

## **The Tribe Set Apart: Numbers 1:47-54 Explained** **Scriptures for Today**

### **Numbers 1:47-54**

But the Levites after the tribe of their fathers were not numbered among them. 48 For the LORD had spoken unto Moses, saying, 49 Only thou shalt not number the tribe of Levi, neither take the sum of them among the children of Israel: 50 But thou shalt appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of testimony, and over all the vessels thereof, and over all things that belong to it: they shall bear the tabernacle, and all the vessels thereof; and they shall minister unto it, and shall encamp round about the tabernacle. 51 And when the tabernacle setteth forward, the Levites shall take it down: and when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death. 52 And the children of Israel shall pitch their tents, every man by his own camp, and every man by his own standard, throughout their hosts. 53 But the Levites shall pitch round about the tabernacle of testimony, that there be no wrath upon the congregation of the children of Israel: and the Levites shall keep the charge of the tabernacle of testimony. 54 And the children of Israel did according to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so did they.

### **Introduction: Why Was Levi Different?**

Imagine standing in the camp of Israel. The census is underway. The tribes are being counted for war. The people are being counted. Reuben is counted. Simeon is counted. Judah is counted. Dan is counted.

Let me ask you a question before we continue. How many of you can name the 12 tribes of Israel? Let's see if we can do this together. I need some of you to write them down as we name them and tell me if we get all 12: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph (Ephraim, Manasseh), Benjamin.

Now, here's what's interesting. Tribe after tribe is numbered for war. Then Moses comes to Levi. And everything changes. Moses skips right over Levi. No census. You are standing there with your tribe, the tribe of Levi, and Moses skips right over you. No military assignment. No place among the armies.

Why? Did God forget the Levites? Are you not important to the tribes of Israel? Did God value the Levites less than the other tribes? Or did God have a different purpose for them?

I want to show you that Levi was not excluded because they were less important. Levi was set apart because they had a unique responsibility. And there are some tremendous lessons here for us today.

## **I. God Does Not Give Everyone The Same Assignment**

### **Numbers 1:47**

But the Levites after the tribe of their fathers were not numbered among them.

Immediately we notice something different about Levi. Every other tribe was counted. Levi was not counted at all. They were NOT numbered among the tribes. Why? The answer comes in the next verses so please pay close attention here.

### **Numbers 1:48-49**

For the LORD had spoken unto Moses, saying, 49 Only thou shalt not number the tribe of Levi, neither take the sum of them among the children of Israel:

God intentionally excluded them from the military census. They were not going to be fighting against the enemies of Israel in the physical battles. This was not an accident. This was not discrimination. This was God's plan.

The Levites had a different calling. This is why they were not numbered. God is calling them to do something different. Think about that. The tribes of Judah and Dan would fight battles. The tribes of Issachar and Asher would fight.

The Levites would not fight. The Levites, instead, would protect the tabernacle. Totally different assignment. Same God. Different responsibility. Same importance. The tribes numbered for war were very important. The tribe of Levi was very important.

This principle continues throughout Scripture. We all have very important gifts and jobs to do within a church.

### **1 Corinthians 12:18**

But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.

God does not make everyone a preacher. God does not make everyone a song leader. God does not make everyone a piano player. God does not make everyone an usher. God does not make everyone a soul-winning leader. God gives different responsibilities to different people. And all of those jobs and functions are very important to a church.

Imagine a football team. The quarterback gets all the attention, or the running back gets all the attention. But remove the offensive line. The game is over. The people who receive the most attention are not always the people doing the most important work. That offensive line is doing the tough work in the trenches.

## **II. The Levites Were Set Apart To Protect The Tabernacle**

### **Numbers 1:50**

But thou shalt appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of testimony, and over all the vessels thereof, and over all things that belong to it: they shall bear the tabernacle, and all the vessels thereof; and they shall minister unto it, and shall encamp round about the tabernacle.

Notice how much responsibility God gives them. The Levites are set OVER the tabernacle and all things related to the tabernacle: The tabernacle, the furniture, the vessels, the transportation, the setup, and the care of all these things. Everything. This was no small assignment.

Now ask yourself: What exactly is the tabernacle? And why was it so important that God would dedicate an entire tribe just to protect it?

The tabernacle was much more than a tent. It was the absolute CENTER of Israel's worship to the Almighty God and Creator of all things. It was the place where sacrifices were offered to God. It housed the holy place and the most holy place. It contained the ark of the covenant. It contained the mercy seat where God would meet with His people.

### **Exodus 25:22**

And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel.

Think about that. The tabernacle represented God's presence among the children of Israel. The tabernacle represented God's dwelling place among His people. It's important. The center of Israel was not the army. The center of Israel was God. That is why God arranged the camp around the tabernacle. Everything pointed toward Him.

Every tribe had its importance. Judah would produce kings. Ephraim would become powerful. The soldiers would defend the nation. But the tabernacle represented something greater than military power, political power, or national strength. It represented God's presence.

Without the tabernacle, Israel was just another nation. Without God's presence, they were just another people. The thing that made Israel special was not their army. It was not their wealth. It was not their land. It was God dwelling among them. That is why the tabernacle sat in the very center of the camp.

When Israel camped, the tabernacle was in the middle. When Israel marched, the tabernacle was in the middle. Everything revolved around God.

Picture the scene. More than two million people in every direction. Twelve tribes spread across the wilderness. And right in the center stood the tabernacle. God was teaching Israel a lesson: The nation was not the center. The army was not the center. The people were not the center. God was the center.

Imagine our solar system. The planets don't sit at the center. The sun sits at the center. Everything else revolves around it. The moment a planet decides not to revolve around the center, chaos will follow. That's exactly what God was teaching Israel. God belongs at the center. The nation revolved around Him. The tribes revolved around Him. The camp revolved around Him. The question is: Does your life revolve around God, or does God revolve around your life?

And that is why the Levites were so important. The Levites were assigned to protect the very thing that made Israel Israel. If the army failed, Israel could lose a battle. If the tabernacle was corrupted, Israel would lose its relationship with God.

The Levites were not guarding furniture. They were guarding the place where sinful man met with a holy God. That is a much greater responsibility than most people realize.

So what is the center of your life? What is the center of your home? What is the center of your church?

Because God intentionally put Himself at the center of Israel's camp. The question for us is whether God is truly at the center of everything we do. That's where this passage moves from history to application.

The most important thing about a church is not the building. It is not the budget. It is not the attendance. It is not the programs. The most important thing is God's Word and God's presence. A church can have everything else and still fail if God is not at the center.

### **III. God Chose Levi Because They Had Proven Their Loyalty**

Now let's answer another question because this is a great question. Why did God choose the tribe of Levi? Why not Judah? Why not Ephraim? Why not Benjamin? Why would God take an entire tribe and give them this special responsibility?

Remember, Moses himself was a Levite. Aaron was a Levite. But I don't think that's the whole reason. I believe God gives us a clue in one of the most famous stories in the entire Bible—the story of the golden calf.

While Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the law from God, the people became impatient. Moses had been gone for about forty days. The people began to wonder if he was ever coming back. They were tired of waiting for Moses.

Instead of trusting God, they pressured Aaron to make them gods they could see. Aaron gathered their gold, fashioned a golden calf, and the people began worshipping it. Think about how shocking this is.

God had just delivered them from Egypt. God had parted the Red Sea. God had drowned Pharaoh's army. God had fed them and led them through the wilderness. And yet it didn't take long for the people to turn aside into idolatry from the God who saved them.

When Moses came down from the mountain, he saw the rebellion and stood in the gate of the camp and asked one of the greatest questions in the entire Bible. Watch what Moses asked the people:

**Exodus 32:26**

Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, Who is on the LORD'S side? let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him.

Now notice what happened. Not everybody came. Who is on the Lord's side? And only the sons of Levi stepped forward. Not every tribe stepped forward. Not everybody chose the Lord's side that day. But the sons of Levi did. And commanded them to slay people who turned to idolatry. 3,000 men lost their life that day for going against God. The Levites stood with God.

When Israel rebelled, Levi stood with God. When Israel worshipped the golden calf, Levi chose obedience. When Moses called for people to take a stand, Levi answered the call. And God did not forget that.

Years later, when God needed a tribe to guard the tabernacle, carry the holy things, and serve in a special way, He chose the tribe that had already demonstrated faithfulness. That's an important lesson. God often entrusts greater responsibility to people who have already proven themselves faithful with smaller responsibilities. As the Bible says:

**1 Corinthians 4:2**

Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.

God notices faithfulness. People may forget it. People may overlook it. But God sees it, and God rewards it.

## **IV. God's Holiness Must Be Taken Seriously**

**Numbers 1:51**

And when the tabernacle setteth forward, the Levites shall take it down: and when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death.

That sounds severe and even evil to our very modern ears. But it teaches something very important. God is holy. The tabernacle was holy. The vessels were holy. The worship of God was holy.

Israel was learning reverence. Many people emphasize God's love. The Bible certainly teaches God's love. But the Bible also teaches God's holiness. Anyone other than the Levites could not come near the tabernacle of God.

**Hebrews 12:28-29**

Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: 29 For our God is a consuming fire.

The God of Hebrews is the same God of Numbers. God deserves reverence. God deserves respect. God deserves obedience. Just like Adam and Eve were not supposed to eat of one tree of the garden, no one except the Levites were to come near the tabernacle or they would be put to death.

Even later on, we see a man touch the ark, Uzzah. David was bringing the ark to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6. "Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it." God smote Uzzah. God's laws and commands are not a joke. He's serious. But our very modern ears think things like that are just wrong.

Commands are commands. Punishments are punishments. "The stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death." David wasn't happy about that either. But God's instructions concerning the ark was ignored. And Uzzah paid the price for that.

## **V. God Is A God Of Order**

**Numbers 1:52**

And the children of Israel shall pitch their tents, every man by his own camp, and every man by his own standard, throughout their hosts.

Everything had a place. Everything had order. Everything had structure. Imagine two million people camping wherever they wanted. There would be chaos. Confusion. Disorder. But God organized the nation carefully.

**1 Corinthians 14:40**

Let all things be done decently and in order.

God values order. That applies in the home. That applies in the church. That applies in ministry. We must continue to get organized. We must continue to put people in the right positions. We must stay in order.

## **VI. The Levites Protected The Entire Nation**

This may be the most important verse in the passage.

**Numbers 1:53**

But the Levites shall pitch round about the tabernacle of testimony, that there be no wrath upon the congregation of the children of Israel: and the Levites shall keep the charge of the tabernacle of testimony.

Notice this carefully. The Levites were not just serving themselves. They were protecting everybody. Their ministry benefited the entire nation.

Now, picture the camp. Millions of Israelites. The tabernacle in the center. The Levites surrounding it like a living wall. Their service prevented judgment from falling upon the congregation.

Now, let's compare that to a church like the one we have here. Think about the unseen servants in a church.

The person who cleans. The person who prepares meals. The person who drives and picks people up. The person who sets up tables and chairs. The person who fills the baptismal. The person who prepares bulletins. The person who runs the sound. The person who follows up with visitors. The people who are praying for us. The person who works on the social media. The people who are online sending offerings that help us feed people and draw people to hear the Gospel.

Many people never notice those ministries. But the entire church benefits from them greatly.

**Galatians 6:9**

And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.

God sees faithful service. Even when nobody else does. Most people know the name of the CEO of a company. Almost nobody knows the name of the guy who keeps the electricity running in the building. But let the electricity go out. Suddenly everybody realizes how important that person was. That's how ministries work in a church.

**VII. Obedience Was The Key**

The chapter ends with obedience.

**Numbers 1:54**

And the children of Israel did according to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so did they.

No debate. No argument. No compromise. God commanded. Israel obeyed. That is the pattern throughout Scripture.

**John 14:15**

If ye love me, keep my commandments.

Obedience does not save us. But obedience demonstrates our love for God. And we all need to get better at loving God.

Which tribe would you have rather been? Judah? Benjamin? Ephraim? or Levi? Many people would want to be with the tribe of Judah. They were the leading tribe. The Savior of the world comes from that tribe through king David.

But yet, Levi was entrusted with protecting the very center of Israel's relationship with God. So, think again.

### **Conclusion**

At first glance, Levi appears to be missing out. Everyone else is counted. Everyone else is preparing for war. Everyone else receives a military role in the upcoming wars. But by the end of the passage we discover something important.

Levi was not overlooked. It might have seemed that way at first. Instead, Levi was entrusted. The warriors protected Israel from enemies on the outside. The Levites protected the worship of God on the inside.

Both were necessary. Both were important. Both were part of God's plan. And the same is true today. You do not have to do what everyone else does. You do not have to have the same ministry as everyone else. You do not have to have the same gifts as everyone else. You simply need to be faithful to the assignment God has given you.

Because in God's kingdom, the greatest servants are often the ones nobody notices—but God sees every act of faithfulness. And just like the Levites, being set apart by God is not a lesser calling. It is a privilege.

Let's pray.