

Numbers 18:8-32

We serve a God who gives.

Memorial Day - Some dispute as to its origins... “Three years after the Civil War ended, on May 5, 1868, the head of an organization of Union veterans — the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) — established Decoration Day as a time for the nation to decorate the graves of the war dead with flowers. Maj. Gen. John A. Logan declared it should be May 30. It is believed the date was chosen because flowers would be in bloom all over the country.”

“By the end of the 19th century, Memorial Day ceremonies were being held on May 30 throughout the nation. State legislatures passed proclamations designating the day, and the Army and Navy adopted regulations for proper observance at their facilities. It was not until after World War I, however, that the day was expanded to honor those who have died in all American wars. In 1971, Memorial Day was declared a national holiday by an act of Congress, though it is still often called Decoration Day. It was then also placed on the last Monday in May, as were some other federal holidays.” VA

Gen. Logan’s order for his posts to decorate graves in 1868 “with the choicest flowers of springtime” urged: “We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance. ... Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten as a people the cost of a free and undivided republic.”

Solemn, reverent reflection on the ultimate sacrifice. A thankful nation marks this as Memorial Day.

But perhaps archeologists in a far-off future might have trouble getting to these roots by reflecting on the modern expression of this experience. Was it a national holiday for car sales? Did it simply mark the beginning of summer?

What began as it did has become for far too many, a self-focused, casual, extra day of rest that we mark not with the choicest of flowers but the choice cuts of meat on our grills.

Now, these things are not wrong, and should be enjoyed. I just wonder how closely they match the meaning of the day.

I suppose we could evaluate any number of important days or even truths through this lens and find plenty of shifts from what was established to what is experienced now.

Even those truths that are meant to define us get warped over time and miss the point.

We lose the joy of the good news of Jesus - a gift of grace, his forgiveness and we make it about earning, living up to perfection (or at least our definition of it.) Self-salvation becomes our way and it feels good for a while but wears us down and leaves us without hope in the end. .

We read of the miraculous and see how the Holy Spirit gifts the church in Scripture, but we become suspicious instead prioritizing our own comfort, or we allow personal experience (or usually the lack thereof) tell us these things anot for today.

Or when we come to a text on giving, generosity... we well up with pride that we have beat out the next guys, or we check that our wallet is still where we put it! Self the priority, likely missing the point.

That's where we are today. You may be daydreaming about Memorial Day plans, but I think there is a correcting balm in Numbers 18 that could serve us for all of life.

We serve a God who gives.

Cycle of provision, and the person of provision.

The Cycle of Provision

Every other deity takes. Only Yahweh gives.

Just think of it, before any other god, perform in a certain way and maybe, just maybe that idol will act. Yahweh is different and that's the story being told through Israel.

If we read wrong we assume he works in the same ways. Sacrifice and obedience are constant themes, not only in the Old Testament but even in the New.

But it is always ordered differently than we expect. All of this sacrifice and obedience is responsive. Done because of what he gives.

Here we see more of that. In the whole cycle of provision and giving for Israel. Comes through instruction to Aaron as the priest.

Finally, no grumbling!

God has made clear that the priesthood is made up of Aaron and his sons. They are responsible for protecting the congregation. Bringing worship before the Lord.

And they are also given charge of the contributions.

Numbers 18:8 “Then the LORD spoke to Aaron, “Behold, I have given you charge of the contributions made to me, all the consecrated things of the people of Israel. I have given them to you as a portion and to your sons as a perpetual due.” (ESV)

We will take it in reverse order, but we can see a cycle. (Draw circle cycle)

God gives - promise - a land, fields to harvest crops, to feed his people. For their flourishing.

Then Israel gives back - Firstfruits (tithe) as a declaration of commitment to Yahweh as the God who gives.

“Throughout the ancient Near East, it was a common practice for kings to tax their people in the amount of a tithe of their produce. Often that income went to

support royal officials or temples.⁶ The tithe in Numbers 18 seems to function somewhat like these royal taxes of the ancient Near East. The Lord was Israel's Great King, and the tithe was an annual obligation to give 10 percent of their produce for the regular support of Levites, who were the servants of the King.⁷ The giving of tithes and firstfruits was thus an obligation of the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people."

The first of cattle born, of grain harvested, of grapes pressed into wine. Committed to the Lord. This becomes the portion for the Levites.

Their inheritance. Since this tribe will not get a portion of land - their work is with the tabernacle, with worship - God provides for them through the congregation as a reward for the service they do.

Then they give a tithe of the tithe...

Numbers 18:27 "And your contribution shall be counted to you as though it were the grain of the threshing floor, and as the fullness of the winepress." (ESV)

Levites give to Aaron and his descendents. Who sacrifice before the Lord, giving back to him.

A few things for us to recognize in this cycle.

God is behind all of it. The land, the produce, the flourishing that creates firstfruits.

He uses the community to provide. Where he can directly make it rain bread from heaven, or have water flow from the rocks. Here he is caring for everyone in Israel, through each other.

Everyone is to be generous in giving the best of what they receive. Inheritance (provision) is given over/back to the Lord for his glory and purpose.

"The cycle of blessing begins and ends with the Lord. (1) The Lord instructs his people in the proper sowing and reaping principles. (2) As the people obediently sow and reap, he blesses the community of faith with an abundant harvest of flocks and fields. (3) The firstborn, firstfruits, and first ripe produce are

consumed by the priests after portions have been sacrificed to God. (4) Tithes and offerings are also presented to the holy and faithful Levites for their provision, as additional portions are rendered to God. (5) Then the Levites present a best-of-the-best tithe of their received tithes to support the Aaronic priesthood, who then offer additional portions to God in thanksgiving and praise.”

Thinking of the church as Israel, we can infer that we should:

See everything we have as God's. The created order declares it.

Psalm 104:14–15 “You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth [15] and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart.” (ESV)

It's all his and he gives to us.

We can also learn we should prioritize firstfruits rather than what remains. The NT doesn't maintain a “tithe” but says giving is in proportion to what you have. But the principle remains what comes first best. Sets the tone for a budget, for a life of receiving from the Lord and giving for his glory.

(I even fell into this, asking John E what was left to give...)

More than all this though, there is something at a higher level at play here.

Numbers 18:20 “And the LORD said to Aaron, “You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel.” (ESV)

Don't use this as a proof text to keep the pastor poor! Certainly not what's happening for Aaron.

The NT carries on the principle of providing practically for the leaders of the Lord's people (1 Cor 9:13–14; Gal 6:6). When this does not happen, the Lord's worship suffers (Neh 13:10–11).

“God wanted his servants to be more than adequately maintained, and as long as his people were faithfully honoring the Lord, they would also honor his servants and provide abundantly for their financial needs.” ID

This is pointing to something wonderful. A sign of the reality that there is something better than fields and territory. Better still than the bread the finest grain makes. More delicious than what the winepress produces.

For Yahweh to be your portion.

The God who gives as yours, not to control or abuse but to be in relationship with.

Not something money can buy, something to receive that makes you generous. A treasure beyond your dreams.

What was reserved for Aaron and the priesthood is now for all who believe.

The Person of Provision

God in Numbers, in the wilderness, provides for Israel as they are heading to the land that will be their provision.

In Christ, for us on our wilderness journeys, God provides himself to pay the wages of sin and defeat death. Becoming the portion, the inheritance of all who believe in Him.

Jesus is our provision.

When the need for relationship with our Creator is an unblemished sacrifice.
When the need is perfect righteousness.

He gives us himself.

Where the world says look to yourself for what you need to survive, Jesus says “look to me!”

“Jesus teaches that living in God’s kingdom means looking to God, rather than human effort, as the ultimate source of the things we need for life. Our labor is

not optional, but neither is it absolute. Our labor is always a participation in the grace of God's provision." Theology of Work

And we give back because he gives us everything. **Philippians 4:19** "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (ESV)

"The whole earth and everything that it produces is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1). The Lord has freely given eternal life to us at the cost of his Son, Jesus Christ. We are a people who have been redeemed at a far more costly price than five shekels of silver — nothing less than the precious blood of Jesus. What is more, the Lord is not only the inheritance of the priests and Levites but the inheritance of all of the saints as well. The Lord has prepared a heavenly home for us that he gives to us as a free gift of his grace."

He is better.

Matthew 13:44–46 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. [45] "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, [46] who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." (ESV)

Oh how I want to be the one who finds Jesus as the ultimate treasure.

All that I have, because he has given all of himself for us.

Psalm 16:5–6 "The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. [6] The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance." (ESV)

The NT uses the language of "inheritance" to describe eternal life in God's kingdom through faith in Jesus.

Ephesians 1:11–14 "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, [12] so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. [13] In him you also, when you heard the word of

truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, [14] who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” (ESV)

This becomes then for us a longing, a prayer, a lifestyle.

“Jesus be my portion, my inheritance forever.”

Anything else is less than and misses the point.

What application do we take from this sacred story?

Give what you want - Think about Reservoir and our search for a new place to gather and do ministry. The Lord has increasingly given me a sense that a first tier goal for us in this transition is to raise 100k. Not for comfort but for ministry. That we could continue to serve families with kids with special needs, where we could reach invisible populations in our city, where we could be used for renewal.

We might get more official. Good goal. Give what you want, but make it a response to what you’ve been given in Jesus.

More so...

Make Jesus your portion - How do I make Jesus do anything?! About you. Receive him, commit to being settled in him.

A covenant of salt forever - the covenant by his blood. Your redemption. Your rescue. Your new life. Your hope for eternity.

We live to mine what’s behind the models, the imagery, the stories. And it is Jesus. May we be true to that, true to him, forever.

Psalm 104:31–34

[31] May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works,

[32] who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke!

[33] I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
[34] May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the LORD. (ESV)

Ephesians 3:14–21

[14] For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, [15] from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, [16] that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, [17] so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, [18] may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, [19] and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

[20] Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, [21] to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (ESV)