

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Numbers 3: 33-39

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank God, it's time to read the Bible again. We continue to read Numbers chapter 3. Today we read from verse 33 to verse 39.

The three sons of Levi—Gershon, Kohath, and Merari—became the three major clans of the tribe of Levi. Yesterday, we read about the locations where the Gershonites and the Kohathites were to camp, as well as the objects assigned to their care in their service at the tabernacle. Next, we will look at the location where the Merarites were to camp and the duties of their service.

Verses 33-34: “From Merari came the family of the Mahlites and the family of the Mushites; these were the families of Merari. And those who were numbered, according to the number of all the males from a month old and above, were six thousand two hundred.”

The way God commanded Moses was exactly the same as before. There were two major families belonging to Merari, Mahli and Mushi. Among these two families, the total number of males one month old and above who were counted was 6,200.

Verse 35: “The leader of the fathers’ house of the families of Merari was Zuriel the son of Abihail. These were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle.”

The leader of the families of Merari was Zuriel the son of Abihail. The families of Merari were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle, between the tabernacle and the camp of Dan, so as to prevent the Israelites in the camp of Dan from mistakenly entering the tabernacle and offending God. Earlier, we read that the

camp of Dan included three tribes: Dan, Asher, and Naphtali. The descendants of Merari and the camp of Dan together guarded the north side of the tabernacle.

Verse 36: “And the appointed duty of the children of Merari included the boards of the tabernacle, its bars, its pillars, its sockets, its utensils, all the work relating to them,”

The four layers of coverings over the tabernacle and the curtains at the entrances of the tabernacle were cared for by the descendants of Gershon. The various vessels and utensils used for worshiping and serving God inside the tabernacle were cared for by the descendants of Kohath. We have already read about all these things. The descendants of Merari were responsible for caring for the upright boards, bars, and pillars that formed the tabernacle, as well as the sockets that supported the boards and pillars. These constituted the main structure of the tabernacle. Relatively speaking, they were large in size and extremely heavy.

The construction of the boards is explained very clearly in Exodus 26:15-30. The boards were made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. The acacia wood typifies our redeemed humanity, while the gold typifies man experiencing the grace of Christ through faith and having Christ's nature constituted into his excellent character. Two tenons were to be made at the bottom of every board so that they could be inserted into two silver sockets. The tenons typify man's faith, inserted into the silver sockets that typify Christ's redemption. Each silver socket weighed one talent, equivalent to approximately seventy-five pounds today.

On the south, west, and north sides of the tabernacle, there were altogether forty-eight boards and ninety-six silver sockets. In addition, there were five bars on each side, making a total of fifteen bars on the three sides. The bars were also made of acacia wood overlaid with gold, typifying the various gifts God gives to the church, enabling them to serve as connections among the saints and to join the saints together in a proper coordination.

Between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place were four pillars, also made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. These four pillars stood on four silver sockets. The four pillars formed three entrances, and at these entrances hung the veil separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. The three entrances typify that only what corresponds to the desire of the Triune God can enter; this was the entrance into the Most Holy Place.

On the east side of the tabernacle was the entrance to the Holy Place. There were five pillars, again made of acacia wood overlaid with gold, and these five pillars stood on five bronze sockets, forming four entrances. Bronze typifies judgment, showing that those who enter the Holy Place must first pass through the bronze sockets of judgment before they can enter the Holy Place. Once they entered the Holy Place, however, everywhere they looked within the Holy Place, they saw gold.

Gold typifies God's nature. When a person lifted up his head, he saw the curtains woven of fine linen and blue, purple, and scarlet thread, typifying Christ as revealed in the four Gospels. Cherubim were also embroidered on the curtains, typifying the glory manifested by Christ. The forty-eight gold-covered boards and the four gold-covered pillars stood on one hundred silver sockets, showing that what supports the testimony of the church is one hundred percent the redemption of Christ.

We see how blessed the descendants of Merari were. Their duty was to care for the main structure of the tabernacle. When the tabernacle had to be taken down and transported, they also bore the heaviest burden. In the church today, there is also a great need for the function of the descendants of Merari—to care for the church life, maintain harmonious coordination among the saints, and manifest the character of Christ. This character is produced through faith, by drawing upon the grace of Jesus Christ, allowing the spiritual life to grow. When life becomes mature, one is able to live out the character of Jesus Christ. This faith is also rooted in the redemption of Jesus Christ. Before entering the Holy Place, one must pass through judgment and cannot bring sin and the world into the service of the church.

Verse 37: “and the pillars of the court all around, with their sockets, their pegs, and their cords.”

The details concerning the structure of the outer court are described in Exodus 27:9-19. Please review the daily Bible reading in Exodus. I cannot explain it in detail here, but I will present the important principles. The court of the tabernacle was one hundred cubits long and fifty cubits wide, and around it was to be a screen five cubits high. This screen was made of fine woven linen and hung upon pillars. There was to be one bronze pillar every five cubits, and each bronze pillar was to stand upon a bronze socket. The position of the outer court defined the entire boundary of the tabernacle. The total circumference was three hundred cubits, with one bronze pillar every five cubits, making a total of sixty bronze pillars and sixty bronze sockets.

The screen of the outer court separated the area of the tabernacle from the desolate wilderness surrounding it, just as today the church marks out in the world an area that belongs to God. This enclosure was supported by bronze pillars and bronze sockets. Bronze typifies judgment, signifying that every saint who enters the church life has passed through judgment and has been purchased back by Jesus Christ. Now the church, filled with a sweet human living, is to bear witness to the surrounding world.

The bronze pillars also had to be secured by pegs and cords. The pegs were long bronze spikes driven into the ground, typifying the condemnation of this world and making God’s testimony more secure. The pillars, bronze sockets, pegs, and cords used around the outer court were all cared for by the descendants of Merari, separating the tabernacle from the wilderness.

In the same way, in the church life today, there is also a need for the function of the descendants of Merari, so that the currents of the world—whether political, economic, or cultural—may all be kept outside and prevented from invading the church life, thereby maintaining the purity of the church life.

Verse 38: “Moreover those who were to camp before the tabernacle on the east, before the tabernacle of meeting, were Moses, Aaron, and his sons, keeping charge of the sanctuary, to meet the needs of the children of Israel; but the outsider who came near was to be put to death.”

The west, south, and north sides of the tabernacle were guarded respectively by the descendants of the three families of Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. The entrance to the tabernacle was on the east side, toward the sunrise, and this was also the most important side. Moses, Aaron, and Aaron’s sons camped on the east side of the tabernacle. Moses was the leader of the Israelites, and Aaron and his sons were the priests of the Israelites. It was most secure for them to guard the entrance to the tabernacle. They camped between the tabernacle and the camp of Judah, lest anyone from the camp of Judah mistakenly enter the tabernacle and provoke God’s wrath.

Earlier, we read that the camp of Judah included the three tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. The camp of Judah had the largest number of people and was therefore best able to protect Moses, Aaron, and Aaron’s sons. Moses, Aaron, and Aaron’s sons protected the entrance to the tabernacle. This was according to the command of the LORD God. Any outsider who did not keep God’s command and came near was to be put to death. God is holy and righteous, and He does not permit His tabernacle to be defiled. In this matter, God was very strict.

Dear brothers and sisters, the church today is generally weak. Perhaps the greatest reason is that it has not been separated from the world. Some churches even appeal to people by lowering the threshold in order to attract them into the church life. We need to realize that when the church becomes exactly like the world, how can the church bear witness to Christ before the world? May God help us and grant us wisdom, so that we may properly testify to the world that we live in the world but do not belong to this world.

Verse 39: “All who were numbered of the Levites, whom Moses and Aaron numbered at the commandment of the LORD, by their families, all the males from a month old and above, were twenty-two thousand.”

According to God’s command, the total number of Levite males one month old and above who were counted was 22,000. This should refer to the total number of all the males one month old and above among the families of Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. There is a difficulty here. Numbers 3:22 says that the Gershonites numbered 7,500. Verse 28 says that the Kohathites numbered 8,600. Verse 34 says that the Merarites numbered 6,200. These three figures add up to 22,300. Yet verse 39 says that the total number of Levites counted was 22,000, leaving a difference of 300. Many Bible interpreters have attempted to deal with this difficulty and arrive at a reasonable explanation.

Generally speaking, the views can be divided into three schools. The first school believes that the figure of 8,600 for the Kohathites was a scribal error. Because Hebrew did not use numerical symbols, but expressed numbers in words, the written forms of six and three were very similar. The strongest evidence for this view is that some manuscripts of the early Greek Septuagint of the Old Testament say that the total number of Kohathites was 8,300 rather than 8,600. This would resolve the difficulty of the missing 300. Personally, I am less inclined to adopt this view.

The second view is that in Numbers 3:16, Moses carried out the numbering, and the figures that follow were the numbers counted by Moses, including the numbers of the three major families. But in Numbers 3:39, Moses and Aaron carried out the numbering together. The total then became 22,000, because the males in Aaron’s household were all priests and were therefore excluded from the total number of Israelites. We know that Aaron had four sons. His eldest son, Nadab, and his second son, Abihu, were struck down by God because they offered profane fire. Numbers 3:4 specifically mentions that they had no children. The Bible does not clearly record how many sons Aaron’s remaining two sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, had. At this time, Moses should have just reached eighty years of age, and Aaron was older than Moses. Therefore, Eleazar and Ithamar were probably in their sixties. They

would have had sons and possibly grandsons. However, 300 males one month old and above may be too many.

The third view is the one with which I personally agree more. That is, the totals recorded for the three major families were the actual figures, and the total should have been 22,300. But when we come to Numbers 3:39, the stated total is 22,000. If we read the context, especially the explanation in Numbers 3:40-51, we will realize that the purpose of stating the total here was that the males among the Levites were to take the place of all the firstborn in the house of Israel. These details will be mentioned in tomorrow's daily Bible reading. Among the tribe of Levi, there were also firstborn males. Perhaps these firstborn numbered 300. Since they already belonged to God by right, they could not take the place of the firstborn among the other tribes. Therefore, these 300 were excluded here, and the figure of 22,000 Levites was the number able to take the place of the firstborn among all the people of Israel.

Dear brothers and sisters, in the daily Bible reading, we read verse by verse and do not overlook any detail. Therefore, we often encounter some difficult problems that are not easy to explain. Usually, when I encounter such a situation, I only present my personal view and do not dare to be completely certain. I hope that the saints will also seek before God and perhaps find a more convincing answer. Usually, when I encounter this kind of situation, my personal practice is to find the answer that is presently most convincing, but not make a final conclusion. I leave room for the possibility that a more complete answer may be found in the future. After all, human beings are limited and cannot fully understand God's word. We can only leave a certain amount of room and ask God to continue to show grace and give light, so that we may understand His word more fully.

Let us pray together: Lord, thank You. In the Bible, You speak in such detail concerning the duties of Moses, Aaron, and Aaron's sons, as well as the duties of the three major families of the Levites. We see that God's division of labor is so complete and detailed. God places great value on the tabernacle and on every kind of service within the tabernacle, and the tabernacle is a type of the church today. Help us also, as we read Numbers, to learn how to serve in the church, especially

to develop our gifts through service. When our gifts are perfected, we will be able to see God's calling upon us. May God bless the church where I am and my church life. I pray in the holy name of the Lord Jesus Christ.