

LESSONS FROM THE LEVITES

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Under the law of Moses, priests had to be not only of the tribe of Levi, but of the family of Aaron, who was the first *high* priest. The priests had assistants, who were also of the tribe of Levi but not of Aaron's family. There were three divisions of them, according to which son of Levi they were descendants of— Gershon, Kohath, or Merari. (The priestly family were descendants of Kohath, as were many other Levites who were *not* of the priestly family). We read about the duties of the Levites in Numbers chapter 3. Since, in the New Testament, all Christians are part of the priesthood of all believers, we can learn lessons applicable to us all from the duties of all the Levites.

The duties of the Gershonites were concerned mainly with the artistic parts of the tabernacle, especially the curtains woven in fine tapestry, and some of them embroidered to represent cherubim. Their duties teach us the beauty of the divine— that is, whatever is of God. The person who doesn't know God, isn't likely to see any beauty in what's of God. The beauty we're referring to is **NOT** the aesthetic beauty of highly ornamented church buildings, nor that of professional choral music, etc. It is the beauty and splendour of God Himself, and His glory. It is what makes time spent with God *delightful* to those who know Him, that causes them to love holiness and loathe sin.

The duties of the Kohathites were concerned mainly with the furniture in the tabernacle proper (that is, not the outer court) — the ark of the covenant, incense altar, table of showbread, and lampstand; and they also took care of the bronze altar at the gate of the courtyard, and the tub (laver) between that altar and the tabernacle. Furthermore, the priests were of this division of the Levites. Most of those items were those closest to what represented the immediate presence of God; and the bronze altar represented what could *bring* people to God. Their duties teach us the privilege of intimacy with God. Only the true believer can "know" God *personally*; that idea actually sounds fanciful and foolish to the unconverted. God even *invites* us to come *close* to Him. "It is good for me to come close to God" (Psalm 73:28). "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8).

It is to be noticed that the Gershonites and Merarites had wagons to transport the items they cared for, but that the Kohathites were not allowed any wagons (Numbers 7:7-9). The items that the Kohathites transported all had rings on their sides, through which poles were fitted; and they carried them by bearing the poles on their shoulders in a way that resembles how pawl-bearers carry a casket at our funerals. That method made it unnecessary to touch those items, so as to show great reverence for what represented being so close to God. Nearness to God is a privilege that we're invited to enjoy freely, but it must *never* be treated *lightly*. Also, in those days the Jews didn't know how to make vehicles with wheels; they learned that skill during the Babylonian Captivity. Any vehicles with wheels in Israel *before* the Babylonian Captivity were imported, and therefore the work of heathen hands. Though God allowed the items born by the other divisions to be transported on wagons, furniture that represented the immediate presence of God was considered too sacred to be carried by vehicles made by heathen people.

The duties of the Merarites had to do mainly with the *heavy* items, particularly the boards and sockets that formed the walls of the tabernacle proper. Their duties teach us the greatness of service— that the way to be truly great is to be the servant of all (Mark 10:44). God showed compassion for the Merarites by allowing them to have twice as many wagons (four) as He allowed the Gershonites (two). That teaches us that, though God may require arduous tasks of us, He never requires more than He equips us for.

The work of the Merarites would seem lowly in human estimation, but it was necessary to make the work of the Gershonites and Kohathites possible. They were like those who “served tables” so that the apostles could give all their time to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:1-4).

God had everything worked out so that the different divisions would complete one another whenever the nation moved on and set up camp at the next place. From Numbers 10:14-21 we learn that the camp of Judah (which included Issachar and Zebulun) left first, followed immediately by the Gershonites and Merarites. Then the camp of Reuben left, followed by the Kohathites. That order allowed the Gershonites and Merarites to arrive at the next camping site long enough ahead of the Kohathites to have the tabernacle and outer fence set up before the Kohathites arrived, and all ready for them to place the furniture they were carrying in its place. That’s a beautiful picture of fellow-believers with different functions completing one another like members in the body of Christ.

This subject can be developed much further, exploring the details of how these divisions of the Levites served; but it’s hoped that this basic insight will stimulate further research.
