

Title: The scattered church - Joshua 21

Purpose: To consider the Levites and to see how we, as Christians, are like Christian Levites and that we are not merely a gathered church, but for most of the time, a scattered church.

INTRODUCTION

Loose ends

Last week, if you were here, you might remember that we began by talking about LOOSE ENDS and we said that these two chapters here at Joshua 20 & 21 were very much like that.

All the military campaigns have been carried out and God has given victory to Israel there in Chapters 1 thru 12 and then in Chapters 13 thru to 19 we have seen how the various tribes have taken up the land that has been allocated to them.

And then there were these 2 chapters that are just slotted in between two short and simple statements that everything is done.

And in a sense these are **God's LOOSE ENDS** - things that we might very well pay very little attention to - these are things that might well go in **our MISCELLANEOUS SECTION** - because we don't really quite know what to do with them.

- Chapter 20 was all about the CITIES OF REFUGE
- and now Chapter 21 is all about the CITIES FOR LEVITES

What binds these two chapters in Joshua together are these people called the LEVITES and although we gave a very minimal insight into these people last time around - I want to fill that out a bit this morning (especially given that Chapter 21 is wholly concerned with these people).

Structure

So you know where I'm going this morning, I have just two points:

- Firstly - THE LEVITES APPRECIATED
- and then secondly - THE LEVITES APPLIED

So then #1:

1] THE LEVITES APPRECIATED

It might be that right now - all you know about the Levites could fill up nothing much more than the back of a postage stamp - and that's fine - for we're now going to try and fill in the gaps a bit.

Their origins

Q. So where do they come from?

Levi was one of Jacob's 12 sons - he was son number 3 and Levi himself had **3 sons**:

- **Gershon**
- **Kohath**
- and **Merari**

And we see these **3 clans of this tribe of Levi** (the Kohathites, the Gershonites and the Merarites) appearing here in the **allocation of these 48 towns** throughout the land of Israel.

4-way division not 3

We also notice that **the division the Levites is not really 3-way but rather 4-way** - Q. Why is that?

Well the clan of the Kohathites is itself divided in two:

- There is Aaron's line - and this the one and only line through which those that are priests in Israel come
- and then there are all the other Kohathite clans

So really what that gives us is a 4-way split and each of the branches get's approximately a quarter share of the 48 towns that are allocated to them as places to live throughout the whole land of Israel.

So when you think of the Levites - it helps to remember that there are Priests and then there are Levites:

- All **PRIESTS ARE LEVITES**
- BUT not all **LEVITES ARE PRIESTS**

What Joshua tells us

Q. Now what does this book of Joshua tell us about the Levites?

Well at least a couple of things are stressed:

- one is the fact that **THEY ARE DIFFERENT** - Q. How so? Well they are the one tribe who do not get a land inheritance of their own.

So if you were to look at a map of the Land of Promise where all the different tribes have their own areas - you would **not find any particular area where the Levites have a whole swathe of land**.

So at one level they are **LANDLESS**.

- the second thing we see is that although they are LANDLESS they are ***NOT* WITHOUT AN INHERITANCE**.

Q. What then is their inheritance?

Well, it is described in a number of different ways - put most simply:

(Joshua 13v33) "... **the LORD, the God of Israel, is their inheritance...**".

We learn too that **"the offerings made by fire to the LORD, the God of Israel, are their inheritance."** - so that means that they are partakers in the food of those offerings.

And as well as that we also learn **"the priestly service of the LORD is their inheritance."** - so the simple privilege of being able to be those directly connected with the service of the LORD at the tabernacle is their portion, their inheritance.

Levites linked to Redemption

Now one thing that is helpful to know about the Levites, it's something that comes out in the book of Numbers, and it is this aspect that they are **STRONGLY LINKED TO THIS IDEA OF REDEMPTION**. (Redemption is basically - "freeing/releasing something at a price".)

It comes out in:

Numbers 3 verse 45 where we read: "**Take the Levites in place of all the firstborn of Israel**, and the livestock of the Levites in place of their livestock. **The Levites are to be mine. I am the LORD.**"

You see God told the Israelites that all the firstborns (whether of man or animal), were to belong exclusively to God and so, for instance, if you wanted to keep a firstborn animal, then you had to redeem it at a cost for yourself.

And here God is saying that He is taking the whole tribe of the Levites FOR HIMSELF as that SUITABLE & SUFFICIENT REDEMPTION for all the firstborns of the twelve tribes.

I can't help but remember that opening verse there in Isaiah 43:

"But now, this is what the Lord says— he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for **I have redeemed you**; I have **summoned you by name**; **YOU ARE MINE**."

The Levites' Appeal

Now before we move on to bring these Levites more into our own day and into our own situations - it is **worth seeing the appeal that they make** that comes out right at the start of chapter 21:

Verses 1-3 read: "Now the family heads of the Levites approached Eleazar the priest, Joshua son of Nun, and the heads of the other tribal families of Israel at Shiloh in Canaan and said to them, 'The Lord commanded through Moses that you give us towns to live in, with pasturelands for our livestock.' So, as the Lord had commanded, the Israelites gave the Levites the following towns and pasturelands out of their own inheritance:..."

And then it goes to detail all the various places. We see that:

- they are ***not*** asking for **CHARITY**
- they are ***not*** asking for **EQUALITY**
- they are effectively making appeal **SOLELY TO THE WORD OF GOD** spoken previously through Moses **THAT IS THEIR KEY GROUND OF APPEAL**

You have to say that:

- they have been **VERY PATIENT** about things - they have had to be the very last people to get sorted AND YET WITH GOD - very often - **"the first are last AND the last first"**.

We can learn that **they don't quarrel**, they don't grab for material things - that it is entirely possible to have our eyes fixed on things above, on spiritual and not purely material things.

- ALSO that they are being **VERY PUBLIC** about things - so there's no whispering discontent going on. They approach the right people and keep everything fully above board.

How much we can learn as churches from their fully above board and open approach to things. How many things go wrong in churches when individuals or groups of people only turn to the leaders of the church as

the final step in seeking to achieve something that they have in mind.

And so perhaps early on we are seeing a powerful quality that these Levites are displaying AND THAT IS THE QUALITY OF BEING A MODEL.

Q. Would you say - as you reflect on your own Christian life - that you are to some extent A MODEL FOR OTHERS?

This is what **Paul** had to say about **the infant church of Thessalonika** in his first letter to them:

1 Thessalonians 1 verses 5-7 "...our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. **AND SO YOU BECAME A MODEL** to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia."

IT GOES ON:

" They tell how you **turned: TO GOD // FROM IDOLS // TO SERVE THE LIVING AND TRUE GOD...**"

The Levites seem to be "**MODELLERS**" - even as we see them here in Joshua 21.

2] THE LEVITES APPLIED

Having seen what the Levites were there in the OT - what I want to do now is to see how this flows over to us now and I want to give 7 what I'll call "POINTS OF CONTACT" with us today:

1] We are "Christian Levites"

Now, I should say, if we consider ourselves to be Christians here this morning:

- you believe yourself in the work that Jesus did on the Cross of Calvary for you personally
- you have recognised and have repented of your former life of sin
- you are now everyday thankful that God has stepped in and turned your life around - He has taken the CURSE of your previous sinful life and made it into A BLESSING instead in the Lord Jesus

If these things are true of you - then it is fair to say that we can consider ourselves as CHRISTIAN BELIEVERS.

BUT I ALSO WANT TO GO A STEP FURTHER AND SUGGEST that we can consider ourselves as what we might call "CHRISTIAN LEVITES".

Q. So how does that work?

Well at the most basic level we are those that God has specifically called out (we are the "called out ones" - and that is what the word "church" in the NT means 'ek-klesia'). And God has not just called us out, He has also said "You are mine" - He has placed His special seal of ownership upon us - filled us with, sealed us by, His precious Holy Spirit.

Just like the Levites were "specially belonging to the LORD" - we too are those specially called out and specially belonging to the LORD.

God says to you and me - if we are truly His - **"YOU ARE MINE!"**

We also reflect the 2 divisions

But I think we can go another step further in this fitting parallel with the OT, where we might think of ourselves as "Christian Levites" because we also become aware that we do fall into 2 broad categories.

There are those that are specifically set aside for the work of God in a full-time capacity (not to be fulfilling the functions of priests - those who stand in between God and people - since the coming of Christ Jesus there has only been one mediator) but rather now to be PASTORS & TEACHERS.

And then the large majority of the rest of us are those who serve in a much wider sphere of service.

Another way of expressing that is to say:

"We are not all called to be **Ministers** with a **capital 'M'** but we are all just as much called **ministers** with a **small 'm'**"

So it was exactly the same with the OT Levites - some were in the priestly line - Aaron's line BUT THE MAJORITY were not and they served in a wider and more general sphere of service to the LORD.

OK #2: We are not just "Christian Levites" but:

2] We are God's scattered people

Last week we considered the CITIES OF REFUGE and we **applied it to ourselves as what you might call:**

"the GATHERED CHURCH OF GOD".

It challenged us as **to what extent** we could say that we were a truly receiving, welcoming people.

To what extent we could say that we were truly, as a **gathered set of people** - that we were a **"PLACE OF GRACE"**.

Now as we come into Chapter 21 - we are ***not so much* looking** at ourselves as a **GATHERED PEOPLE** but as a SCATTERED PEOPLE.

For some people - when they think about their Christian faith - they think about SUNDAYS - they think about coming to church (and for most people) that usually means the MORNING SERVICE.

But for many others of us - when we think about our Christian faith:

- something 7 days a week
- it is something very much 24x7

Now that doesn't mean that we have church services, or meetings, scheduled for every day of the week, it just means that **CHRISTIANITY IS A LIFESTYLE** and ***NOT* an event OR a club** we attend.

Maybe you've never seen yourself in this way before - but God's design is that we be (for the vast majority of the time) A SCATTERED PEOPLE - we are meant to be encountered by secular people, in all walks of life and in more or less any kind of venue you might think of: office, factory, at the shops, in sports clubs, in cities, in towns and in the countryside.

Perhaps that distinction of:

- GATHERED CHURCH
- & SCATTERED CHURCH

is not one you're used to - but it does mirror what the Levites of the OT were - a liberally scattered influence for good

throughout the whole land.

We're "Christian Levites", we're the "scattered people of God" **#3:**

3] We are God's "TOURIST INFORMATION"

If you are visiting a town that you don't know (especially if it is something of a tourist destination) you will often keep your eyes open, when you first arrive, for a the TOURIST INFORMATION place.

At a spiritual level that is a function that we are to perform.

You see in society at large today there is:

- **a lot of confusion & simple misinformation**

People would have little idea what really goes on in a good bible-centred, God-believing church.

- put another way - there is **a very big INFORMATION GAP** when it comes to all SPIRITUAL, to CHRISTIAN things

Although you may not feel you have every answer to every question that people might throw your way - (unless you are a complete Christian NEWBIE yourself) - you will certainly have a lot more knowledge than the average person today.

Not only this:

- you have **access to the Word of God**
- & you have **access to the Holy Spirit of God** (the author of the Word).

In the OT this was a function that the Levites would play all across the land. Wherever you lived you were never far from a Levitical influence:

In Deuteronomy 33 (Verses 9b-11) we read:

"...he **watched over your word** and guarded your covenant. He **teaches your precepts to Jacob and your law to Israel**. He offers incense before you and whole burnt offerings on your altar.

Bless all his skills, O Lord, and be pleased with the work of his hands."

- We are to be guardians over God's word
- we are to be dispensers of that Word
- & we are to be, YES, skilled in that Word

Q. I wonder who you have been signposting lately in the right direction? **#4:**

4] We are SALT, we are LIGHT

We have already said that the Levites were a people whom God set aside in order to serve in connection with the tabernacle (that mobile temple that was given to Moses and constructed whilst they were at Sinai).

We've said that **SOME were to serve as Priest's** officiating at the altar of the Lord.

And for the rest of the clans who were not in the priestly line:

- the **Kohathites** - dealt with packing and unpacking the **tabernacle furniture**
- the **Gershonites** - dealt with the care of the **various curtains and coverings**
- and then the **Merarites** - they had the job of caring for and carrying the **various frames and poles**

BUT A QUESTION ARISES - and it is this:

Q. What did the Levites do when they were back at home, when they were not officiating directly in some way with the tabernacle?

And the answer was that they had the responsibility to be SALT & LIGHT where they were.

*** You see the Levites gave **the invisible** YHWH or LORD, a **visible, tangible presence** because they saw themselves as **His representatives**, as **His Ambassadors**. ***

As Paul put it in:

2 Corinthians 5 verse 20 "We are therefore **Christ's ambassadors**, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

Have you ever thought that the first whiff anybody might get as to what the gospel is about, what the Bible is about, is what they see lived out in you.

Your life is rather like a COMIC STRIP for the gospel - people these days are not so much into reading but they are pretty happy to look at pictures, pretty happy to read COMICS and so, at a level, that's you and that's me.

That being said - I wonder whether we make such a bad impression of Jesus and the wonderful promises of God that people feel it's nothing more worthy than a **SILLY CARTOON!!!** #5:

5] We are at the centre not just the periphery, the outskirts

We learn from the book of **Numbers chapter 35** what exactly the Levites got in each of the 48 cities that were allocated from every single tribe in Israel right up and down the land both East and West of the Jordan. We read:

"...the Lord said to Moses, 'Command the Israelites to give the Levites **towns** to live in from the inheritance the Israelites will possess. And give them **pasturelands around the towns**. Then they will have towns to live in and pasturelands for their cattle, flocks and all their other livestock.
'The pasturelands around the towns that you give the **Levites will extend out fifteen hundred feet from the town wall**. Outside the town, measure **three thousand feet** on the **east** side, three thousand on the **south** side, three thousand on the **west** and three thousand on the **north**, with the town in the center. They will have this area as pastureland for the towns. '"

God so constructed things that God's representatives, these Levites - would be right at the heart of their towns. There was to be no putting these Levites in some corner.

For a whole mile in every direction from the town or city wall you would be confronted not by a settled agricultural existence but with the more nomadic presence of the Levites livestock.

we too, as Christian Levites should consider ourselves as those who are not to be just pushed out to the very outskirts of life but as those who are right in the very heart of what is going on in our society.

Q. What a challenge that is?

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on ourselves in the OT light that these LEVITES shed:

- REMINDS US - that we are **Christians in CHURCH** **AND** **Christians in COMMUNITY**
- REMINDS US - that we are **the GATHERED CHURCH** (on Sundays, in the midweek at Housegroups) **AND** we are **the SCATTERED CHURCH** for all the rest of the time

I want to end with one final thought - with a final question:

It is one thing for a set of people to be (at some level) a MODEL for us BUT:

Q. HOW & WHERE DO WE GET THE POWER TO LIVE A MODEL LIFE?

Just earlier on I mentioned that the Thessalonian believers were one such set of people that Paul pointed to as a model and

1 Thessalonians 1 verse 7 So Paul had said of them: ". **AND SO YOU BECAME A MODEL** to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia."

HE WENT ON SOON AFTER TO SAY:

" They tell how you **turned: TO GOD // FROM IDOLS // TO SERVE THE LIVING AND TRUE GOD...**"

And this was very much the Levites story:

After the Golden Calf incident when the Israelites, in a wholesale manner turned away from God to Idols (in this case the Golden Calf - the Levites acted differently - they chose to stay close to God, to stand in alignment to God:

- So this is **Moses speaking** in **Exodus 32** (verses 26-29):
"Whoever is for the LORD, come to me." And all **the Levites rallied to him**. Then he said to them, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbour.' " The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. Then Moses said, "**You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.**"

The Levites would ever have looked back to that day and recognised that God had **ONCE FOR ALL TURNED THEIR ORIGINAL CURSE INTO A BLESSING**.

And that is where we derive POWER from - that God has taken our broken lives and made them something sweet. Before we were broken, before we were in sin AND God has reversed the curse for us - we are now forgiven, we are now adopted - where we had "no hope" now we have a hope and a future.

When you have that sure and certain knowledge that there is no more curse attaching to you - then you have power to live in the light of it and to live as transformed people - affecting and influencing others - signposting them to the source of blessing that you yourselves have experienced first hand.

AMEN