick is decidedly of opinion that none were numbered but those only that were born since their coming out of Egypt, when the first-born were sanctified, ~~0080~~Exodus 13:2. If there were 22,000 first-born males, we may suppose as many females, and all these brought forth in the first year after they came out of Egypt, we must hence infer that in the last year of their servitude, even when it was in the greatest extremity, there were abundance of marriages made among the Israelites; they were not discouraged by the present distress, but married in faith, expecting that God would shortly visit them with mercy, and that their children, though born in bondage, should live in liberty and honour. And it was a token of

good to them, an evidence that they were blessed of the Lord, that they were not only kept alive, but greatly increased, in a barren wilderness.

2. The number of the first-born, and that of the Levites, by a special providence, came pretty near to each other; thus, when he *divided the nations, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel*, ^{GEN 32:8} Deuteronomy 32:8. Known unto God are all his works beforehand, and there is an exact proportion between them, and so it will appear when they come to be compared. The Levites' cattle are said to be taken instead of the firstlings *of the cattle of the children of Israel*, that is, the Levites, with all their possessions, were devoted to God instead of the first-born and all theirs; for, when we give ourselves to God, all we have passes as appurtenances with the premises.

3. The small number of first-born which exceeded the number of the Levites (273 in all) were to be redeemed, at five shekels apiece, and the redemption-money given to Aaron; for it would not do well to have them added to the Levites. It is probable that in the exchange they began with the eldest of the first-born, and so downward, so that those were to be redeemed with money who were the 273 youngest of the first-born; more likely so than either that it was determined by lot or that the money was paid out of the public stock. The church is called the church of the *first-born*, which is redeemed, not as these were, with silver and gold, but, being devoted by sin to the justice of God, is ransomed with *the precious blood of the Son of God*.