

## The Priesthood Of God (Part 2)

### Continuing the Foundation

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 26-Sep-09; Sermon #958

The Bible has used metaphors to help us better understand aspects of our calling. Last Sabbath I used the Feast of Trumpets to expound on Paul's use of a soldier as a metaphor. A soldier depicts the devotion to duty in spite of the suffering that is inherent in our calling. Our suffering becomes a reality as we sacrifice human nature and misinformation that so strongly wants to remain in control of our life.

Paul vividly reminds us that a soldier's main responsibility is to serve the interest of the government that enlisted him to its service. In order to do this, Paul states that the soldier must avoid engaging himself in the affairs of this life. In other words, he must be single-minded in devotion to his duty. Paul also told us that we must avoid close attachments with the uncalled who strongly exhibit the spirit of this world. "Evil communications corrupt good manners." We are involved in a spiritual war against wily foes striving to break our devotion to Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God.

Today we are going to be moving another step forward into a major portion of what we are called to accomplish.

Turn now to Revelation 5:9-10 which we will use as a launching pad.

**Revelation 5:9-10** And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth."

As disciples of Christ, we are devoted to a movement that will culminate with us being priests of the Most High God, and I believe it is time we have a clear understanding of the requirements of that responsibility so that our responsibilities can be much more focused.

In the previous sermon, we delved into the history of the foundation of priesthood, and it is clear that its roots go all the way back to Adam and Eve. Cain and Abel are the first of mankind shown making sacrifices. The Bible's narrative introduces them sacrificing without any formal list of instruction. The conclusion has to be that God personally and verbally communicated these instructions to them, because Genesis 4 clearly states that He corrected Cain for deviating from what he had been told. This is important, because it shows that priesthood and sacrificing did not arise because men saw a need for them. Sacrificing arose because God commanded it. It was His intention from the beginning that mankind respond to Him in clearly defined ways important to His purpose.

We touched on Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek. It is in this episode that the term "priest" appears for the first time in the Bible. This event gives us interesting insight into Abraham's time, because of the fact that Abraham *clearly* deferred to Melchizedek. Despite the presence of other kings, Abraham *yielded* to Melchizedek in a spiritual way as shown by his tithing of the spoils of war to Melchizedek. Tithing is a religious act.

This event shows that there existed in Abraham's time, and where Abraham lived, some sort of formal worship of the Most High God. My emphasis is on the word "formal," meaning "ordered and established." It was not every man doing for himself whatever *he* thought was best. There was a priest there. Now because there was a priest there—a Priest of the Most High God, who obviously was not one with the five kings—it indicates that there must have been a community of worshippers of the Most High God *besides* Abraham whom Melchizedek served as High Priest. My guess would be that these worshippers came from two sources.

Turn to Genesis 14. That is where the Melchizedek event takes place. I believe that these worshippers came from two sources, and I think you might be surprised at the possibility concerning the number of people who might have been there.

**Genesis 14:14** Now when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his three hundred and eighteen trained servants who were born in his own house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.

Three-hundred eighteen servants went to war with Abraham. These servants were Abraham's own. They did not come from the other kings that were involved here. If each of those men had a wife, that would bring the group in Abraham's colony to over six hundred. If there was even one child for each pair of adults, we are getting very close to one thousand people working for and dependent upon Abraham.

In addition, there may have been others besides the three hundred eighteen who were trained in specialized discipline. Is it possible that the three hundred eighteen were only soldiers? I have to shrug my shoulders on that. I do not know. Is it possible that there were others who were shepherds, and others who were veterinary-types who took care of sick sheep and sick cattle? I do not know. We are looking here at what was no small number of people who could have been involved in the worship of the Most High God, because very often in those days trained workers and so forth went the way of their master in terms in religion.

It is no wonder, brethren, that Genesis 13:2 says that Abraham was *very* rich. In addition, Lot was not all that far away, and there is a possibility that Lot and some of his people were also part of that group. There is also a possibility that there were others besides Abraham and Lot's group who may have been worshipping the Most High God. You will recall in Genesis 12:6 it tells us that when Abraham came into the land, the Canaanites were already there.

The Canaanites were descendants of Ham, Noah's son, and thus it is entirely possible that descendants of Shem, who *did* worship the Most High God, also settled there rather than in Babylon following the Flood. Remember that these people very likely knew where Eden was located, and this knowledge might have drawn them into that area; thus Abraham, who was called by God from the area of Babylon, was then sent to the land that became the Promised Land to be those people's human leader, and thus the presence of Melchizedek and Abraham's familiarity with Him. There is a lot there for just a couple of lines, but that possibility is strong because of Melchizedek's presence there.

Now leaving Genesis 14, we went forward to the time of Moses. I want you to turn with me to Exodus 12. This is instruction for the Passover.

**Exodus 12:3** Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying: ‘On the tenth of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household.

**Exodus 12:6** Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight.

This very first Passover observation took place before the making of the Old Covenant and the formal appointment of a priesthood for the newly-forming nation. Though it is unstated, but clearly implied, the spiritual head of each family acted in the place of an officially-appointed priesthood. In other words, we are probably looking at what was a traditional practice.

Now we are going to go Exodus 19. Remember what is taking place here. In Exodus 20 God came down on the Mount and He gave the Ten Commandments.

**Exodus 19:21-25** And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to gaze at the LORD, and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them.” But Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for You warned us, saying, ‘Set bounds around the mountain and consecrate it.’” Then the LORD said to him, “Away! Get down and then come up, you and Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest He break out against them.” So Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.

In Exodus 12 it was Passover time. Now here we are, in Exodus 19, and the time element is Pentecost, roughly fifty days after leaving Egypt. Israel was not formally molded into a nation and would not be until the making of the Old Covenant, which still lay ahead and was not done until Exodus 24. Even after that was accomplished, it would still be another nine months later that the tabernacle would be erected and the need for a formal priesthood clearly established. However, two of those verses we just read showed that Israel *already* had priests operating among the people. Now who *were* they, and where did *they* come from?

I think that they were most likely the same group that slew the lamb and hosted that first Passover observation shown in Exodus 12. I believe that because of the weight of heavily implied evidence throughout the Bible, almost from its beginning to end (to the end of the Old Testament especially) that they were a body of men who were most likely first-born sons. Symbolically and socially, “firstborn” almost without fail indicates prominence and leadership.

Go now to Exodus 13. This is a very interesting little subject here.

**Exodus 13:11-16** “And it shall be, when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and your fathers, and gives it to you, that you shall set apart to the LORD all that open the womb, that is, every firstborn that comes from an animal which you have; the males shall be the LORD’s. But every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you will not redeem it, then you shall break its neck. And all the firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. So it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What is this?’ that you shall say to him, ‘By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And it came to pass, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the LORD killed

all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all males that open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.' It shall be as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, for by strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt."

I think it is good that we stop and take a closer look at this because some aspects of it may be of special interest to us under the New Covenant. A special interest may be the New Testament spiritual application of the word "firstborn."

Exodus 12 and 13 reveal that the commanded observance of Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread and the dedication of the firstborn to God all existed before the making of the Old Covenant. Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread did not even exist until God redeemed Israel from Egypt. However, every commentator who writes about the dedication of the firstborn to God says that it began many centuries previous to leaving Egypt, but it is here, in Exodus 13, formally attached to the redemption from Egypt to further accentuate the redemption's significance. Now how did it do this?

These same commentators also say that the appointment of the firstborn son as family leader and priest was not limited to the Israelites, but virtually all nations followed this practice. Because of this command in Exodus 13—the practice of the dedication of the firstborn—the Israelites were to never forget that because God redeemed them from Egypt, He *owned* them, and they had to give up their firstborn son. They had to give up the firstborn of animals. The first birth of animals and humans could have taken place at any time during of the year, and when that occurred they were reminded once again that their life and liberty belonged to God.

This was not something that took place only once in a year. It took place whenever a firstborn was born. This might have been in June. It might have been in September. This might have been in January. So whenever in the year this took place, they were to be reminded that their lives belonged to God because of the redemption of them from Egypt.

Let me clarify something. The firstborn belonged to God, but they could redeem the firstborn for five shekels. They got their firstborn sons back from God so he did not leave the family, but it still did not break the fact that God owned them. We will see how in just a little bit. Remember, this is all attached to the priesthood.

**Numbers 3:6-13** "Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him. And they shall attend to his needs and the needs of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of meeting, to do the work of the tabernacle. Also they shall attend to all the furnishings of the tabernacle of meeting, and to the needs of the children of Israel, to do the work of the tabernacle. And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are given entirely to him from among the children of Israel. So you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall attend to their priesthood; but the outsider [anyone outside of Aaron's family] who comes near shall be put to death." Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be Mine, because all the firstborn are Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I am the LORD."

At this time the Levites replaced the firstborn sons in regard only to direct duties at the tabernacle. However, this did not end the practice of the dedication of the firstborn. It continued on, but the firstborn's tabernacle duties were limited. However, their leadership responsibilities to their family and local community continued right on apart from the tabernacle, or later the temple. God just shifted the responsibility away from the directly religious to family and community responsibility. They were to take leadership positions in those areas.

What we are beginning to see here is a shift in the meaning and use of the term "firstborn" in the Bible. The term "firstborn," in time, actually becomes a title in the Bible. It is a title of honor—very great honor. One thing to understand is that just because a person is, or is not, literally firstborn, has no constant bearing on whether they will carry the title. In other words, you did not have to be the firstborn to be given the title "firstborn." I told you a shift in the usage of the word "firstborn" has taken place, and the meaning shifted as well.

**Genesis 49:3-4** "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it—he went up to my couch.

Do you see what is happening here? Reuben lost the title of firstborn even though he literally *was* the firstborn.

**I Chronicles 5:1-2** Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel—he was indeed the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, so that the genealogy is not listed according to the birthright; yet Judah prevailed over his brothers, and from him came a ruler, although the birthright was Joseph's.

The birthright always went to the firstborn. It did not go to Reuben because he disqualified himself. Instead, the firstborn's birthright went to Joseph. Incidentally, probably at that time when Joseph was born into Jacob's family, the commentators feel that he was actually the seventh one born. So he was way down the list. There is no doubt he had *the* outstanding characteristics in the family—even greater than Judah. God chose the family of Judah to be the one from whom the Messiah would come, and the king-line would come, but the birthright (the right of birth), which belonged to the firstborn, went to Joseph.

This is not the first time this happened. It happened quite frequently, as we will see in just a minute.

**Genesis 25:31-34** But Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright as of this day." And Esau said, "Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?" Then Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Esau was literally firstborn, and those privileges went to him, but Jacob ended up holding them, and in the long-run proved to be the better man; so somewhat like Joseph, he became the legal firstborn even though he was not literally the firstborn.

These next verses speak of Ephraim and Manasseh. There was a direct divine intervention here.

**Genesis 48:17-19** Now when Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him; so he took hold of his father's hand to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head." But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great; but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations."

So Ephraim displaced Manasseh as the firstborn even though Manasseh was literally the firstborn. Now this begins to really get interesting. We are going to go to Jeremiah 31:9. This is talking about Israel being re-gathered and on the way back to the Promised Land.

**Jeremiah 31:9** They shall come with weeping, and with supplications I will lead them. I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters, in a straight way in which they shall not stumble; for I am a Father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn.

Now we have an entire nation as firstborn. You can see it shifting away from what it originally had been.

**Exodus 4:21-22** And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD: "Israel is My son, My firstborn."

There the entire nation of Israel is His firstborn! Can you see the way it is being used? It shifts all over the place, but yet it is heading in a very definite direction. You can see very clearly that the term is indicating eminence. It is indicating prominence.

We are going to go now to Isaiah 19. We will look forward a few years to something that is coming, and it is tied to what we just read in Exodus 4. This is wonderful to think of. It is very much like Jeremiah 31. It is talking about the restoration of Israel.

**Isaiah 19:23-25** In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will serve with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be one of three with Egypt and Assyria—a blessing in the midst of the land, whom the LORD of hosts shall bless, saying, "Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance."

Some Bibles even translate "Israel My inheritance" as "birthright," "My firstborn," but the *NKJV* chose to do it with "inheritance," showing prominence.

You should be able to see, as we move toward New Covenant time, that "firstborn" has little to do with actual birth order. In fact, except for Jesus' physical birth, it has nothing to do with physical birth whatever in its usages in the New Testament.

Turn with me to Colossians 1. Note the way it is used here. It is describing Jesus Christ.

**Colossians 1:15-17** He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and

invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

This ought to be pretty clear. The context is showing Christ's precedence in terms of time and supremacy, in terms of rank over the entire creation. Now consider this. Our Creator God, our Savior, **was not born** ! This is taking time all the way back before the creation of the heavens and the earth. He existed from eternity. He was not born, and yet He is called "firstborn," because, by this time in the Bible, "firstborn" has everything to do with rank, supremacy, and dignity of office. "Firstborn" has become a title that extols, showing, in this case Christ, the active One in charge of all things.

Now here comes something from my personal experience. Herbert Armstrong warned the ministry, in my presence, not to use a word's definition as proof of a doctrine. He stated that it was too indefinite, because word-meanings change through usage. Instead, he said to understand the word's usage in context. That is what we are doing.

God was not born, and yet our God, our Creator, our Savior, is called "firstborn." Do you see it is a title extolling His preeminence over everything?

Now back to Colossians 1. This continues on.

**Colossians 1:18** And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

The term does not suddenly change meaning at all. Same kind of context. Now it is showing ranking—that is, supremacy and dignity of office in terms of the *spiritual* creation. The first couple of verses show the physical creation. Now it is the *spiritual* creation, so that in all things, as Paul says in the last phrase, "He may have the preeminence."

From here this really gets interesting.

**Revelation 3:14** "And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God:

Of course, He was the Beginning. We just saw it all the way back there in Colossians 1. That is why He has the preeminence. He is "the Beginning of the creation of God." He was the Beginning of the physical creation. He is also the Beginning of the spiritual one. His preeminence, brethren, is universal. It is over all things pertaining to God's purpose.

Now where do we fit into this? I am only going to show you this briefly in this sermon. I am going to expound on it more at the Feast of Tabernacles, God willing.

Turn to Ephesians 1:3. This is quite an honor.

**Ephesians 1:3-5** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.

Let us go back to verse 3. There is a two-letter phrase we are going to look at.

Verse 3 says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places *in Christ*.” That is a very important little phrase which has awesome meaning. This little phrase has a direct connection to verses 22 and 23.

**Ephesians 1:22-23** And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Paul is saying that we are now part of Christ’s body. We fill Him to the full. When we receive God’s Spirit, we become a part of Jesus Christ. And as such then, very much of the supremacy, the responsibility, and the dignity of office also passes through us.

For example, we share in His inheritance of the earth. We become co-heirs with Him. Christ is our High Priest, and we become priests under Him, and thus part of the Melchizedek priesthood. In addition, we also become part of the Firstborn, and are considered “firstborn” right along with Jesus Christ. Do you want proof? I will give you proof.

**Hebrews 12:18-23** For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. (For they could not endure what was commanded: “And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.” And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.”) But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect.

The entire church, brethren, is now the firstborn. That is awesome! It is almost unspeakable the honor that is accorded us simply because we are “*in Christ*.” It does not end here. Wait until you hear the sermons at the Feast about how much this means to us. So “firstborn” is, by this time, completely a title, and those of us who were born literally “out of due season,” have been made by God to be “firstborn in Christ”—just like Joseph, just like Ephraim, and any others who were put in that office and given that dignity by God.

Now from just a few scriptures that we have looked at so far it has already become clearly established that the act of sacrifice is central to the worship of and obedience to God, and that priesthood is established by God to provide worshippers with guidance in those areas.

The English term “priest” has very interesting roots that are helpful to know because they give a fairly clear picture of the overall responsibilities of a priest. The term “priest,” though most often appearing in the New Testament than the Old Testament, did not come into the English language from the Hebrew language, but it came from a Greek root. Before that Greek root got to English, it had to travel through Latin before becoming part of English religious terminology.

The English word “priest” has the same root as Greek words, transliterated into “presby,” as in “Presbyterian.” Our modern English word “priest” is a modification of the Greek word *presbyter*, which means “elder” or “older,” but it is actually joined with another Greek word that means “leader



of cattle.” Thus the term that is forming here indicates an older man who leads a religious group. However, a fuller sense of the picture that we get of a priest needs some factors that are derived from Hebrew and Latin.

In the New Testament the word used in Greek is *hiereus*. Transliterated, that is “*hee-er-yooce*.” It is #2409 in *Strong’s*. It means, “one who offers sacrifice and has charge of those operations.” Now “high priest” is “*ar-khee-er-yuce*.” It is #749 in *Strong’s*. It literally means “high” or “chief” priest.

The word “priest,” either alone, or qualified by “high” or “chief,” appears around 750 times in the Old Testament, and 80 times in the New Testament. By comparison, “Levite” only appears 80 times in the Old Testament, and only 3 in the New. By way of comparison, “king” appears 2259 times.

The Hebrew word for priest is not *presbyter*, but *cohen*. Most things like *Strong’s* and *Vine’s* spell it *kohen*. An awful lot of Jews in the United States spell it *cohen*. I do not know where they got their last name, but it may mean that they are of a Levitical family. Not proof-positive, but there is that possibility.

The root word of *cohen* is *kun*. That word means “to stand,” and that a priest, in the Old Testament sense, is one who is authorized to stand before God as His servant. However, the thought of standing does not end there. He is also one who stands before the worshippers worshipping God; and thus, “to stand” also carries with it the sense of officiating or conducting a meeting. It also carries with it the sense of mediating. A priest—a *cohen*—is one who stands between God and man.

It is right here that the Latin ties to the English word “priest” come to our aid. The Latin for “priest” is *pontiff*. *Pont* means “bridge.” *Pontiff* essentially means “a bridgemaker.” “Pontiff-Maximus” is the chief bridge-maker; the Pope. A much clearer picture is emerging. A priest is, in general, perceived as an older man who stands before God as His servant while leading a group of worshippers. He instructs and mediates between them, helping to build spiritual bridges between God and the worshipper.

Thus, in the Hebrew, Greek, and even Latin taken together, is one of a general outline of a priest. He is one who is more mature in the faith, appointed to stand before God, ministering to the worshippers of God. His standing position is between God and the worshippers. In this position his most obvious activities are to perform instructive, sacrificial, ritualistic, and mediatorial duty.

We have not lost track of the Levites yet. A little bit on them. The name “Levite” as used in the Old Testament is derived from a root that means “to attach” or “to be joined.” A Levite helps people become attached to God. It appears that God was planning ahead when Levi was born and named. He probably inspired it.

Both Moses and Aaron (who was the first high priest and also the head of the family that always occupied that high-ranking-priest position) were Levites. Moses was a Levite. Aaron was a Levite. The rest of the Levitical family was always attached to the priests’ responsibilities, to assist them, even though they were not priests.

**Numbers 3:12-13** “Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of

Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be Mine, because all the firstborn are Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I am the LORD.”

**Numbers 3:41** And you shall take the Levites for Me—I am the LORD—instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the livestock of the children of Israel.”

**Numbers 3:45** “Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of their livestock. The Levites shall be Mine: I am the LORD.

I think you are seeing that God was pretty insistent about these people being attached to the high priest and to Him. This was no minor responsibility.

**Numbers 8:14-22** Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the children of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine. After that the Levites shall go in to service the tabernacle of meeting. So you shall cleanse them and offer them like a wave offering. For they are wholly given to Me from among the children of Israel; I have taken them for Myself instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the children of Israel. For all the firstborn among the children of Israel are Mine, both man and beast; on the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them to Myself. I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn of the children of Israel. And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the children of Israel, to do the work for the children of Israel in the tabernacle of meeting, and to make atonement for the children of Israel, that there be no plague among the children of Israel when the children of Israel come near the sanctuary.” Thus Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children of Israel did to the Levites; according to all that the LORD commanded Moses concerning the Levites, so the children of Israel did to them. And the Levites purified themselves and washed their clothes; then Aaron presented them like a wave offering before the LORD, and Aaron made atonement for them to cleanse them. After that the Levites went in to do their work in the tabernacle of meeting before Aaron and his sons; as the LORD commanded Moses concerning the Levites, so they did to them.

Do you know that whenever the Israelites marched through the wilderness at times, and they set up the tabernacle, nobody except the Levites was allowed anymore than a Sabbath day’s journey close to the tabernacle? The Israelites could not set up their tents any closer than a Sabbath day’s journey away. This was except for the priests and the Levites. That was really a position of honor given to the entire tribe of Levites. You can maybe understand why this event took place. Turn to Numbers 16. This is Korah and his group.

**Numbers 16:4-7** So when Moses heard it, he fell on his face; and he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, “Tomorrow morning the LORD will show who is His and who is holy, and will cause him to come near to Him. That one whom He chooses He will cause to come near to Him. Do this: Take censers, Korah and all your company; put fire in them and put incense in them before the LORD tomorrow, and it shall be that the man whom the LORD chooses is the holy one. You take too much upon yourselves, you sons of Levi!”

This group of men—Korah, Dathan, and Abiram—lusted after that honor that had been given to the tribe of Levi, and of course that included Moses and Aaron and all of the Levites. Korah's group's desire was so great that it drove them to rebellion against God, and they all ended up dead.

God's larger intention, if we would turn back to Exodus 19:5-6, would show that the covenant-people were to be a nation of priests, and because God is holy, the people that are in His possession must be holy.

The appointed priests were to discharge their duty on the behalf of the whole community, but that entire tribe of Levi was the representative of the rest of the nation before God to help them grow in their special relationship with God. In other words, the entire tribe of Levi was appointed, commissioned by God, to serve Him in helping to make the rest of Israel holy so that they could become a nation, a kingdom of priests. The principle of sacrifice plays a major role in one becoming holy, because human nature must be sacrificed and put to death.

**Leviticus 11:44-45** For I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth. For I am the LORD who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

This is spoken not just to the Levites, but to everybody, because this is their aim in life. If you are beginning to get the picture, because we are to be a kingdom of priests, we, brethren, have to, above all things, become holy because we cannot help people to become holy unless *we* are holy. That is what God is showing us here. Brethren, this becomes the main focus of our life if we are ever going to be a priest.

**Leviticus 19:2** “Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

**Leviticus 20:7** Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God.

**Numbers 15:37-41** Again the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel: Tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a blue thread in the tassels of the corners. And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and that you may not follow the harlotry to which your own heart and your own eyes are inclined, and that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy for your God. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God.”

The focus of this command, each place it appears, is that likeness to God in character and purpose is essential to those who would serve Him regardless of where they might be in the overall picture, but most especially in the priesthood, as we shall continue to see as the subject is developed.

I think this is a good place to stop because the next section is fairly large and there is not enough time to go into it.