

November 11, 2018
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Deuteronomy
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Deuteronomy 18:1-8.

1. What is the difference between a priest and a Levite?
2. How was it that the Levites receiving provisions of food and wool could be considered a blessing?
3. Try to explain how “inheriting the LORD” could be a blessing.
4. Is it possible that God is not saving as many people in America as He once did?
5. How does a congregation determine the salary for a servant of God?

THE LEVITES’ BLESSING **Deuteronomy 18:1-8**

In this long speech to the people preparing to enter the Promised Land, Moses had just instructed them regarding God’s will regarding judges, kings, and the governmental leaders of the nation (17:8-20). The people would reveal conformity to God’s righteousness based on how they related to these God-ordained authorities.

Now Moses turned his attention to the Levites and the priests who were part of the Levites. God gave specific instruction about the position these people filled and the part they were to play in the trans-Jordan economy. The people would prove that they were seeking the

LORD’s righteousness if they treated the Levites the way God required.

The Levites required special care in God’s plan for the nation because they were special people in the scope of God’s will. God chose the Levites to enjoy a unique relationship with Himself. They were the object of His special favor and in return were supposed to be dedicated to serving God’s interests in the nation.

Of course our culture would call this unfair, biased, discriminatory, and pass a law to forbid such intolerance. The powers that be in America would be sure to level hefty fines against any effort to recognize people specially chosen by God to serve His purposes. In a way, that attitude is already being manifested. Business owners are not allowed to honor God by refusing to affirm sin. Coaches are not allowed to talk about God or serve God in the sports arena. Pastors are generally dismissed out of hand if they dare to speak up at town hall meetings. And ministers of the gospel are definitely not allowed to weigh in on politics without endangering their church’s gift of tax exemption granted by the all-benevolent government.

Obviously, Satan, the prince of the air, the power that works in the children of disobedience, the great influencer of earthly kingdoms is opposed to God’s plan. In Moses’s day, Satan’s desire would have been to completely eradicate the Levites and the priesthood—which by the way he has accomplished for a season. Satan’s desire is now the complete dismantling of modern ministry. It is likely that his plan is to either remove all vestiges of Bible preaching churches or to so infect them with fleshliness that the ministries could not possibly reflect God’s truth.

God had a specific plan for the Levites. Israel would prove they were pursuing righteousness by how well they conformed to God’s plan. It seems interesting that in this text about instruction there is no mention about the Levites’ duties. The only issue here is the people’s care of the Levites. In similar principle, God has a plan for the ministers of His Word today. We prove pursuit of God’s righteousness by how well we conform to His rules for them.

God’s Plan for the Levites.

In this instruction from Moses, it really appears as though the Levites seemed to get “short-changed.” In the opening words, we run into a reference to the priests as well as the entire tribe of Levi. *The Levitical priests, all the tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel (v.1a).*

What is the difference? All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. It is easy to understand how all Levites were men who were born in the family of Levi. Levi was Jacob’s third son through his wife Leah. Each of Jacob’s twelve sons were heads of the various people groups that made up Israel. God chose for Levi’s descendants to have a unique place in the nation. All of the men born in Levi’s posterity were potentially the LORD’s chosen servants.

But some of Levi’s descendants were even more unique in that they served as priests. To be a priest, a man had to be born in Aaron’s lineage. There are also other, more specific qualifications listed in the Mosaic Law for those who would serve as priests. But, the most obvious is that the guy had to be born in Aaron’s lineage. Let’s not forget that Aaron and his brother Moses were born in Levi’s line. Therefore, all priests were Levites first. But not all Levites were born in Aaron’s line and, therefore, not all of them would qualify to be priests.

The priests made up a very special group of God’s servants. They were responsible for maintaining the worship at the tabernacle and later at the temple. Therefore, the priests had to live wherever the Ark of the Covenant was located, which meant wherever the tabernacle was set up. Much of the time in the Old Testament history, the tabernacle was in Shiloh. But not all the time.

Levites on the other hand could live in any of the Levitical cities. God commanded that the Israelites set aside forty-eight cities where Levites would live and minister. Six of those cities were “sanctuary cities” where people could go to live securely until it was proven they did not commit murder when their peer died in an accident. Typically, the Levites lived in any of those forty-eight cities, except in times when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” In those days, you might find a Levite living almost anywhere.

The one most glaring thing all Levites and priests had in common was that they had no inheritance according to God’s law. The first verse stated, *shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel*

(v.1a). The very next verse says the same thing. *They shall have no inheritance among their brothers (v.2a).* The words *portion* or *inheritance* (v.1) speak specifically of land, property, or a real part, tangible portion of the nation of Israel. Throughout Deuteronomy those words refer to real land in the Middle East that God gave to real people according to His promise. That someone else occupied those pieces of property previously is immaterial. All land on earth belongs to God the Creator who is free to give it to whomever He chooses when He chooses. Which conclusion would solve all the Middle East conflict today. But who wants to listen to God?

God has the authority to give whatever piece of land He chooses to whomever He chooses. And He chose not to give any to the descendants of Levi. While all the other tribes were allotted real property, by families, in the settling of the Promised Land, the tribe that emanated from Levi received no similar section. As we will see, God had a particular reason for His plan.

But humans often don’t understand God’s plans or approve of God’s plans. For example, what would be the response if the government made this new rule? “Everyone in America qualifies for social security and health care. The only exception is for people with the last name ‘Smith.’ They have no portion.” Of course, everyone named Smith (as well as many others) are going to respond, “What! You can’t do that!” No, not in America. That kind of apparently arbitrary discrimination is supposedly against the law. But God can do whatever He chooses to do.

And what did He choose to do for the Levites? Actually, God blessed the Levites abundantly. He gave them material blessings. Specifically, God ordered that the Levites should share His own food offerings. *They shall eat the LORD’s food offerings as their inheritance (v.1b).*

God’s law required many very specific kinds of offerings. Those required offerings and sacrifices served a couple of important purposes. For example, by offering those things, the people revealed their obedience to God, love for God, and respect for God. Also, the offering of those many sacrifices also pointed forward in a prophetic way to the great need for the final sacrifice for sins, the blood of Jesus. The writer to the Hebrew Christians pointed out how Christ’s sacrifice fulfilled those pictures. *But in these sacrifices there is a*

reminder of sin every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Hebrews 10:3-4) . . . then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second (Hebrews 10:9).

But there was also another important purpose served in all those offerings of meat and grain. What the people obediently offered to God, God passed on to the Levites. It was as though the Levites and their families ate at God's table. Therefore, the principle was that the Levites should find their security in God Himself, God alone. And yet it depended on God's people being obedient to God. God commanded the rest of the people to provide this blessing.

We saw the general rule for this provision back in chapter fourteen. *And you shall not neglect the Levite who is within your towns, for he has no portion or inheritance with you. At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do (Deuteronomy 14:27-29).*

The more specific instruction for providing for the Levites is here in our text. *And this shall be the priests' due from the people, from those offering a sacrifice, whether an ox or a sheep: they shall give to the priest the shoulder and the two cheeks and the stomach. The firstfruits of your grain, of your wine and of your oil, and the first fleece of your sheep, you shall give him (vv.3-4).* According to God's law, the people were not allowed to give the Levites junk or leftovers. The shoulder and cheeks were the best cuts of the animal. The firstfruits were the best of the harvest. The first fleece was the best wool.

Added to this provision, God also allowed some small provision through the Levites' own work in the cities He allotted to them. *Command the people of Israel to give to the Levites some of the inheritance of their possession as cities for them to dwell in. And you shall give to the Levites pasturelands around the cities. The cities shall be theirs to dwell in, and their pasturelands shall be for their cattle and for their livestock and for all their beasts (Numbers 35:2-3).*

Of course all the sacrifices were taken to the tabernacle. We can speculate that the extreme amount of meat, grain, wine, oil, and wool was distributed in some way to the Levites in the forty-eight cities. Could the Levites in turn sell some of the excess? Did they also sell some of the excess produce and meat from their little farms? The essential principle (regardless of how it was executed) was that God promised to care for His chosen servants as the people submitted to God's plan for sacrifices and offerings.

But the Levites received even greater blessings from God in that God gave them spiritual blessings. The Lord Himself was the Levites' inheritance. Moses instructed, *the LORD is their inheritance, as he promised them (v. 2b)*. Notice that the inheritance of the LORD Himself was according to His promise. He gave His word that He Himself was the Levites' inheritance.

This might be a bit hard to comprehend as a blessing. Would you be satisfied with the inheritance God or would you rather inherit \$200,000? Maybe we can illustrate the difference like this. You sit in the lawyer's office as he reads the provisions of your father's will. As the lawyer reads through the stipulations, you grow more and more discouraged. He is reading, "To Bill, I leave one large egg of solid gold." "To Harry, I leave one large egg of solid gold." "To Mary, I leave one large egg of solid gold." Having read through the inheritance granted to all the family members, the attorney turns to you and says, "You didn't get a golden egg." Would you jump up and express your displeasure? Would you claim that your loving father really wasn't so kind and loving after all. Wait. Sit down and listen. The attorney reads, "To Jim, I leave the goose that lays the golden eggs." Would you rather inherit the blessings of God or the God who is the source of all blessing?

Furthermore, when God determined this blessing, He made the choice in His sovereign wisdom. *For the LORD your God has chosen him out of all your tribes to stand and minister in the name of the LORD, him and his sons for all time (v.5)*. In the previous verse, we learned that God's blessing of Himself being the Levites' inheritance was according to His promise. Here the LORD's blessing was according to His sovereign election. Instead of giving the Levites physical stuff, He gave them the privilege of being His special ministers. They were vocationally dedicated to doing God's work

among God's people. Especially the priests evidenced this choice as they represented the people to God and God to the people.

Specific Instruction for Levitical Service.

In the last couple of verses of our text we discover some unique instruction for how the Levites might serve God. For example, a Levite might show up for work at the main place. Not all Levites lived near the tabernacle. Therefore, *if a Levite comes from any of your towns out of all Israel, where he lives . . . (v.6a)*. It appears that Levites had some duties in the outlying towns or as they were called, the Levitical cities. Maybe this was even more true when the high places, places apart from Jerusalem, where the people worshiped (not a positive thing) were established later in the monarchy.

But the gist of this statement indicates that periodically the Levites would leave the Levitical cities to go minister at the tabernacle or temple. We know that in Jesus's day during the Passover Feast so many thousands of lambs were sacrificed that it required over 20,000 Levites to handle them all. If that was also true in Old Testament times, those Levites no doubt came from their towns .

Levites in general were chosen to serve the LORD. However, they could show up for service at the place of God's presence (ark, tabernacle) according to their desire. The rule was – *and he may come when he desires – to the place that the LORD will choose (v.6b)*. But the expectation was that if they should show up at the tabernacle it was to minister. He might go to the place the LORD chose, *and ministers in the name of the LORD his God, like all his fellow Levites who stand to minister there before the LORD (v.7)*. To minister in the name of the LORD is to do His work for His glory. It is a very special privilege. To minister before the LORD in the LORD's name was to engage in eternal work.

However, it seems that the willful movement of the Levites was not the real issue in this instruction. The important matter was care for the visiting Levite. The LORD required the people to give him equal portions, *then he may have equal portions to eat (v.8a)*. This rule applied to the circumstance stated above. If a Levite showed up

at the tabernacle to serve, he and his family shared equally in the offerings given.

The Levite should receive equal provision even if there was patrimony involved. He was to receive equal provision *besides what he receives from the sale of his patrimony (v.8b)*. What was the sale of the Levite's patrimony? In the Levitical cities, the Levites could own houses. Those houses would be passed down from fathers to sons. *And if one of the Levites exercises his right of redemption, then the house that was sold in a city they possess shall be released in the jubilee. For the houses in the cities of the Levites are their possession among the people of Israel (Leviticus 25:33)*. If a Levite showed up at the tabernacle to serve, he was not penalized for having invested wisely or having sold an inherited house.

Current Application of the Instruction.

Where have all the Levites gone? You might have noticed that there are not many Levites in our setting. Obviously that is a strictly Old Testament concept. There is no need for Levites since Jesus fulfilled the law of sacrifices with His own blood.

But there is still a need for dedicated servants of the Lord, and herein is a problem. Few young men are "called to be Levites" in this day. The reality is obvious. That the population in Bible colleges across America is shrinking is painfully obvious. Worse is that many, if not most, Bible teaching Seminaries are struggling to attract students. Likewise Evangelical mission boards as a whole are experiencing an attrition rate on the foreign field that is not being offset by new missionaries. The reality is that either God is not choosing servants according to His sovereign choice, or those men He is choosing aren't listening or being obedient.

Is this a sign that Christianity is losing popularity? There is no argument that Christianity, or even simple respect for God and His Bible, is waning in our culture. Another obvious proof according to researchers like George Barna is that ministries that focus on teaching and preaching the Bible are shrinking, while ministries that focus on

programs and felt needs to attract people are growing. Is God just saving a lot fewer people in our society than He used to? Or is it possible that for a couple of generations we have been living on the reservoir of religion that previous generations of genuine Christians filled up through their pursuit of God's righteousness. And now the reservoirs are running dry.

Is this a sign of God's judgment against the American culture? A sure sign that God is judging a culture is the deafening silence of His Word through preachers. There is much biblical precedence for drawing this conclusion. God promised that a sign of His judgment on a people is His silence. The messenger Isaiah told rebellious Israelites, *When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood (Isaiah 1:15)*. That truth was illustrated when the rebellious king, *Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets (1 Samuel 28:6)*.

In the same way, God promised that a sign of His judgment would be the silence or lack of preachers. God told messenger Micah to declare, *Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without divination. The sun shall go down on the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God (Micah 3:6-7)*.

God also promised that a judgment worse than agricultural famine is a famine of preaching His Word. *"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord GOD, "when I will send a famine on the land – not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD" (Amos 8:11)*. Ezekiel preached the same warning: *Disaster comes upon disaster; rumor follows rumor. They seek a vision from the prophet, while the law perishes from the priest and counsel from the elders (Ezekiel 7:26)*. Why are preachers who preach the Bible plainly and clearly becoming fewer and fewer? Maybe it's God's judgment against a rebellious people.

The good news is that there are still preachers who declare God's Word. There are still men who God regenerates through the same old-fashioned work of the Holy Spirit. There are still men who God selects to dedicate their lives to serving Him by preaching and

teaching His Good News (the gospel). And because there are still servants of the Lord, we need to care for them.

How? What kind of care does the LORD desire for His servants. We are to offer financial provision. When an elder (pastor) is vocational, as opposed to an overseer who is employed outside the church, the church is responsible to care for him. That is the instruction Paul gave to Pastor Timothy. *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain" and, "The laborer deserves his wages" (1 Timothy 5:17-18)*.

Paul also used the picture of soldiers, shepherds, and farmers to explain God's rule. *Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? (1 Corinthians 9:7-9)*.

Very specifically those who learn from the dedicated preacher of the Bible are supposed to care for the preacher. *One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches (Galatians 6:6)*.

Just like in Moses's day, this care was an indication of the people's pursuit of practical righteousness. "Similarly today, the manner in which God's people attend to His servants is a barometer of their spiritual health. A minister in need is a symptom of a people living independently of God." (Daniel Block, *The NIV Application Commentary*, "Deuteronomy," Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012, 431-432).

But money is not the only provision we should give God's vocational servants. We are also to offer relational provision. That means that the people of the congregation should work at esteeming the individual who God has called to be His servant. *We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13)*. And still in this age, the best compliment is imitation. *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word*

of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith (Hebrews 13:7). That kind of obedience is so important, not just for the leader's sake but because it offers the obedient one eternal reward. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you (Hebrews 13:17).

Many Old Testament principles offer modern-day applications. While we do not try to copy the details of the law, it is good to recognize that the New Testament states the same principles in terms that we can do.