

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

Numbers 18: 21-32

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 18. Today we read from verse 21 to verse 32.

Among the Israelites in the Old Testament, those who were separated out to serve God could not have an inheritance, because God was their inheritance, God was their portion. God did not want them to labor and toil for their livelihood; God wanted them to be able to serve God with single-hearted devotion. As for their needs in daily living, God would surely take care of them.

Yesterday we read how God takes care of the priests' living: of the heave offerings that the Israelites present to God — that is, among the offerings which the Israelites present to God according to the regulations of the offerings and which are separated as holy — the portion that does not pass through the fire, the part that remains, is to be given to the priests. Of such offerings, some the priests must eat in the outer court of the tabernacle of meeting, and some may be taken home and shared with their families.

God then listed five major categories of offerings separated as holy and given to the priests. Because the priests, at the time of their consecration to the holy office, had already been anointed, they belong completely to God and are God's. Therefore, among the offerings the people present to God, after God has first enjoyed the sweet-aroma offering made by fire, all that remains is given to the priests. Next, from verse 21 to verse 32, God charges how the living of the Levites is to be cared for.

Verse 21: "Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting."

After the Israelites entered the good land, they obtained the land as an inheritance and began to labor. Of the harvest they gained through their toil, whether crops or livestock, they were to offer a tenth, and this is the tithe. The tithe is presented to God, and God gives this presented tithe to the sons of Levi as an inheritance. The Israelites labor in the fields and orchards, and the Levites labor in the tabernacle of meeting; the tithe the Israelites present, God bestows on the Levites, in return for their work.

The first time the tithe is mentioned in the Bible is in Genesis 14:17-20. The background is that Abraham rescued his nephew Lot, defeated the four kings, and on his triumphant return passed through the Valley of Shaveh; Melchizedek king of Salem came out with bread and wine to meet Abraham, and blessed Abraham. Abraham then took a tenth of what he had gained and gave it to Melchizedek. Melchizedek is a type of Christ, and Abraham established the first precedent of offering a tenth to the Lord.

After this, Abraham's grandson Jacob left home, and on the road to Padan Aram passed through Bethel, and there he had a strange dream: he dreamed of a ladder set up on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God ascending and descending on it, and God standing above the ladder blessing Jacob. After Jacob awoke, he made a vow to God, in Genesis 28:22, "And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You." Later, Jacob's 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel. Now God ordains that the Israelites of the 12 tribes are all to present a tenth of the produce of the land to the Levites who have been separated out to serve God.

Verses 22-23: "Hereafter the children of Israel shall not come near the tabernacle of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. But the Levites shall perform the work of the tabernacle of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity; it shall be a statute

forever, throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance."

The Levites were to be separated out, to handle the affairs of the tabernacle of meeting in the tabernacle of meeting; they were also to be responsible for guarding the tabernacle of meeting, lest the Israelites intrude into the tabernacle of meeting by mistake, sin against God, and be struck down by God. God once again charged the Israelites not to come near the tabernacle of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. The Levites were to handle the affairs of the tabernacle of meeting, including guarding the tabernacle of meeting, and they were to bear the iniquity of trespassing against the sanctuary. Therefore, they were to guard it strictly and not let the Israelites approach the tabernacle of meeting. This was to be a statute forever for the Israelites throughout their generations. The Levites were not to have an inheritance among the Israelites.

Verse 24: "For the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer up as a heave offering to the LORD, I have given to the Levites as an inheritance; therefore I have said to them, 'Among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.'"

The Israelites entered the good land and divided the land as an inheritance; the Levites could not have an inheritance — they were separated out to serve God in place of the firstborn males among the Israelites. A tenth of the produce of the Israelites was to be presented to God as a heave offering, and God gave this heave offering to the Levites as an inheritance. In this way the Levites would not be entangled by secular affairs and could handle the affairs of the tabernacle of meeting with single-hearted devotion. They handle God's affairs on behalf of the people of Israel, and for the people to supply their needs in daily living is also only right and proper. In addition, the Levites were also to live scattered among the 12 tribes, bearing the responsibility of teaching the people to fear God.

This is God's charge to the Israelites in the Old Testament age. When the Israelites feared God and presented a tenth as a heave offering according to God's charge, the living of the Levites should have been relatively abundant. But the Israelites of

the Old Testament were frequently a stiff-necked people, and did not present a tenth according to God's charge, and therefore the supply of the Levites was frequently insufficient. Later the southern kingdom of Judah was destroyed, and the Israelites were carried captive to Babylon, and it was not until Cyrus king of Persia held power that the Israelites were permitted to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Among those who returned, the number of Levites was truly pitifully small, less than one percent, because in Babylon they had begun to acquire property and learn to do business, living an abundant life, and therefore were unwilling to return.

Ezra led the second return to Jerusalem, and in Ezra 8:15 it is specially recorded: "Now I gathered them by the river that flows to Ahava, and we camped there three days. And I looked among the people and the priests, and found none of the sons of Levi there." Among those who returned at the start there was actually not a single Levite! Therefore, Ezra took special pains to go and search for Levites.

Dear brothers and sisters, if we put ourselves in their place and think about it, would we be willing to lay down a comfortable life in Babylon, cast aside an abundant estate, and return to the temple in Jerusalem to engage in the service of the Levites? Of course, by the New Testament, Peter tells us that every saint has the status of a priest and can come directly to serve God. However, in the church there are still many affairs that need someone to take responsibility for them; the Old Testament principle of the division of labor between the priests and the Levites — how should it be applied in the New Testament? Today we will not expand on it; tomorrow we will spend time specially to fellowship about the principles revealed in this chapter, and how, in the New Testament, we should apply them in the church.

Verses 25-26: "Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak thus to the Levites, and say to them: "When you take from the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them as your inheritance, then you shall offer up a heave offering of it to the LORD, a tenth of the tithe.'"

Earlier it was first mentioned that the Israelites were to present a tenth of their produce to God as a heave offering, and that God would give this tithe offering to the Levites; this was God's charge to Aaron, and Aaron was to tell it to the Levites. Beginning with this verse, it is God's charge to Moses concerning the tithe of the Levites. Here we see how exceedingly considerate God's handling is: because the tithe of the Levites was to be given to the priests, and Aaron, being the high priest, might find such words hard to bring himself to say; whereas Moses was the leader recognized by all, and also the one closest to God, therefore God charged Moses to tell the Levites: the tenth which the Israelites present is what God has given them as an inheritance; after they have taken this tenth, they must again take out a tenth of it as a heave offering to present to God. The Israelites are to present a tenth, and the Levites are also to present a tenth; the next verse tells us the reason.

Verses 27-28: "And your heave offering shall be reckoned to you as though it were the grain of the threshing floor and as the fullness of the winepress. Thus you shall also offer a heave offering to the LORD from all your tithes which you receive from the children of Israel, and you shall give the LORD's heave offering from it to Aaron the priest."

The Israelites entered the good land and obtained the land as an inheritance, and through their labor they were to take a tenth from the grain of their threshing floor and the wine of their winepress and present it as a heave offering to God; God then gave this tithe to the Levites. After the Levites received it, it was reckoned as the wages for their work in the tabernacle of meeting — this was the grain of their threshing floor, the wine of their winepress. Therefore they, just like the Israelites, were also to take out a tenth and present it as a heave offering to God, and God would give this heave offering to Aaron. That is to say, the Israelites present a tenth to the Levites, and the Levites must in turn present a tenth to the priests.

Verse 29: "Of all your gifts you shall offer up every heave offering due to the LORD, from all the best of them, the consecrated part of them."

God exhorted over and over again: of all the gifts the Israelites present to the Levites, the Levites are to take out the best tenth, separate it as holy, and present it to God as a heave offering. Whatever is presented to God must be the best; only this is a heave offering.

Dear brothers and sisters, by the New Testament, the principle is still the same: we are to present our best to God; that is to say, we are to put God in the first place. If we want to offer our time to God, we must offer our best time to God, and not wait until we are so busy that we are utterly exhausted and then offer God the leftover time; if we want to offer our finances to God, we must, when we receive an amount, first set aside the part offered to God, and then plan how to use the rest; if we want to offer our talents to God, we must with single-hearted devotion first handle God's affairs, and afterward, if there is energy to spare, go and handle other affairs.

What God wants is our best. Being able to present the best to God is accepted by God, and will bring forth God's abundant blessing. The prophet Malachi challenges us in just this way, in Malachi 3:10: "'Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this,' says the LORD of hosts, 'if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it.'" The tithe that is due is for the sake of thanksgiving, and only the person who is truly thankful can come to know God's riches.

Verses 30-31: "Therefore you shall say to them: 'When you have lifted up the best of it, then the rest shall be accounted to the Levites as the produce of the threshing floor and as the produce of the winepress. You may eat it in any place, you and your households, for it is your reward for your work in the tabernacle of meeting.'"

God wanted Moses once again to say to the Levites: if they take out the best from the tenth they receive and lift it up as a heave offering to present to God, then what they receive is reckoned as the grain of their threshing floor, the wine of their

winepress. This is what God bestows on them as the wages for their work in the tabernacle of meeting. The Israelites labor in the fields and orchards, and they labor in the tabernacle of meeting — there is no difference; and their family members may then enjoy in any place the wages gained through their toil.

Among the portions the priests receive, many are what remains after passing through the offering by fire, and the priests must eat them in a holy place; the wages the Levites receive are what is gained through their toil, and therefore there is no restriction of persons or of place — just like the Israelites, they may enjoy it together with their families, in any place.

Verse 32: "And you shall bear no sin because of it, when you have lifted up the best of it. But you shall not profane the holy gifts of the children of Israel, lest you die."

Of what the Levites gain through their toil, they must present the best tenth of it as a heave offering to God; otherwise they will bear the sin of profaning the holy things, and this is a very serious warning. What the Israelites gain through their labor, presenting a tenth of it, is to give thanks for God's abundant bestowal; if the Israelites do not present the tithe that is due, the prophet Malachi, in Malachi 3:8, rebukes the Israelites as robbing God's offerings, and therefore they do not obtain God's blessing.

But the Levites are different: it is the heave offering of the tenth that the Israelites present, and God gives this heave offering as the wages of the Levites. The essence of the heave offering is a holy thing presented by the Israelites to God, and the handling of holy things must be according to God's regulations, that is, the Levites must take out the best tenth of it as a heave offering to present to God, otherwise it is profaning holy things and will bring about death. With the same tithe, God's requirement of the Levites is much stricter than of the Israelites, and this is also a very good reminder to the New Testament saints.

The tithe is a commandment God gave to the Israelites in the Old Testament. By the New Testament, every person who has received grace and been saved is a person whom Jesus Christ redeemed at a heavy price, with His precious blood, and therefore we are all people who belong to Christ. Paul says in Romans 12:1: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." Paul wants us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice; that is to say, our whole person, including our time, our abilities, and everything we possess — the sovereignty over all of it is God's, and God has entrusted it to us to manage. Therefore, the offering we ought to make is not the Old Testament tenth, but should be ten-tenths, because everything of ours belongs to God.

However, in practice, Paul teaches us this way in 2 Corinthians 9:6-7, "But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver." On the one hand Paul encourages us to be generous, because he who sows sparingly reaps sparingly and he who sows bountifully reaps bountifully; but on the other hand he also tells us not to give grudgingly, not of necessity, but according to what one purposes in one's heart, giving cheerfully.

In 1 Corinthians 16:2, "On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come." Here Paul goes a step further and teaches practically: at every Lord's Day gathering, one is to lay out the amount that one has purposed and set aside. As for how much this amount should be? The Old Testament tithe can serve as a reference, but it cannot become a regulation.

If every saint strictly practiced the tithe, the church would absolutely never be in lack. Therefore some churches place great emphasis on the tithe and frequently teach it from the pulpit, with the result that the seekers among them all feel doubly pressured and are unwilling to come again. If the church could follow Paul's charge, with each person offering willingly and cheerfully, and the church never in lack — would this not be better?

Offering is our thanksgiving to God, and naturally it should be laid out willingly and cheerfully. The more seasoned one's life, the higher the proportion that will be laid out; conversely, the more willing one is to lay out, the faster his life naturally grows. May God have mercy on us.

Let us pray together: Lord, thank You for letting us see, through Numbers chapter 18, the boundaries of responsibility God set for the priests and the Levites in the Old Testament, as well as the supply for their living. We ask God also to grant us wisdom to know how to apply this in the New Testament church. We have all received exceedingly great grace; help us to learn to offer in thanksgiving, and through offering to obtain growth in life, so that we may experience God's more abundant blessing. Bless the church I belong to, that it may not fall into regulations, but that in love the saints may supply one another and the church be in no lack. If we can be faithful in these small things, God will bestow more abundant blessing. Keep the church I belong to. We pray in the holy name of the Lord Jesus Christ.