

# THE VOLUNTEER STATE

1 CHRONICLES 9:22-33    NOVEMBER 27, 2022

We call California *The Golden State*. New Jersey is *The Garden State*. Wyoming is *The Equality State*. How about Tennessee? *The Volunteer State*.<sup>1</sup> That nickname was first given in the War of 1812 "due to the key role played by volunteers from the Tennessee militia." The moniker was cemented when President Polk (of Tennessee) issued a call for 2,600 volunteers to join the Mexican-American War effort. 30,000 Tennesseans answered.<sup>2</sup>

Today, volunteerism isn't quite so important in the Volunteer State. In 2019, the state ranked 31st in volunteer rate. Then again, California finished in 47th place.<sup>3</sup>

In the year 538 B.C., King Cyrus of Persia issued a call for Jewish volunteers to leave exile in Babylon and return to Israel to rebuild the temple and resettle the promised land. It was an astonishing fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and an awe-inspiring display of God's grace.

Initially, about 50,000 Jews answered the call to return to worship in Jerusalem. This new era of Jewish history wasn't going to be built around a king like David or a warrior like Joshua. It was going to be built around the new temple. That temple could not function without Levites. But in the records of Ezra and Nehemiah we find there were only a few hundred Levites who volunteered to relocate from Babylon. A lot was depending on them and they would have a lot to do.

1 Chronicles 9 shows us the kinds of things they were doing. When I think of Levites, I imagine solemn rituals. I think of the drama of blood being spilt, the lifting of oblations as incense filled the air and the Psalms of David resound through a gold-covered court. This text gives us another view of the Levites' ministry. Many of their tasks seem mundane, even menial. But *these* functions were each part of connecting people to God, and reviving the heart of a nation.

We are not Levites but Christians *are* a priesthood. We're invited to volunteer in service to God, in small and not-so-small ways. From this example, we can find spiritual principles about our own response to God and ministry to others and how even small service makes a big difference.

**1 Chronicles 9:22 - <sup>22</sup>The total number of those chosen to be gatekeepers at the thresholds was 212. They were registered by genealogy in their settlements. David and the seer Samuel had appointed them to their trusted positions.**

In general, the gatekeepers were tasked with protecting the Temple and granting access to it. We'll see other duties in the coming verses. Their job is described by one source as, "one who is occupied with the gate."<sup>4</sup> Their presence, their attention, their focus was on the Temple of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/List-of-nicknames-of-U-S-States-2130544>

<sup>2</sup> <https://tennesseehistory.org/volunteer-state/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.americorps.gov/sites/default/files/document/Volunteering\\_in\\_America\\_Rankings\\_508.pdf](https://www.americorps.gov/sites/default/files/document/Volunteering_in_America_Rankings_508.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

*This* was the place where men could hear from God, give worship to Him and receive atonement. But they were also surrounded by enemies who worked hard to *stop* this temple from being built. So the Levites stood guard. This duty could be traced back to David and Samuel. In fact, it went even further back, all the way to Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron.

God *always* called for volunteers to minister in His presence, to point people in the right direction, and to maintain a place of worship so the Lord can be found by those who are seeking. Sadly, the job comes with opposition. In some cases, that opposition is much more extreme than others.

When the call went out for people to return to Israel, we're told that anyone who *wanted* and anyone "whose spirit the Lord had roused" went.<sup>5</sup> But the Levites didn't pick their own duties. Their assignments were distributed. Some by lot, some by skill, some by other qualifications. Each would be specifically assigned, but *all* had this in common: They were faithful and capable and willing.<sup>6</sup>

**1 Chronicles 9:23-24 - <sup>23</sup> So they and their sons were assigned as guards to the gates of the Lord's temple, which had been the tent-temple. <sup>24</sup> The gatekeepers were on the four sides: east, west, north, and south.**

The east gate was the most prestigious - it had a few more guards than the others,<sup>7</sup> but status and seniority didn't matter for gate duty. Lots decided. No matter which gate you were stationed at, this was a wonderful job. You were able to bring people in to meet with God. You were responsible to maintain the sanctity of the Lord's House. You helped pump the spiritual heart of the nation.

**1 Chronicles 9:25 - <sup>25</sup> Their relatives came from their settlements at fixed times to be with them seven days,**

There were 212 gatekeepers, but the job was 24/365. We're not told how they handled shifts, but they would've worked a full week every three weeks or maybe every five or seven.<sup>8</sup> During festival weeks, everyone would be on duty together.

This Levitical service was a family affair. Even if mom and the kids weren't on duty, the whole of family life was dedicated to the service of the Lord. It was a group effort that required commitment and dedication. Not only would there be the week on, but we have to consider the commute.

The tribe of Levi did not have territory the way the other tribes did. Instead, *the Lord* was their inheritance and they were given 48 cities throughout the rest of the country. When they weren't on duty in the Temple, they were sent back throughout all the other tribes so that they could minister there. Of course, these folks *walked* everywhere. That's not such a big ask if you lived in the land of Benjamin. But if your home was up on the coast of Asher? That's quite a trip. Maybe *your* Levite city

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<sup>5</sup> Ezra 1:5, Ezra 7:13

<sup>6</sup> 1 Chronicles 9:13

<sup>7</sup> 1 Chronicles 26:12-18

<sup>8</sup> Frank E. Gaebelcin *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 4*, H.D.M. Sense *The Pulpit Commentary Volume 6*

was Golan, among the tribe of Manasseh. That meant you'd have to cross the river Jordan every time you came and went from your week at the Temple. Your commute was *days*.

This Levitical life would require a lot of trust in the Lord. Aside from the travel, your own home and fields would have to take a backseat position. While on the job, you relied on the contributions of the *other* Israelites for your food. You had no ancestral land passed down to keep as a fall-back.

But none of these things were a downside. When we get to listen in on the thoughts of a truly spiritual man, David, the sweet Psalmist of Israel, what did *he* say? "Better a day in your courts than a thousand anywhere else. Oh that I could dwell in the house of the Lord as a doorkeeper!"<sup>9</sup>

It wasn't just about unlocking doors or keep out vandals. This Levite life was about being in the presence of God and opening access to Him. Today there is One mediator between God and man, the Lord Jesus Christ. We don't have to go to a priest to interact with God. But if you're a Christian, the New Testament describes you as a servant-ambassador. You're invited to live as a steward of grace, doing good to all, especially the household of faith, building up the Body of Christ. Like with Levites, there are a lot of ways we can be involved in that calling. God has provided a great variety of gifts and opportunities and assignments for those who want to serve. And that service is meant to become the focus of our lives. To serve God means we're ready to leave our nets behind, ready to leave our fields unattended for the sake of living out our calling as Christians. That our time and our attention and our passions are always oriented toward how we can serve our Lord.

**1 Chronicles 9:26 - <sup>26</sup>but the four chief gatekeepers, who were Levites, were entrusted with the rooms and the treasuries of God's temple.**

They didn't just watch over piles of gold and silver. The rest of the Israelites were supposed to bring in contributions as daily portions for the gatekeepers and singers.<sup>10</sup> These four guys were tasked with administrating those resources so that their fellow servants wouldn't go hungry.

Sadly, during the time of Nehemiah, two things happened that brought the ministry of these Levites to a grinding halt. First, the people stopped giving, so the gatekeepers and singers were forced to abandon their posts. There was no food to eat, so they went back to their own fields.

Second, one of the guys in charge of these storerooms allowed an Ammonite official named Tobiah to *move in* to one of the rooms! Tobiah hated the Lord and hated the Jews and hated the Temple. But he was influential. He had position and worldly power. And so, the chief gatekeepers brought a fox into the henhouse. They bound themselves to him instead of the Lord because he had influence. Nehemiah fired those who *had* been in charge and replaced them with men who could be trusted. We see that word in verse 26: These Levites had been *entrusted*.

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 27:4, 84:10

<sup>10</sup> Nehemiah 12:47

God's wants to *entrust* you with ministry. It's easy to think, I have to *do* this for God because I owe it to Him. We *do*, but that's not the way the Lord thinks about it. Jesus sent out His disciples with power and authority on His behalf. God revealed Himself to Abraham and to Samuel and to David and to Moses and to Jonah and to Gideon and said, "I want to *give* you the opportunity to watch over some spiritual treasure." We're told in 1 Peter that God gives each one of *us* a gift to serve with as members of His house. But our service isn't automatically continued. It is based on faithfulness.<sup>11</sup>

This storeroom duty is a great example to us. On the one hand, it seems like such a boring, unimportant thing. "I get to watch a *closet*?" But when that duty went undone, the whole work of the ministry suffered. In fact, it came to a stop until things were put back in proper order.

The assignments the Lord offers may not seem as high-profile as we'd like, but everything He calls us to has value. And just because a person is a "chief" doesn't mean they are above mundane service to the Lord.

**1 Chronicles 9:27 - <sup>27</sup> They spent the night in the vicinity of God's temple, because they had guard duty and were in charge of opening it every morning.**

The gatekeepers had this simultaneous duty of guarding from intruders *and* granting access to attenders. Christian service is similar. God gives us the privilege of inviting others into His family. In one parable, the Master says to the servant, "Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, in Jude we're told to guard the truth and contend for the faith because there are those who want to creep in and defile it.

**1 Chronicles 9:28-29 - <sup>28</sup> Some of them were in charge of the utensils used in worship. They would count them when they brought them in and when they took them out. <sup>29</sup> Others were put in charge of the furnishings and all the utensils of the sanctuary, as well as the fine flour, wine, oil, incense, and spices.**

So far, we've seen no *altar* tasks. The Chronicler is describing for us a bunch of custodial, administrative, even janitorial jobs. But these duties were just as *sacrificial* as offerings on the altar. They required dedication and focus. A faithful Levite would need to render this service carefully and purposefully. Without these small chores, the daily sacrifices wouldn't happen.

As the text unfolds, we get the impression of a lot of activity, many moving parts, but *not* that many people on shift to do it. Jesus was up front with us that, in ministry, there's always going to be a lot to do and not as many people as we'd like to do it. "The harvest is great, but the workers are few."

These Levites didn't spend their days complaining that so many *other* Levites stayed in Babylon. Instead, they set about their business week by week. God had stirred up their hearts. God was

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<sup>11</sup> Piet Dirksen 1 Chronicles 9,26-33: Its Position in Chapter 9

<sup>12</sup> Luke 14:23

using *them*. They were a meaningful part of the rebirth of a nation. Faithfulness focuses on what I'm called to do, not what others *should* be doing. A faithful servant says "I could," not "you should."

**1 Chronicles 9:30 - <sup>30</sup>Some of the priests' sons mixed the spices.**

The mixing of temple spices was a restricted job. According to the Law in Exodus 30, specific people had to follow a specific recipe to make these spices for a specific purpose. To go *outside* those boundaries was unlawful. It was a duty that demanded skill and study and authorization.

**1 Chronicles 9:31-32 - <sup>31</sup>A Levite called Mattithiah, the firstborn of Shallum the Korahite, was entrusted with baking the bread. <sup>32</sup>Some of the Kohathites' relatives were responsible for preparing the rows of the Bread of the Presence every Sabbath.**

Early on in the pandemic, baking bread became trendy. The problem was, Americans baked all the flour away!<sup>13</sup> One company saw their sales of flour increase by 2,000%. Flour shortages remained a persistent problem even while supplies for other hoarded items started to bounce back.

A particular fellow named Mattithiah is singled out here as the baker of the showbread. I love that we're given his name because it reminds us that we are not just warm bodies to the Lord. We're not just cogs in His machine. We are beloved children. These loaves would be set out on a special table once a week. This task was directly connected with ritual and worship in the Temple and required reliability. The bread *must* be prepared and displayed week by week. It was a team effort between the baker and others to accomplish this particular duty every Sabbath.

The showbread reminds us of Christ's persistent, holy presence. It reminds us that He is the Bread of Life. It reminds us that He is a Provider and Sustainer and that when we come to Him we will *never* go hungry. This was a special ministry - but it wouldn't be possible if other Levites hadn't prepped the flour and cleaned the utensils, and if the Israelites hadn't contributed to the work.

**1 Chronicles 9:33 - <sup>33</sup>The singers, the heads of the Levite families, stayed in the temple chambers and were exempt from other tasks because they were on duty day and night.**

I've done a lot of singing over the years. I can't say I've ever had to sing in the middle of the night. These singers were on duty round the clock, just in case 2am singalong needed to happen, I guess.

Nehemiah tells us that these singers built settlements for themselves around Jerusalem. They were exempt from the other jobs listed above because, as one translator puts it, "The task was upon them."<sup>14</sup> In Ezra and Nehemiah we see the emphasis that was put on corporate praise. As they re-established this nation, they were determined to be a *worshipping* people. These particular Levites had specific skill that they could use to facilitate worship with the whole congregation. The singing brought sanctification and joy and thanksgiving and celebration. The singing of God's people was

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/05/why-theres-no-flour-during-coronavirus/611527/>

<sup>14</sup> Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

heard far and wide and was a testimony of God's power and grace. What an amazing witness it was to the unbelieving peoples around Jerusalem. These Jews came back to ruins and waste. No city, no temple, no wall, no homes. And a very short time later they were lifting high the praises of their God who had filled their hearts with rejoicing and done the impossible through them.

They worshiped when they laid the foundation of the temple and when the wall was finished. They worshiped when more Jews returned from Babylon and when they realized they needed to confess their sin. Despite the difficulty of the days, they were always ready to praise God and remind themselves of His steadfast love. Part of our making the most of the time we have is by worshipping with songs and hymns and spiritual songs. Marking our days with thanksgiving to God.

So, as these different jobs come into focus, we see that some of them were randomly assigned by lot, some required individuals with a certain set of skills. Some meant you'd be on duty day and night, others would be a weekly thing. Some would require you to live in Jerusalem, some would allow you to live elsewhere in the land. While one fellow was inventorying, another might be inviting a guest inside. While one man was tuning up an instrument of David, another was taking stock of the food for the shift coming on duty. While one man was baking, another was just *being* in the vicinity in case he was needed. But all of it was part of the greater work of keeping the Temple open and functioning. You've heard of the central nervous system - this was the central *spiritual* system. If their nation was to survive, the spiritual life would have to thrive.

The jump from their experience to our application isn't far. God looks at the Church and says, "You're a *nation* of priests, set apart for service and the building of a spiritual house." And we have all sorts of things that we can do to serve the Lord and build up His house and proclaim Him and offer worship and be a blessing to others. It's a huge effort that has a place for every one of us.

In God's service, every job matters. He decided to use people like you and me to do His work. But He does not force us. He *invites* us, just as these people in 1 Chronicles 9 had been *invited*.

But remember: Many Levites heard the call, but decided to *stay* in Babylon. Imagine for a moment being one of *those* individuals. You see, to *be* a Levite meant you were a person who was set aside to serve God. But there you were in Babylon, no longer in exile. You were there by choice. In the town square you might meet someone and hear them ask, "Where are you from and what do you do?" "Well, I'm a Levite, but I do whatever." A Jew would know that Levites *existed* to serve God.

The Levites in our passage were serving because they volunteered, but they volunteered to come and be *who they were already set apart to be*! God had whispered to their hearts, "Come and be with Me and we'll do a great work together. This is what I've wanted for you all along."

"What will we be doing?" "Some big things. A lot of small things. But all *significant* things." This text shows us that *all* ministry matters when God has given it to us. Whether it's baking bread or unlocking a gate or playing an instrument or organizing a group or proclaiming God's Word.

As Christians, we're invited to serve the Lord in all sorts of ways according to the lot He casts, the skills we've developed, the gifts we've been given by the Holy Spirit, the place and circumstances we're in. But that invitation to volunteer is really a calling to become who God has already made us to be. The Christian life is not about having a religious philosophy on top of a human existence. We've been made into new creations. We've been transferred into a new Kingdom, a new Family, a new citizenship, a new future, a new direction, a new purpose. We have the chance to become like these Levites who were at the center of what God was doing, by accepting His invitation and volunteering to go along with Him.

In Exodus 32, Moses asked a simple question: Who is on the Lord's side? The Levites answered, "We are." That was the beginning of their special service. That's why we know who they are and know nothing about the Zebulunites. In the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the question was essentially the same: Who wants to serve the Lord? A few hundred said, "We do."

Today the Lord brings us into one tribe, one Church, all set aside for service and ministry and spiritual harvest. He asks: "Who wants to join Me in saving souls and changing lives and sharing testimonies and building a spiritual house?" If we volunteer to do what we've already been made to do He will use us and assign us and give to us gifts and opportunities. The power is His, the choice is ours.