

Practicing God's Presence Numbers 3-4

Slide 1

Most people don't have jobs that can mean life or death if you make a simple mistake.

If you're a teacher or work on a computer, you might get mixed up on a student's name or enter a wrong number but nobody's going to die!

Yet, there are some people who have jobs that are dangerous. I did some research and found the Top 5 Most Dangerous Jobs:

5. Garbage collectors – struck by vehicles
4. Roofers - falls
3. Oil derrick workers – contact with equipment
2. Aircraft pilots - crashes
1. Logging workers – contact with equipment

But in Biblical times, the number #1 most dangerous job was an Old Testament Levitical Priest. Cause of death: Vaporization!

The ministry and job of a priest was literally “do or die!” If they didn't do their job, exactly as God told them, it was a one-way trip to the morgue.

Now lest you think that their job is ancient history, I'm here to inform you that God hasn't changed, and we STILL need someone to perform that “do or die” ministry on our behalf!

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Numbers 3:1 starts out with an important transitional phrase, “*This is the account of the family of Aaron and Moses...*” It's important because it introduces us to a new group of people.

The rest of chapter 1 and all of chapter 2 focused on the tribes of Israel, but now our center of attention is directed to the descendants of Aaron and Moses.

According to Numbers 3:12-15, a census of all the Levite boys, from one month old, was to be taken, as they now belonged to God!

These Levites were given the job of caring for the tabernacle where God dwelled. And, as a Levite, they had two primary tasks.

The first was to perform guard duty around the tabernacle. Chapter 2 described how the tribes were laid out around the tabernacle in a square formation.

On the inner part of that square, between the Tabernacle and the people, the Levites were to camp.

This was to keep the ordinary Israelites at a safe distance from the Tabernacle. Because, if you accidentally came too close to the Tent of Meeting, it was certain death.

The second job of the Levites was to carry and care for all the parts of the tabernacle when they were on the march.

For example, the clan of Kohath, camped on the south side of the tabernacle, and their job was to carry the most sacred and important objects like the ark of the covenant.

Chapter 4:4-20 goes into detail about how that needed be done. In fact, they weren't even allowed to LOOK at any of the holy objects, they had to cover them immediately.

The rest of the chapter goes into detail about the other Levite clans and what part of the tabernacle they were to care for and carry.

The Gershonites were to carry and care for the 'soft parts' of the Tabernacle like the curtains, and the Merarites job was to carry and care for the heavy pieces like the bars, pillars, poles and furniture.

Now, you'd assume that we're talking about a few men performing these tasks, but chapter 4:47-48, tells us, *"All the men from thirty to fifty years of age who came to do the work of serving and carrying the tent of meeting numbered 8,580!"*

It took 8,500 men to prepare and move the Tabernacle! You might ask, *"Why is all of this detail and attention given to the Tabernacle? And why does it take so many to do it?"*

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Well, it has to do with what the Bible is revealing about WHO God is! See, God is both TRANSCENDENT and IMMANENT at the same time.

To be "transcendent" means that God is so far beyond us, so far above us, so much more intelligent and holy than we are, so superior in quality and achievement that we don't have a chance of ever knowing Him!

He exceeds the limits of our experience. He's unknowable. On the other hand, God is also IMMANENT. In other words, He's like us, He's close to us, and we can know Him personally!

Now get this. Every other culture or religion worships a god who is either transcendent (distant and uninvolved) or immanent (present with us). But never both.

For example, in Islam "Allah" is transcendent. He's supposedly high and holy, but you're not going to catch him playing ball with the guys!

On the other hand, Norse gods like "Thor" were totally immanent, almost too immanent!

They were just like us. Feasting and fighting, marrying, and committing adultery. If it wasn't for their superpowers, you wouldn't even know they were a god!

But the God of the Bible isn't one or the other, He's both! He's completely transcendent and at the same time completely immanent.

According to Isaiah 57:15, He says that *"I live in a high and holy place..."* (transcendent) but at the same time He *"is contrite and lowly in spirit."* (immanent)

Isaiah 55:8-9, *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

That verse is telling us that God is so far beyond us, that we can't understand why He does what He does.

But people still judge Him and that's just ridiculous since we'd have to know more than He does to judge Him!

Yet, at the same time, the same God whose ways and thoughts are far above ours tells us that He created us in His image! We see these two characteristics of God in Numbers 3 and 4.

Remember, He set up His tent in the midst of the camp with the people. He was close to them, dwelling in their midst but at the same time His tent is surrounded with mystery and danger.

Ordinary people couldn't approach it. The Levites could but they had to do it according to God's instructions or they were toast!

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So now we come to the meat of the matter. What is your view of God? And is it correct? It's important how we view God, because it makes the difference in the way we approach Him.

Do you have a 'transcendent' view? An immanent view? Or do you have a balance of both? If you're going to really understand who He is, you're going to need to have a balanced view.

In fact, I find that very few people have a balanced view of God! It's either one or the other since it has to do with the way you were raised or taught.

For example, if you were raised in a liturgical background like Catholicism, Orthodox, Presbyterian, or Lutheran you see God as distant; hard to approach and know.

Many Catholics approach Him with a lot of mystery and rules and regulations, and pomp and circumstance.

The thought of knowing God personally and intimately is a difficult concept for them to wrap their brain around.

Now, just as dangerous is a completely immanent idea of God. It's the idea that God is my buddy. My co-pilot. That we can approach Him anytime or anywhere whether we're holy or not.

When we pray, we kinda waltz into His tent and say, "*Hey God! How ya doin' today? What do you have for me today?*"

This bothers me! God tells us in Psalm 100:4 to, "*Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.*"

Even the Lord's Prayer shows us that we need to come into His presence with a sense of awe and reverence: *"Our Father who is in heaven... HOLY is your name!"*

Did you know that? If not, then you need a dose of God's reality because He's so holy that if you were to see Him as He is you'd vaporize!

In fact, that's why the bible says that *"no man can look Him full in the face and live!"*

Take Aarons oldest 2 sons for instance. They were appointed to be priests but they did it wrong and paid the ultimate price!

Numbers 3:2-4 tells us that instead of using 'kosher' coals from the altar to burn their incense, they used *"unauthorized fire."* As a result, fire came out from God's presence and burned them to a crisp!

You might say, *"Wow! That's pretty drastic!"* But drastic situations require drastic actions.

Since we don't understand how powerful and how HOLY God is, we don't understand how offensive and blasphemous our sin is in His presence.

What we may think is a tiny transgression is magnified a 100 million times in God's presence! As a result, we don't realize the danger we're in!

In Matthew 5:28-30, Jesus says, *"But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."*

And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”

The moral of the story? Serving a holy God in the wrong way is hazardous to our health! Aaron’s younger sons learned from their older brother’s mistakes and lived long lives.

Air Force pilots have a saying, *“There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots.”* The same is true with Old Testament priests. There were no *“old, bold”* priests!

The threat of death from God’s holiness is a clear and present danger so Numbers 3 and 4 are warning us not to take Him lightly! Even moving the objects associated with God was serious business.

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The tragedy of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron’s older sons, is that their deaths were preventable! They were warned!

God’s not some kind of *“Cosmic Dictator,”* lashing out unpredictably and eliminating innocent bystanders! NO!

He gives clear and understandable instructions so that we know exactly how to act and what to do.

The purpose of all these detailed instructions is revealed in Numbers 4:19, *“So that they may live and not die when they come near the most holy things.”*

The reason God goes through all this detail is so that He could dwell with them, without destroying them! He wanted to be a blessing to them, not a danger.

What we need to understand today is that God hasn't changed in His commitment to holiness. I don't think we fully realize that. If anything, I think we err on the side of God's immanence.

We take sin for granted and don't deal with it as seriously as we should. We're like a 3-year-old child sent to run a nuclear power plant!

God has given us detailed instructions in His Word, telling us how we should live. They're not just suggestions! They're commands and our lives depend on us obeying them.

Some are NO! and others are "Yes:"

- Don't commit adultery or murder
- Do honor your father and mother
- Don't take advantage of the poor and helpless
- Do speak the truth in love

God gives us instructions for the same reason any good father or mother instructs their children, so they can enjoy a good life!

See, one of the reasons we disobey or reject God's laws is because we've forgotten that's He's transcendent and all powerful.

But, when you really understand how wise and holy God is, you begin to love and obey His law. At the same time, you have to remember that God is not only transcendent but He's immanent.

It's like a teenager who doesn't feel the need to obey their parents. They think they're out of touch, "*You just don't understand!*"

If you think God is too high, too holy, too out of touch, then you're going to say to yourself, "*God doesn't understand what I'm going through, so why should I go to Him?*"

But, because God is with us, He knows what we're going through and the struggles we're having. Yet, we still have a problem. Because God is holy and we're not, if we mess up its still instant death!

How many of you know you're going to mess up? That's why Galatians 3:10 says, *"For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."*

The fact is, none of us can be perfect, but perfection is the standard! God doesn't grade on a curve! All it takes is one sin, one slip, one infraction of the law...and zap!

God didn't say to the priests, *"You know the last 99 times you packed up my furniture you didn't sneak a peek at the holy things, so I'll let you off the hook this time."*

No! One single glance in the wrong direction and it was curtains! In fact, it's surprising that any of the Levites or Israelites survived!

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Conclusion

Today, nothing has changed. We can't say, *"Well, at least I'm not as bad as THAT guy!"* That's comparative holiness, God demands perfect holiness.

Any imperfection in God's presence is enough to condemn us to an eternal hell. So, what are we going to do? Nothing! Because we can't do a thing about it.

The answer is found in the fusion of transcendence and immanence. Jesus is that fusion! In Jesus, the high and Holy God took on a body of flesh just like us and lived with us!

Jesus, the transcendent Holy God, took on Himself the death that we deserved for our sins. Christ died so that we could approach the one and only Holy God.

Not because we're so righteous and holy, but because He is! Jesus came and lived the life of perfect holiness that we could never live!

He died the death our sins deserved so we could come into the presence of a perfect, Holy God and know Him without dying!

On the other hand, if God took His holiness so seriously in the Old Testament that He killed those who took it lightly, we can't take obeying Him lightly either!

According to 1 Peter 2:9, we are called to be a *“royal priesthood, a holy nation in his service.”*

That means that every single one of us needs to take our duty to serve God as seriously as the Levites took it in Numbers!

In fact, it should be a privilege to take up His cross and carry His message wherever we go!