

# God's Buffer Zone

Numbers 1:50-54

*“But you shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings and over all that belongs to it. They shall carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall take care of it; they shall also camp around the tabernacle. So when the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle encamps, the Levites shall set it up. But the layman who comes near shall be put to death. And the sons of Israel shall camp, each man by his own camp, and each man by his own standard, according to their armies. But the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the testimony, that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the sons of Israel. So the Levites shall keep charge of the tabernacle of the testimony.’ Thus the sons of Israel did; according to all which the Lord had commanded Moses, so they did” (1:50-54).*

Paul stated in Romans 15:4, “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” The Book of Numbers can instruct and encourage us.

Holiness, especially as it relates to the nature of God, is a predominant theme throughout the whole Old Testament. This portion of the Pentateuch in particular emphasizes the theme of the holiness of God. As God deals with Israel throughout the Book of Numbers, the people

will learn this valuable principle. Two rather frightening historic examples occurred earlier and are recorded in Exodus and Leviticus. When God had summoned Israel to Sinai, He had instructed Moses to set boundaries around the mountain prior to Israel’s meeting with Him. This was both to protect Israel and to teach them His holiness. If men or even animals accidentally wandered past the boundaries, they were to be immediately put to death (Exodus 9:12, 13). In another painful lesson, two of God’s priests, Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, were incinerated at their posts of duty for offering an unauthorized fire on their censers before God (Leviticus 10:1-3). Aaron was not even allowed to bury his sons or mourn for them. This may appear to be cruel and uncompassionate by God, but His premise was this: “By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored” (Leviticus 10:3).

God had chosen the tribe of Levi and Levi’s descendants to act as His priests and tabernacle officers before the rest of Israel. Their selection and duties involved three requirements: (1) the call and setting apart (Exodus 19:4-6; Numbers 3:11-13), (2) their duties within and without the tabernacle (Exodus 21—31), and (3) their encampment before the tabernacle (Numbers 1:50-54). The instructions and reasons for the third divine assignment form the basis for this lesson.

The Levites were to act as God's buffer zone between Himself and the rest of the people of Israel.

### **THE LEVITES AND ISRAEL**

God sanctified for Himself a particular tribe from Israel, namely Levi. These families and these alone would handle and transport God's holy things—the tabernacle, its furniture and utensils, and the priests' special clothing. The tribe itself consisted of four clan leaders: Gershon, Kohath, Merari, and Amram, Moses' and Aaron's clan-group. From among all of Israel, only Aaron's family were the actual priests, chosen to conduct the sacrifices and special worship assemblies God required of Israel. Each of the other families, however, had special assignments, and their work was equally as important. God had given Israel a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to remain over the tabernacle itself (Exodus 13:21, 22). Whenever the cloud moved, it was an indication to Israel to break camp and follow God's leading. Sometimes the cloud remained over an area for just a few days; at other times it remained stationary for months. Each Levitical family was responsible for particular items of furniture or of the tabernacle structure (see chapter 3 for specific assignments). Every piece was numbered, and the Levites knew how to assemble and disassemble the tabernacle quickly. With such simplicity and order, the camp and tabernacle could be moved rapidly. The tabernacle could probably be broken down and ready to move in less than two hours.

A second function the Levites had in their role as God's separated people must be noticed. God used them as intermediaries, as a buffer zone between Himself and the rest of Israel. Numbers 1:51 records that no other Israelite could approach or touch any part of the tabernacle as it was being set up or taken down. Unless they were in the process of bringing a sacrifice before the priest, Israel was not to be in the tabernacle area. One might call to mind a later incident in Israel's history, the death of Uzzah, which shows how God's work must be treated as holy (2 Samuel 6:2-11). Under David's reign, the ark of the covenant was being transported to Jerusalem. Instead of it being done according to God's instructions, the ark was

being carried on an ox cart. Uzzah, a non-Levite, was leading the cart when the ark almost tipped over. One's natural instinct would be to reach over and steady the ark. This Uzzah did, but for touching the ark, God struck him dead for his irreverence. Similarly, God's divine instructions for the Levites to camp around the tabernacle served to protect Israel from irreverence. Three families, Kohath, Gershon, and Merari, were to camp on three sides, and the family of Amram (Moses, Aaron, and the priests) were to camp in front of the tabernacle door. The tabernacle was to always face the east (cf. 1:50—2:34). Then, beginning with the tribe of Judah, Israel was to camp three tribes deep around all four sides of the Levites. The Levites acted as a buffer zone between Israel and God.

Imagine for a moment being a Levite and camping within a few yards of the tabernacle itself. Remember that the pillar of cloud or the pillar of fire was always over the tabernacle. Thus, at night it would never be dark in your tent area. What an awesome reminder that one dwelt in the constant presence of God. What parallels can be drawn from this symbolism of the tribe of Levi as God's buffer zone?

### **BELIEVERS AND THE WORLD**

From the Old Testament, one can see that God has used many symbols of separation to distinguish the holy from the unholy: (1) boundaries on Mt. Sinai, (2) Levites as priests and transporters of the holy things, and (3) the encampment arrangement of the tribe of Levi and Israel in the wilderness.

In the New Testament, God presents in the person of Christ another symbol, often called type and antitype of the mediating priesthood. Jesus Christ is our High Priest (cf. Hebrews 7—9). Jesus during His earthly ministry constantly mentioned that He was from the Father and came to do the Father's will (cf. John 6—8). He plainly told the Jews, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). In the Old Testament no one could approach God directly except through the priest-mediator. In the Christian age, Jesus is between man and God not to block man's way to God but to reestablish the relationship and fellowship that was broken by man's sin. The writer of Hebrews gives us these en-

couraging words: "Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). Since Jesus is the only mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5), what is our parallel role in God's divine plan? It is certainly not identical with Jesus' role as He stands before God. As New Testament Christians we do not hold the fate of man in our hands, as some churches claim to have the authority to do in dispensing salvation. Paul does say, however, that we are ambassadors of Christ calling men to be reconciled to God through Him (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). Another parallel that I have in mind is used by Peter:

You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a *holy priesthood*, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God *through* Jesus Christ. . . . But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:5,9; emphasis mine).

The priesthood of the believer is the role of serving God and living righteously before the world.

From a biblical viewpoint, God's people living righteously is so important that the rest of the world could not survive without it. Two examples illustrate this divine principle. All of human kind would have come to an end and the promised seed line of Genesis 3:15f. would have failed had Noah not "found favor in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 6:8). One million souls, the estimated population of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other cities of the plain, would have lived a while longer if only ten righteous souls could have been found among them (Genesis 18:32). Instead, they suffered the wrath of God in fire and brimstone, and archaeologists today can only estimate where these cities remain buried.

Paul encourages New Testament Christians that the new life in Christ versus the old life of sin

has spared them from the wrath of God that is still scheduled to come upon the sons of disobedience (Ephesians 2:2; 5:6). Peter follows that theme when he encouraged New Testament believers by declaring that in remaining righteous, even though maligned by some, our living and preaching the gospel to people is God's hope and their only hope of escaping God's wrath and judgment (1 Peter 4:4-6). If all of the righteousness and goodness of God's people were removed from the earth, God's wrath and judgment would immediately come upon sinners. We act as God's buffer zone from immediate judgment.

What an awesome responsibility and yet a privilege we have as we live in and before the world. Have you ever thought that your life, even in Christ, was unimportant? Consider it again in the light of God's Word. You may be that tenth righteous soul, so to speak, that keeps your neighborhood and city together. You may be that righteous leaven of influence for your congregation and community. Your righteous acts are a buffer zone between God and the world.

Consider also the idea of privilege. While the Levites guarded the holy things of God and kept Israel from God's wrath, conversely, they lived facing the tabernacle and constantly in God's presence. John speaks of a similar joy when he writes about our abiding fellowship, joy, and cleansing as we walk with God (1 John 1:4-9).

## CONCLUSION

In light of such an awesome responsibility and privilege, we need to be steadfast in our obedience and righteous living before the heavenly Father and the world. Where are you living? Are you on the inner circle of God's fellowship and special privilege, or do you find yourself on the outside of the camp? The way is still open to God through Jesus. Check the Scriptures to see where you are camping.