

# Numbers 4:16-20

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*Verses 16-20 describe the responsibility of Aaron's son, Eleazar, concerning the oils and the grain offering. The LORD also gives a warning to the Kohathites not to look at the holy objects of the tabernacle.*

Verse 16 outlines *the responsibility of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest* (v. 16). They oversaw *the oil for the light and the fragrant incense and the continual grain offering and the anointing oil—the responsibility of all the tabernacle and of all that is in it, with the sanctuary and its furnishings*. Eleazar was appointed as supervisor over all of the activities described in verses 5-15 as well as given the task of seeing that the oils, the *incense*, and the *grain offering* were handled properly.

The *oil for the light* would be a supply of olive oil used to fuel the lamps on the lampstand (Exodus 27:20). The lampstand (Exodus 25:31-35) would provide light in the tabernacle as the priests performed their worship. It also symbolized the LORD's guiding presence among His people (Psalm 27:1, 44:3, 89:15).

The *fragrant incense* was an offering that was burned on the altar of incense, placed near the veil separating the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place (Exodus 30:1, 6). Aaron burned *fragrant incense* every morning (Exodus 30:7), resulting in “perpetual incense before the LORD” (Exodus 30:8). Incense symbolizes the “prayers of the saints” (Revelation 5:8, 8:3-4).

The *continual grain offering*, made of “fine flour” (Leviticus 2:1, 6:15), was presented along with the burnt offering (Leviticus 8:2-11) as an atonement (Heb. “kippūr,” “covering” or “reconciliation”) for the sins of the person bringing the offerings.

The *anointing oil* was used to consecrate (i.e., “set apart” or “make holy” for service only to the LORD) persons (Leviticus 8:12) or things (Leviticus 8:2-11). Oil also symbolized intercessory prayers for the sick (Mark 6:13; James 5:14).

Finally, *the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron* (v. 17) concerning the family of Kohath. It is in the form of a warning, telling the priests to *not let the tribe of the families of the Kohathites be cut off from among the Levites* (v. 18). Here, to be “cut off” would be to die physically. As stated in verse 15, the Kohathites who were not priests (those in the family line of Aaron) were in danger of dying if they handled a holy object without it being covered. So, the priests, charged with covering the holy objects, needed to be diligent when doing so in order to prevent other Kohathites from dying.

This is explicitly stated in verse 19. The priests were to *do this to them that they may live and not die when they approach the most holy objects* (v. 19). All of the instructions concerning covering the holy objects of the tabernacle (verses 5-15) were designed to save lives. Only priests can

handle the objects that God has declared to be holy. Thus, the LORD commanded that *Aaron and his sons shall go in and assign each of them to his work and to his load*. This organizing was to ensure efficiency as well as safety.

The LORD then restated the warning that *they* (the Kohathites who were not priests) *shall not go in to see the holy objects even for a moment, or they will die* (v. 20). If a non-priest sees a holy object, even for a split-second, he will die. So, the priests needed to take all precautions necessary to prevent the loss of life of their fellow Kohathites. That God repeated this instruction emphasized the urgency for them to follow His direction in this matter, and ensure the safety of their brethren.

The fact that God provided and preserved such specific instructions for these objects and implements used in worship is worth reflecting upon. God makes clear throughout the Bible that the primary goal of worship is to align our hearts with God's, that we might follow His ways. When Israel followed worship, but it did not result in changed hearts and minds, God rejected the worship (Amos 5:21-25).

In our modern era it has been observed that the creation of good habits begins with discipline. As we exercise willpower to choose to take action, we reframe our mindset. The goal of these specific instructions is to create a mindset that God's ways are for the best. That disobedience to His ways results in death (Romans 6:23). By exercising willpower to follow these specific instructions, it provided an opportunity for the Israelites to orient their mindset toward obedience to God in all matters.

One way for believers today to apply this principle is in the exercise of spiritual disciplines. We can use an amount of willpower to get started in prayer, Bible study, meditation on God's word, fasting, or many other activities. If these activities orient our mindset toward God, such that it affects the other areas of our lives with obedience to His ways, then it is of great benefit. Our greatest blessing lies in walking in the ways of God, putting to death the old man, the flesh, and walking in the newness of life as a new creation in Christ.

#### **Biblical Text:**

**<sup>16</sup> “The responsibility of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest is the oil for the light and the fragrant incense and the continual grain offering and the anointing oil—the responsibility of all the tabernacle and of all that is in it, with the sanctuary and its furnishings.”**

**<sup>17</sup> Then the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, <sup>18</sup> “Do not let the tribe of the families of the Kohathites be cut off from among the Levites. <sup>19</sup> But do this to them that they may live and not die when they approach the most holy *objects*: Aaron and his sons shall go in and assign each of them to his work and to his load; <sup>20</sup> but they shall not go in to see the holy *objects* even for a moment, or they will die.”**