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A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

PREPARING THE TABERNACLE (7–10)

The Place of the Passage

This section introduces a flashback. The tabernacle was set up “on the first day of the first month” (Exodus 40:2, 17). One month later, the census of the people was taken “on the first day of the second month” (Numbers 1:1, 18). The people will begin their journey later this same month, on the twentieth day of the second month (10:11). After the report of the census but prior to the departure, Numbers 7–10 introduces a flashback to something else that took place in the previous month, on “the day when Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle” (7:1; 9:15) and before the census was conducted. This flashback is here because it is important for us to know, before the journey begins, that God’s tent is not only set up but is also fully stocked and ready to go. This section describes the stocking and staffing of the tabernacle, its first worship festival, and the glory of God taking up residence there—all of which occur prior to the census.

The Big Picture

The Lord is delighted to take up residence among his people to lead them to the Promised Land.

Gospel Glimpses

A PROVIDED SACRIFICE. Once the tabernacle is finished, the chiefs of each tribe stock it with sacrifice provisions on behalf of their respective constituencies (7:1–88). It is the chief of the tribe of Judah—the tribe from which the Messiah is anticipated—who leads this ceremony (7:12). These provisions show us that it is the rulers among the people, and especially the chief from Judah, who are held responsible to ensure that the people’s atonement is provided for. One day, the Messiah would fulfill these patterns by personally providing the final sacrifice for all of his people.

MERCY SEAT. The first divine act in the tabernacle, once it is set up and stocked, is a word spoken “from above the mercy seat” (7:89). The mercy seat is a solid gold plate with golden cherubim, placed on top of the ark. The ark with the mercy seat is called the “footstool” of God’s throne. God’s throne is in heaven, with the ark and its mercy seat as the intersection between heaven and earth. Hence, to hear the voice of God from over the “mercy seat” is to hear from God’s throne in heaven (Exodus 25:17–22). It is through the intercession of Jesus that our personal communion with God, foreshadowed by the mercy seat, is accomplished (Hebrews 4:14–16).

Whole Bible Connections

PASSOVER. The original Passover took place in Egypt (Exodus 12:1–51), but its first ritual celebration is narrated in Numbers 9:1–14. The Passover ritual is one of the most important annual festivals in the biblical narrative. It is during the Passover festival that Jesus is sacrificed as the true Passover lamb (John 19:14). It is also the ritual observance of Passover that is replaced by the New Testament Communion table (Luke 22:14–20).

LEVITES. The term “Levite” occurs 330 times in the Bible (318 times in the Old Testament and 12 times in the New). The role that the members of this tribe serve in the ministries of the tabernacle and the temple can hardly be overemphasized. Their inauguration into that role is reported in Numbers 8:5–26. The Levites are tasked primarily with supervising and guarding the worship at the sanctuary and with teaching God’s law to his people.

Theological Soundings

SUBSTITUTION. The Levites are installed into their office in a five-step ceremony (8:5–13). First, they are ritually cleansed (vv. 6–7). Second, they are provided with two bulls for a sacrifice (v. 8). Third, they are presented to the Lord by the congregation (vv. 9–11). Fourth, the two bulls are offered for the Levites’ atonement (v. 12). Fifth, the Levites are offered before the priests. The centerpiece of the ceremony is the third step, in which the congregation “shall lay their hands on the Levites” and present them “as a wave offering from the people of Israel” (v. 11). By this process, the Levites are given to God’s service “instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the people of Israel. . . . For all the firstborn among the people of Israel are mine” (vv. 16–17). This process teaches the principle of substitution, where one person is accepted by God in the stead of another. Jesus is the ultimate offering whom we the people of God must look to as our substitute.

Glossary of Terms

PASSOVER: An annual Israelite festival commemorating God’s final plague on the Egyptians, which led to the exodus. In this final plague, the Lord “passed over” the houses of those who spread the blood of a lamb on the doorposts of their homes (Exodus 12). Those who did not obey this command suffered the death of their firstborn

SACRIFICE: An offering to God, often to seek forgiveness of sin. The law of Moses gave detailed instructions regarding various kinds of sacrifices. By his death on the cross, Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of believers (Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 10:12). Believers are to offer their bodies as living sacrifices to God (Romans 12:1)

Please answer the following questions:

Chapter 7

1. How many carts and oxen were given to the sons of Gershon, Nerari, and Kohath for service? (7-9)
2. What did the leaders of each tribe do for twelve consecutive days? (10-88)
3. What did Moses hear when he went into the tabernacle after the dedicatory offering? (89)

Chapter 8

4. How was the candlestick (lampstand) made? (4)
5. Why were the Levites purified? (11)
6. The Levites were wholly given to the Lord instead of what persons? (16-18)
7. What age group of Levites did the service of the tabernacle? (24-25)

Chapter 9

8. What did the Israelites celebrate on the fourteenth day of the first month? (4)
9. Who was cut off from among the people? (13)

10. How were strangers to celebrate the Passover? (14)

11. What covered the tabernacle when it was set up? (15)

12. How did the Israelites know when to move or stay? (17-23)

Chapter 10

13. Who was to gather at the tabernacle when both trumpets sounded? (2-3)

14. Who was to gather if just one trumpet sounded? (4)

15. For what other three purposes were the trumpets to be sounded? (5-10)

16. What was the order of their march when the Israelites moved? (14-28)

17. Who did Moses want to go with them? (29-32)

Personal Application

18. How do the teachings of the Spirit in these passages minister to your faith?