

# Numbers 18-19: Godly Leadership

By  
Peter Martin  
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*“Speak to the children of Israel, and get from them a rod from each father’s house, all their leaders according to their fathers’ houses—twelve rods. Write each man’s name on his rod. “And you shall write Aaron’s name on the rod of Levi. For there shall be one rod for the head of each father’s house. “Then you shall place them in the tabernacle of meeting before the Testimony, where I meet with you. “And it shall be that the rod of the man whom I choose will blossom; thus I will rid Myself of the complaints of the children of Israel, which they make against you.”*

*-Numbers 17:2-5*

Last week we went over Numbers 16 and 17 which describes the largest rebellion of the Israelites up until this point. This rebellion was led by a coalition of religious and political figures that opposed the rule of Moses and Aaron. But unlike a traditional military coup in which the structures of power are seized by force, instead the leaders of this dissident revolution claimed to be seeking a more equitable society where the role of Moses and Aaron would be evenly distributed among the other leaders.

Last week we talked about the dangers of this type of populist uprising and why these always end in failure. We also looked at the true motives of this type of thinking that false virtue tries to hide. That far from being the “voice of the people”, as such leaders claim to be, they tend to be motivated only by envy and self-interest. As such, God condemns these leaders to the pit, the lower leaders to the flame, and those who complained of the judgement to a plague.

However, the chapter ended with an interesting section that we didn’t have time to explore last week. Far from God simply telling the children of Israel that they merely have to accept Aaron and Moses as their leaders because “He said so”, He instead reveals the heart of Moses and Aaron and establishes the purpose of true leadership and the reason for Godly hierarchy.

By causing Aaron’s rod, and only Aaron’s rod, to come back to life, God is showing that hierarchy, authority, and leadership ultimately come from Him. He also shows that this authority is made to bring life and prosperity to those who sit underneath the benevolent “rod” of their prospective authorities. As the apostle Paul later puts this point:

*“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing.”*

*-Romans 13:1-6*

This is not to say that authority is always good, the abuses of all authorities, both secular and religious, are so numerous that I don’t believe any person could possibly list them all. They exist in literally every system of authority, including the authority of Moses and Aaron, and the abuses have far-reaching and terrible consequences. But to condemn human authority and hierarchy because it is subject to corruption and abuse would be as foolish as rejecting the human body because it is subject to corruption and death. The structures in their inception and function serve a good and necessary function, but because they are run by fallible and sinful people, they are also subject to failure, scandal, and corruption.

Just like the human body though, the existence of such things shouldn’t cause us to want to tear the structures down, but to seek to purify them and hallow them the best that we can, knowing that we will never be fully successful on this side of heaven. While I think that it is certainly a worthwhile and interesting conversation to talk about which practices lead to more pure and successful systems of power, this is not what the following chapters are about. Instead of giving us a pattern for how to purify these structures, God instead explains the function and the necessity of hierarchy, using the Levitical priesthood as a holy example that explains all other structures of authority.

However, like the rest of the Mosaic books, the explanation is not given in pure and obvious prose, but instead it is given to us through narrative and ritual, which was the primary “language” of our ancestors. So for the rest of this paper we will be exploring these rituals to help us understand the purpose and the glory of good, Godly leadership, so that we might strive to become such leaders in our own lives.

# The Necessity of Hierarchy

*“And a fire came out from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense.”*

*-Numbers 16:35*

Before we dive into these passages, I did want to give a brief explanation for the necessity of hierarchy. Last week we spent some time talking about the results of destroying hierarchy and we even spoke about the curse of fire that consumed the false leaders, but we never really discussed why God structures human societies around this structure. Part of the reason is contained in the curse of fire itself.

Last week we focused on the fire as a symbol of the self-exaltant spirit of the envious rulers within the society. But there is another way to look at this symbol that is equally powerful. A unique facet of fire is that it “discriminates” aggressively when it comes into contact with other elements. To some materials, fire is destructive, and it “devours” them.

These would be flammable objects like wood, hay, and stubble. But to other objects, the first can’t consume them no matter how hot it gets. To these materials, like precious metals, the fire can only “transform” it into another state, namely by melting it. And it is in this melted state that metals can actually be purified and reshaped. This would help us understand another reason why God associates Himself with fire. Our God is a God who judges. The things that are “unworthy” to dwell in His presence are consumed, therefore, the ones who enter into His presence in an unworthy state are brought to Hell. However, the ones who have been forgiven and redeemed, the same presence that judges and consumes the unworthy, purifies and exalts those who have been made worthy.

For our purposes here, a way to understand this judgement is God showing His people the inevitability of hierarchy. Because our God has created this universe in His image, or as an expression of His own character, this means that we live in a world that naturally discriminates. And because we bear the fullest image of our Creator, human beings naturally discriminate and set up hierarchies of value.

Take physical strength as an obvious iteration of this principle. No matter how much we want everyone to be equal, there will always be some people who are stronger and faster than others. And, once again, because we naturally discriminate, human beings will always create competitions to create a hierarchy of value. We will pit athletes

against one another in order to see which one is the strongest, the fastest, or the most athletic. This is innate to our nature and it extends into every other facet.

Let's say you were deciding where to eat tonight. You would naturally gravitate towards a hierarchy of discrimination in the form of reviews. You would scrutinize the reviews of restaurants in order to make a good decision. The same would be true if you were looking for something more serious like a doctor or a lawyer. It would be foolish to pick the first person that we found, we would discriminate, we would look for hierarchies to determine which doctors and lawyers are better than others.

The same holds true for leaders. There are people who are, through natural ability and training, going to be more adept leaders. We will first use a hierarchy of vision, in other words, we will see which leader's vision is the best for us. But then we would also see how skilled are they at communicating their vision? How competent are they? Meaning how likely are they to actually accomplish their vision. These hierarchies compound upon each other until we make a decision. However, these decisions are usually made very quickly and not so thoughtfully. This is where we rely on our "guts". We get "impressions" of people, that are actually a composite of internal judgement, and we make decisions based on those impressions.

To put this point as simply as I can, a hierarchy has to be established in human society because there will always be a difference in competence and ability. But why does this difference exist? In order to understand this we have to look at God's nature. As Christians we believe that our God actually exists in a hierarchy of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

*"Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner."*

*-John 5:19*

When Jesus was accused of making Himself equal with God, He gives an explanation of how divine hierarchy works. Though the persons of the trinity are indeed autonomous, they "bow" to the Father as their source of power, authority, and direction. This gives us the biggest hint into why hierarchy is necessary. In order for harmony to exist, direct competition has to be done away with. Think about an orchestra or a band. In order for all the different parts of the band to harmonize with one another, they can't be in competition, which means that they have to have different roles.

If the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all had the exact same roles, at best they would be redundancies of one another, at worst they would be in open conflict with one another. True harmony can only exist when there is a difference in roles, and those roles will always have a hierarchy related to purpose. To use the example of the band again. In a traditional band, the most important person in the band is the lead singer, which is why they are always the most well known part of the band. The instruments are there, in some sense, to “exalt” the singer who is expressing the lyrics.

The same principle is true in say an athletic team. In football, usually the quarterback is the most well-known player, in baseball it is usually the pitcher, and in soccer this would be the “forwards” or the “strikers”. In each of these cases, the hierarchy is structured around purpose. Whatever the main goal of a system is, the more valuable certain members will be within that structure. This same basic principle repeats itself at every level of society, from families, to local communities, to nations, to empires, this will always hold true, reality will always structure itself in the form of a hierarchy.

Therefore, to deny hierarchy is actually to deny the very principle that allows for harmony. This is why it shouldn't shock us that the results of revolutions that seek to undermine hierarchy will always be chaos and increased division.

This also means that it only makes sense that when God forms His own society, this is the pattern that He overlays onto His community of saints. What is the purpose of the people of God? The answer is given in the structure. At the center of Jewish society would be the tabernacle, later, the temple. The highest purpose of the people of God has always been, and will always be, the glory of God. Therefore, it makes sense that the people who outwardly practice this reality at its highest point of realization would be at the top of this particular hierarchy.

Another facet of hierarchy is that as hierarchy rises up, the level of discrimination increases. On a football team, there are many linebackers, and multiple receivers, but there is only one quarterback on the field. The same holds true with the pitcher on a baseball team. It isn't that the other roles are in some sense “less important”, but that the hierarchy will necessarily discriminate against numbers. The less of something there is, the more valuable they become. This is why the most stable structure is a pyramid. Each level of the pyramid is, in some sense, equally important, since the structure can't exist unless every layer holds together, but as the structure ascends, the blocks get fewer and fewer on each level, making each individual piece of that level more and more valuable until you get to the absolute top which is one piece.

So at the top of Israel would not be the political power, but the religious power held by the tribe of Levi. And even in this family is a hierarchy, for only the line of Aaron could serve at the highest level of religious service, namely ministry within the tabernacle.

This is why the nation is formed not by a king coming from the line of Judah, which would happen later on, but instead it is formed by a family of priests coming from the line of Levi. Even though Moses' main function is political, it is still a primarily religious role. This is why God doesn't expect Moses to provide food for the people, as a king would be expected to do, instead God miraculously provides the food and the water. Moses is not expected to lead the troops out to battle, as a king would be expected to do, he instead prays over the battle and God gives the victory.

The church is similarly structured, for a similar reason:

*“For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.”*

*-1 Corinthians 12:12-18*

Paul writes this passage to a church experiencing fragmentation and division. Even within the service itself, the church had chaos instead of order. A big part of this disorder is found in the lack of hierarchy. The Corinthian church didn't understand this concept and so each member of the church was trying to usurp the role of other members. This created division and disunity. Paul is calling on the church to learn to live in harmony with their “gifts”. This means our place in the body is determined by our ability.

By giving the metaphor of “body” to describe this hierarchy, it negates the human tendency towards oppression and self-exaltation. Since the body functions in harmony with one another to fulfill the desires of the spirit of an individual. So in the same way the church is called to function in harmony with each other to fulfill the will of the Spirit of God who desires to move in the world through His church. But, by using this metaphor Paul is also enforcing this sense of hierarchy. All members of the body are necessary to its function, but some members are more important than others. We could live with one eye or even one kidney, but if we couldn't live without our heart.

This means that a church structure will ebb and flow, but it will always contain authority and hierarchy. There will always be people who are more qualified and competent to lead and teach the word of God, and these are the ones that the body of Christ needs to place within the proper roles. But, since the human heart is bent towards self-exaltation, those positions must guard themselves against pride and envy, which is a difficult thing to do and we will discuss that point more when we talk about Moses' fall in a couple chapters.

## Dead Tradition and Living Faith

*“Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds. Then Moses brought out all the rods from before the LORD to all the children of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod. And the LORD said to Moses, “Bring Aaron’s rod back before the Testimony, to be kept as a sign against the rebels, that you may put their complaints away from Me, lest they die.” Thus did Moses; just as the LORD had commanded him, so he did. So the children of Israel spoke to Moses, saying, “Surely we die, we perish, we all perish! “Whoever even comes near the tabernacle of the LORD must die. Shall we all utterly die?”*

*-Numbers 17:8-13*

To officially establish the line of Aaron amongst the people, God performs an interesting miracle by bringing his rod back to life. Throughout our studies in the Exodus we talked about the significance of the rods of Aaron and Moses. For the ancient person, the elder's staff was a sign of tradition, ritual, power, and identity, which is why magic is usually performed with a rod of wood, like Gandalf in Lord of the Rings or the wizard's wand. This is why God allows Moses and Aaron to perform miracles using their rods. It is a picture of God allowing His own power and authority to flow through the tradition, ritual, and identity of the Jewish people.

But in this miracle, God does something truly amazing. This miracle has more obvious implications, this is a clear allusion to the resurrection. We have something dead that returns to life and bears fruit, just as Christ died upon the cross, returned to life, and from the grave came the seed of eternal life. Even for the Israelites who would be ignorant to the fullness of this sign, this would still be a sign of encouragement and hope. The nation was facing the death of all the elders of the tribe. It would be important for the younger generation to see a sign of resurrection to give them hope for God's redemptive plan for them.

At a deeper level though, this is a sign of Aaron's role within the tribe, which is an expression of true leadership. Remember, that since Aaron's role was to tend to the Holiest part of the nation, his family becomes the extreme example of leadership for the rest of the community, and the rest of the world. So what is it that true leaders do? To put this point as simply as I can, a true leader takes dead tradition and identity and brings it to life by giving it meaning.

Let's take a simple example like national identity to flesh this point out a little more. When we are children, we inherit the traditions and the identity of those who came before us, we then embody these things through various rituals. These rituals are things like: the national anthem, the pledge of allegiance, and national holidays like the Fourth of July. For a kid, most of these rituals can be fun, or at least entertaining, but they are also "dead", meaning that they don't contain any real meaning beyond that activity themselves.

As such, these rituals can become tedious and even annoying over time. They don't really serve the child to teach them what their identity and traditions mean because they have not been "brought to life" by a good leader. What is supposed to happen is that throughout the child's life, people around them teach them the stories behind these rituals. They teach them the story of the Fourth of July and the national anthem. Maybe they even take them to see various historic sites, all while building a genuine sense of national pride and identity. As this process occurs, these rituals don't go away, but instead they are *filled* with significance and meaning. Like the almond branch, what once was dead, now bears seeds that grow up in the individual and create a culture of national identity.

This is an aside, but this is actually where we get our term "culture" from. The word culture comes from the Latin word "colere" which means to tend, guard, till, or cultivate, meaning that it was an agricultural term. This makes sense, in order to grow in our identity we need roots, and in order to have roots, we need to have soil to plant ourselves in and our growth needs to be tended by these cultural institutions and practices. This would be why our own national identity is dying. The institutions have not been tended to, the stories have not been handed down, or they have been distorted, and the practices are widely ignored. To put this another way, the leaders who are responsible for bringing the dead tradition back to life have failed in their practice.

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl once said "Those who have a "why" to live can bear with any "how". What this means is that fullness of life doesn't come from external circumstances, but internal meaning. Without understanding the meaning behind our behavior, ritual becomes dead and oppressive, turning us into little more than slaves.

But when we understand *why* we do things, the ritual is filled with meaning. What was dead comes back to life and bears seeds that can nourish us and establish us. Once again, the reason why so many young people are struggling with depression and anxiety is because they aren't really "rooted" in anything.

They have been denied any deeper meaning and so they have casually discarded the dead traditions and rituals handed to them by their society. They did this not understanding that without anything to ground them, the very meaning of their lives withered.

For our purposes in this lesson, this understanding should help us greatly. Descending from this same word, "colere" also comes the words "cult" and "cultic". While these words today have broadly negative connotations, in the ancient world this was words were merely associated with religious practices and rituals and "tended" or "guarded" the faith of the believers. The apostle Paul makes essentially the same point in his letter to the churches in Galatia:

*"But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor."*

*-Galatians 3:23-25*

The law, which contains all the moral commandments as well as the religious rituals and practices was the thing that "guarded" or "cultivated" the faith of the people of God. But in itself was insufficient. The end of this process was that the law could bring us to know the living God. This didn't do away with the laws and the rituals of the Old Testament, but it brought them to life for the Jew. The early apostles continued to celebrate the Jewish holy days, and practice the same rituals, but within a new and living relationship with Christ.

The gentile believers later developed their own religious rituals and traditions with the exact same purpose, to ground and guard the faith of the believer as they get to know Christ. This means that the children within the church have their faith guided by the rituals until they come to know Christ. But those who come to know Christ later on in life are able to deepen their faith through these rituals.

But the same thing is true here that was true for the nation of Israel. Without good leaders who are able to bring these dead rituals to life, they remain dead and become oppressive or even idolatrous. This is why the term "cult" has come to mean a religious sect that controls and manipulates their followers. Instead of these rituals leading to the

living God, they instead only root the followers into the leaders, giving them increased power and authority without ever bringing glory to God. But more on this point later.

## Bearing the Guilt of Others

*“So Moses said to Aaron, “Take a censer and put fire in it from the altar, put incense on it, and take it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them; for wrath has gone out from the LORD. The plague has begun.” Then Aaron took it as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the assembly; and already the plague had begun among the people. So he put in the incense and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living; so the plague was stopped.”*

*-Numbers 16:46-48*

This is the first time Aaron uses his role as head priest for the nation. The false leaders used their religious rituals to point to themselves. Their aim was not to honor God, but to bring glory to themselves and to take the right of leadership from Aaron. But God, being gracious and merciful, allowed for Aaron to stand between the living and the dead and perform and offer incense up to God that stops the plague.

This event illustrates a key component to the role of Aaron within the nation, and by extension, the role of a true leader. This role is repeated in a more succinct manner by God a little later on:

*“Then the LORD said to Aaron: “You and your sons and your father’s house with you shall bear the iniquity related to the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity associated with your priesthood.”*

*-Numbers 18:1*

The term “iniquity” used here is a reference to sin, but not sin in terms of committing an offense or trespass, this word refers to an internal corruption. What God is referencing is the inherent state of decay the tabernacle would always be in. At a practical level, what this means is that the tabernacle, like any structure, would be subject to decay from nature. The garments of skin would wear out, various items would get dinged up and worn down over the course of time. On top of this, the tabernacle itself would need to be tended to. The lamp would need a constant refilling of oil, the incense would need to be relit, the bread of presence would need to be remade, and the water basin would need to be washed and refilled.

This “practical” care would mirror a spiritual reality. The sacrifices that kept the tabernacle holy would need to be constantly re-offered and prayers and intercession would have to be continually offered up. This is a very good metaphor for how any

system works, especially religious ones. No matter how strong a tradition is, or how rich a history might be, the story needs to be tended to. The leaders of the system have to constantly renew it. Making new traditions when necessary, but preserving the old ones as much as they can.

At a small scale, we see this in a home. Parents have to tend to their marriage, keeping the romance and affection fresh. But they also have to deal with the kids growing and changing over time. They need to adjust their schedules, make room for different activities, but always maintain the structure that grounds the children in the home.

The same principle remains true at a larger scale, like for instance in the church. The traditions of our faith need to be tended to. They need constant explanation and refreshment. The rules need to maintain the traditional structure, but must also be able to address modern concerns. And the inherent issues that happen within a community must be addressed. This includes conflict and even incompetent leadership. I like what C.S. Lewis said about the church in his book “The Pilgrim’s Regress”:

*“Her empire is always crumbling. But it never quite crumbles...”*

*-C.S. Lewis - “The Pilgrim’s Regress”*

The church is always under attack from forces within and without. The structures are always threatening to turn oppressive and idolatrous on one hand, but also to become so modern that they lose their shape, conviction, and historicity. Institutions of the church are plagued by scandal and issues, local churches split up, lose members, and even succumb to heresy. The church is always crumbling, but, by the grace of God, it never quite crumbles. It is the job of the pastors to lead the church and preserve her as best as we can. To tend to the issues and make sure the roots of our faith run deep in the source of our salvation, namely Christ.

This metaphor then becomes an example for our souls. Our souls need to be tended to. Sins have to be uprooted, and the soil must be kept free from the things that allow for toxic growth. We must tend to our resentments so they don’t become bitterness, tend to our lust, so that it doesn’t turn into habits of fantasy and indulgence, tend to our disappointments so they don’t turn to despair and so on. But the reverse is true, we must tend to our affections lest the fire of our love goes out, we must constantly renew our minds and wash ourselves from our sins, we must continuously offer up prayer and praise to God, and we must daily seek to commune with our Lord.

The religious leader is the one who tends to that for the believer. This is why it is said that Aaron stands “between life and death”. The “iniquity” of the tabernacle structure

ultimately leads to “death”, meaning the eventual collapse and destruction of the structure intended to house the presence of God. And the same is true for the human soul.

*“I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; “that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.”*

*-Deuteronomy 30:19-20*

We must always remember that the commandments, or instructions, of God are not there to undermine our authentic selves. They are not intended to “ruin our fun” or to deny us the desires of our heart. They are there to preserve our souls. The unfortunate truth is that our sin leads to death, it corrupts our souls and leads to destruction. To tend to our souls means to deal with our sins lest they corrupt us and produce death in our lives. This death doesn’t have to be as dramatic as a drug addiction or a heinous sin like murder. But it can be as simple as strained or broken relationships caused by our selfishness, lack of self-control and discipline due to lustful indulgence, or a failure to live up to our potential due to laziness and complacency. These are simple and ubiquitous “deaths” that are all too common around us.

I know in my own heart, as I battle against my sexual lust I can see how the fantasies take shape in my own complacency and selfishness. How my frustrations can turn into outbursts of wrath, and how my disappointments can make me closed off and apathetic. These are real consequences that I struggle with at all times. I can also see how easy it is to fall into complacency in my walk with God. To allow the fire that animated me towards God can grow cold. How my affection for my wife and kids can dry up. Without constant “tending” the inherent “iniquity” becomes caustic and destructive.

We talked about this in our study through the Exodus, but this is why the priests were to attend to the rituals that dealt with the sins of the people. God allowed these rituals to be “living rituals”, as in they were connected to the source of God and therefore had real efficacy in the forgiveness of the people. But it also served as a vivid symbol for how the people were to live their lives. To put it another way, the ritual didn’t supplant the responsibility of the people to live in accordance with God’s word, on the contrary, it communicated its necessity.

*“Then the LORD said to Aaron: “You and your sons and your father’s house with you shall bear the iniquity related to the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity associated with your priesthood. “Also bring with you your brethren of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you while you and your sons are with you before the tabernacle of witness. “They shall attend to your needs and all the needs of the tabernacle; but they shall not come near the articles of the sanctuary and the altar, lest they die—they and you also. “They shall be joined with you and attend to the needs of the tabernacle of meeting, for all the work of the tabernacle; but an outsider shall not come near you. “And you shall attend to the duties of the sanctuary and the duties of the altar, that there may be no more wrath on the children of Israel. “Behold, I Myself have taken your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel; they are a gift to you, given by the LORD, to do the work of the tabernacle of meeting.” “Therefore you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything at the altar and behind the veil; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood to you as a gift for service, but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.”*

*-Numbers 18:1-7*

## The Holy Life

*“And the LORD spoke to Aaron: “Here, I Myself have also given you charge of My heave offerings, all the holy gifts of the children of Israel; I have given them as a portion to you and your sons, as an ordinance forever. “This shall be yours of the most holy things reserved from the fire: every offering of theirs, every grain offering and every sin offering and every trespass offering which they render to Me, shall be most holy for you and your sons. “In a most holy place you shall eat it; every male shall eat it. It shall be holy to you.”*

*-Numbers 18:8-10*

The priest in their behavior symbolized the holy and the sacred to the people. We can see this clearly in the above “heave offering”. The heave offering was one that was burned before God and then the smoke of the offering was “waved” before the Lord. This was a picture of how mankind could take the material goods that they had, like meat and grain, and turn them into spiritual blessings to God. This is what the smoke represented, it was a sign of the spiritual that ascended up to God.

The priests themselves were an example of that. Unlike the other tribes, they didn’t receive any land as an inheritance, they also couldn’t “work” for a living, but instead were “paid” through the sacrificial system. The tithes of the people gave them their

finances and off-cuts from the sacrifices were what they ate. They lived a life that was “holy” unto the Lord in a way that no one else could.

But this wasn't because the priests were encouraging other people to be just like them in a literal sense, but instead it was the priest's job to teach the people how they could take the “common” or the “secular” and to make it holy. A simple example would be the tithing system. The work that someone did which would be secular, now had a portion of it given up to God. This was not the totality of what they were giving to God, but a sign that all they had was God's. Just like the wave offering, offering up a part of the sacrifice symbolically hallowed all of it.

This is the strange work of the priest. They live an eccentric life before the Lord, a life that can't be literally emulated. But in their extreme behavior we learn how to live our lives before God. Think about superheroes for a second and hopefully this will make sense. When we watch superhero movies we are watching stories that are so eccentric and extreme that we couldn't possibly emulate them in any real sense. And yet, these stories do fill people with hope and it encourages us to live more honorable and virtuous lives. How does this work? Since we recognize the hero as a symbol, it is easier for us to emulate the spirit that animates the hero.

Symbolically, the hero's origin is always through a trauma of sorts. Superman loses his home, Batman loses his parents, Spiderman gets bitten by a spider and then loses his uncle and so on. What does this symbolize? The hero is the one who can turn personal tragedy and trauma into their strength, the source of what makes them a hero as opposed to allowing that trauma to corrupt or break them down. In our personal lives, we look at stories like this and we try to learn the strength to do something similar.

The hero faces down villains that are sometimes cosmic in their presence. What does this symbolize? The hero is the one who does the right thing no matter how difficult it might be and how massive the obstacle is that they have to overcome. In our lives, while we will never face down supervillains, we have our own share of difficulties and obstacles that tempt us to run away or hide from responsibility, and in order to embody the values of the hero, we have to stand firm and face our own demons.

The priests and the pastors in the church function in the same way. The average person can't spend all their lives in prayer and studying the word, but they learn how to *apply* the Scriptures to their lives and to pray to God in all their circumstances. And it is the priests, and the pastor's job to teach the people how to do this. This is our sacred duty, to exemplify the holy life and teach others how to do the same, no matter what their individual lives look like.

## Pilgrims and Sojourners

*“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”*

*-Hebrews 11:13-16*

*“Then the LORD said to Aaron: “You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel.”*

*-Numbers 18:20*

As I said before, the priests in the land couldn't have any inherited land, unlike the rest of the population. The pastor is in a similar position, but to a much lower extent. Our income is based on tithes, therefore, unless we are corrupt, we can never be rich. We also can't establish say a business or some other legacy that we can bring our children into. Our role in the body of Christ is established through the laying on of hands of the elders of the church, meaning that we can't actually establish our children, even if we wanted to. And we can't pass down any “family” business or trade.

What does this teach us? The priest in their eccentric life is teaching us something that applies to all that follow God. This world is not our home, we have no guarantees about the direction of this world or what will happen. Even the wealthiest families and dynasties throughout the ages eventually crumble and fall. The inheritance that we are trying to pass down to our children is our spiritual inheritance. It doesn't mean that we don't pass down a physical inheritance, but that this is not as valuable or important as the spiritual faith that we are supposed to give to our children.

## Red Heifer Sacrifice

*“Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, “This is the ordinance of the law which the LORD has commanded, saying: ‘Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring you a red heifer without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which a yoke has never come. ‘You shall give it to Eleazar the priest, that he may take it outside the camp, and it shall be slaughtered before him; ‘and Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood seven times directly in front of*

*the tabernacle of meeting. 'Then the heifer shall be burned in his sight: its hide, its flesh, its blood, and its offal shall be burned. 'And the priest shall take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet, and cast them into the midst of the fire burning the heifer. 'Then the priest shall wash his clothes, he shall bathe in water, and afterward he shall come into the camp; the priest shall be unclean until evening. 'And the one who burns it shall wash his clothes in water, bathe in water, and shall be unclean until evening.'*

*-Numbers 19:1-8*

This particular sacrifice seems so strange, but when we break it down it has a lot to say to us. What we know from the context is that this specific sacrifice was made to produce a water of purity used specifically to purify those defiled by death. Once again, this is a role that is not relegated to willful sin, but instead a job that tends to a natural travesty of this life, namely the shame and pain of death. This is one of the reasons why the priest and the modern pastor attend to the rituals surrounding death.

This is a negative burden that the minister must bear. Death is a shame that most people actively try to avoid. They don't want to look at it or think about it, and yet, the minister is called to attend to it. We visit the sick and dying and we preside over the funeral rites given for the dead. Why? In order for a tree to reach the heavens it must have roots that touch hell. In order for a minister to truly intercede in the weaknesses of mankind, we have to be acquainted with sorrow and grief.

This is one of the reasons why ministers tend to have tragic lives. God allows His ministers to undergo a larger portion of sacrifice so that we might understand the weakness of others and show them compassion and hope. As the apostle Paul puts this point in his letter to the church of Colossae:

*"I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God..."*

*-Colossians 1:24-25*

Paul was glad to allow suffering to reign in his life that he might be an example to others of how to endure suffering well. It allowed him to have greater compassion on the suffering and the dying, and in so doing, he fulfills a part of Christ's ministry:

*"He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.*

*Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted.”*

*-Isaiah 53:3-4*

Christ's ability to heal people by touching them is attached to His ministry that allowed Him to "fill" the suffering of humanity, even unto the grave. When He touched the sick and the dying, He was defiling Himself in a sense, but He did so in order to draw near to us in our suffering, to bear our griefs and to carry our sorrows. This is why in the above sacrifice, the priest who conducts the sacrifice is themselves made unclean by it, more on this later.

That being said, I want to quickly point out some important components of this sacrifice. First, it must be a red heifer. This is a female cow who is "pure" red, even two black hairs would disqualify it. This means that it is a type of cow bred specifically for sacrifice, no yoke could ever have been on it. It is colored red, in Hebrew "adamah", which signifies blood, (the physical manifestation of spirit), sacrifice, earth, passion, and man. Adam's name is related to this word.

When you put all that together we can see that this cow represents man, almost in our fullest sense. It is attached to the earth, suffering, mortality, and sacrifice. Next, it was sacrificed out of the camp. This is not to be done at the tabernacle or temple. This sacrifice was to take away the "shame" of death, and therefore it had to be "hidden" and separate from the people. This again shows that one of the most fundamental qualities of our nature, namely our mortality, is a shameful and horrible thing.

The blood is sprinkled in front of the tabernacle. The blood of the heifer is what someone has to "walk" upon before they can enter the holy place of God. It creates the path that leads to glory and the place where they could deal with the curse of sin and death.

All the rest of it was burned. This sacrifice was "total". Since the priests received their "payment" from the meat of the sacrifices, this sacrifice was from the entire nation, both laity and priests. It all belonged to God and was strictly between man and God. This is not to atone for sins, which happen between men, nor was it to give thanks to God, it was specifically to "wash away" the stain of death and make it possible for fallen man to commune with Holy God.

Upon the offering was cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet. Cedar wood is closely related to the symbolism for gold, and for the same reason. It is a wood that resists rot and corruption, therefore it was a symbol of hierarchy, royalty, eternity, and purity. Hyssop is

related to life and purity since it was an herb that was a common cure for most maladies. This is why hyssop is used to spread the blood of the lamb for Passover in Exodus, and why David asks to be purified with hyssop in Psalm 51. Scarlet is, obviously, related to the same symbolism of red, namely sacrifice, earth, mankind, and spirit, but it is also related to luxury and protection since scarlet was difficult to produce and was thought to keep in heat more effectively than any other color.

Though this sacrifice was to deal with the corruption of death in terms of ritual purity, there is a strange hope contained within the sacrifice that mankind can be made pure from death and its effects. Like the cedar and the hyssop, that we can take something into ourselves that would make us immune to the corrupting influences of sin and death. This is fulfilled in Christ whose scarlet blood washes the church clean and gives us eternal life in Him.

This sacrifice “defiles” the one who makes it. They are themselves rendered unclean and have to remain outside the camp all day. Later it became a tradition that this sacrifice was done facing the temple on the eastern side of the city. This correlates to the sunrise and therefore has a heavy association with death and resurrection. The priest, symbolically, dies when he exits the camp. He then remains hidden for a day since, he returns at nighttime, and then is revealed among the people the next day. This follows the rising and setting of the sun, and is fulfilled in Christ.

*“Then a man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and store them outside the camp in a clean place; and they shall be kept for the congregation of the children of Israel for the water of purification; it is for purifying from sin. ‘And the one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until evening. It shall be a statute forever to the children of Israel and to the stranger who dwells among them. ‘He who touches the dead body of anyone shall be unclean seven days. ‘He shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean.”*

*-Numbers 19:9-12*

The ashes from this offering is a necessary ingredient in the water for purification. Although verse 9 says that this is for sin, the remaining verses make it clear that this water is to purify someone from ritual impurity that they take on by touching a dead body. This means that the water was not for sin per se, but instead the effects of sin that render us mortal and subject to decay and death. This, again, is fulfilled in Christ. It is through His death that the “waters” of baptism are made pure and can now cleanse us from the stain of sin that manifests itself in death.

Like with Miriam the person who touches a dead body is rendered ritually unclean for a week. Meaning that when we come in contact with death, we must bear its shame for a full cycle, namely a week. This is also related to the Jewish practice of “shiva”, which also means seven. After a death, a family is expected to ritually mourn for a full seven day period and not engage in any work or normal activity, they share in the death of their loved one. This then leads to a type of resurrection when they return after seven days.

There is also a picture of two cleansings that happen here. The person is washed on both the third and the seventh day. This could refer to many things, for the Jews I think that the third day would be significant because it is the divine number. Three relates to divine, or cosmic, perfection, which is why most divine structures bear the number three both inside and outside Judaism and Christianity. Four relates to worldly perfection, four corners of the earth, four cardinal directions, and four seasons. So the person who touches death is cleansed on the day of cosmic perfection, and then waits the number of days for earthly completion in order to make it the full seven days at which point they would be clean.

Christ fulfills this pattern in an interesting way. In His first coming, He completes the purification of man by spending three days touching death, meaning in the grave. This is a way to understand human history prior to Christ. It is, symbolically, the three days that waited for God’s cosmic timing to cleanse mankind. But even though we have partaken of that purity, the world is still fallen and our bodies are still subject to death. There needs to be a second cleaning that will only happen at the end of earthly history, or on a personal level, the end of our lives, which is signified in the four day waiting period.

Meaning that all human history leading up to the first coming of Christ could be considered the first “three” days of this ritual. The divine order had to be satisfied and man had to sit in the “filth” of sin and death before he could be cleansed in the first coming. The rest of human history that occurs between the first and second coming of Jesus relates to the next four day period that the defiled person must wait. When the fullness of human history comes to a close, Christ will return and fully purify His creation.

The reason why I went into such detail is for the same reason why we are studying the concept of Godly leadership. This ritual, that can easily become dead and useless, is actually pointing to the ministry of Christ, the living God. Many Jews look at this ritual as a mystery that contains no higher meaning. It is disconnected from their God and so it is

something that is dead and without meaning. This is made even more potent in the fact that they literally can't fulfill this ritual since they don't have a temple anymore.

In each ritual, in each ceremony, whether the ritual is as small as our morning routine, or as big as a wedding ceremony, the purpose, the meaning, is hidden in the life of Christ. The good leader willingly points beyond themselves to the eternal glory of Christ. This is what Aaron was called to do, and this is what all the church is called to do, with special emphasis on pastors. To see Christ, not just within the church, but all around us, to see meaning throughout our lives, even our suffering, sin, and death, is to understand the purpose of Godly leadership. No matter what capacity we have as a leader, this is what we strive to do. To see allow for all creation to speak of Christ and to be an occasion to praise and exalt Him.

*"The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language Where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, And their words to the end of the world. In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun, Which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, And rejoices like a strong man to run its race. Its rising is from one end of heaven, And its circuit to the other end; And there is nothing hidden from its heat."*

*-Psalm 19:1-6*

*"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes."*

*-1 Corinthians 11:23-26*