

# The Levitical Cities: A Curse to a Blessing

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Joshua 21:1–3; 41–45  
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By the time we come to our current text, the land God promised Abraham has already been distributed among the tribes. The tribe of Levi, like the tribe of Simeon, didn't receive a region of its own. Instead, the Lord gave Levi forty-eight cities scattered throughout the territory of the other tribes. These cities also included pastures for livestock.

This evening, I want to consider three things about this. First, we'll look at the historical background that led up to Levi's unusual inheritance. Second, we'll see how Jacob's curse became God's blessing and why. And third, we consider how all of this applies to us.

## The Curse on Levi

This is the fourth time in the book of Joshua that Joshua mentioned the Levites wouldn't receive an inheritance of their own but instead were taken under God's special care. Their inheritance was God himself. This is important because it reveals an abundance of God's grace to all his people.

To appreciate this, we have to go back to Genesis 34. Here Shechem the Hivite violated Dinah, one of Jacob's daughters. Later, when he and his father approached Jacob for Dinah's hand in marriage, Jacob's sons said that they would allow such a thing only if all the men of Shechem's city were circumcised. I suppose they thought no one would agree to such a blood plan. But they did. However, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's full brothers, refused to let the marriage proceed. On the third day after the men of Shechem circumcised themselves, while they were still in pain, these two brothers killed all the males of the city and rescued their sister.

Jacob was, of course, angered by Shechem's mistreatment of his daughter, but he was equally displeased with the behavior of his sons. He said to Simeon and Levi, *Ye have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land,... And I being few in number, they shall gather themselves together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house* (Gen. 34:30).

This incident came up again a few years later. In Genesis 49, when Jacob addressed each of his sons on his deathbed, he spoke thus about Simeon and Levi: *Simeon and Levi are brethren; instruments of cruelty are in their habitations. O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their*

*assembly, mine honour, be not thou united: for in their anger they slew a man, and in their selfwill they digged down a wall. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel: I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel (vv. 5–7).*

As a punishment for their sin, Jacob assured these two brothers that they wouldn't receive a portion of the land that God promised Abraham. They would be scattered. Simeon, as we've already seen, was scattered in Judah. He was given cities that were mostly located along the southern border. This was both good and bad. It was good because Simeon benefited from Judah's relative faithfulness, and it was bad because the cities Simeon occupied were military outposts that protected Judah from southern assaults.

But God dealt differently with the tribe of Levi, showing a clear preference for them in Exodus 6. Verse 14 introduces a list of *the heads of their fathers' houses*. We would expect that the heads of all the tribes would be listed here. Instead, we have one verse about Reuben, one verse about Simeon, and the rest of the chapter (fifteen verses) about Levi. And that's where it stops. No more is said about Jacob's other sons. It seems God gave the list of tribal heads only to get us to Aaron and Moses, who were descendants of Levi. Verse 26 says, *These are that Aaron and Moses, to whom the LORD said, Bring out the children of Israel from the land of Egypt according to their armies*. God wanted to establish that these two men were his spokesmen. But why this tribe and why these men, especially after the incident with Dinah? We don't know.

Later on, the Levites vindicated themselves in Exodus 32. When Moses came down from the mountain and discovered God's people worshiping a golden calf, he said, *Who is on the LORD'S side? Let him come unto me*. Who responded? Only the Levites. The story continues: *And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him*. Moses instructed them to kill every man who had taken part in the atrocity, and that day the Levites killed three thousand men. Moses blessed them for it. He said, *Consecrate yourselves to day to the LORD, even every man upon his son, and upon his brother; that he may bestow upon you a blessing this day (Exod. 32:26–29)*.

How did God bless the Levites? By not only blessing them but also by making them a blessing to the other tribes. We see this in Deuteronomy 33:10, where God assigned them to be teachers of the law and servants at the altar. Moses wrote, *They shall teach Jacob thy judgments, and Israel thy law: they shall put incense before thee, and hold burnt sacrifice upon thine altar*. Through the Levites, all the tribes had access to the Word of God. The people could have had no greater blessing. And Moses prayed for God to bless Levi in their ministry. He said, *Bless, LORD, his substance, and accept the work of his hands: smite through the loins of them that rise against him, and of them that hate him, that they rise not again (v. 11)*.

The Israelites understood how God had blessed the Levites and made them a blessing to others. Thus, they willingly gave them cities out of their territories. Verse 3 of our text says, *And the children of Israel gave unto the Levites out of their inheritance, at the commandment of the LORD, these cities and their suburbs.*

## The Blessing of Levi

Over the years, the tribe of Levi blessed God's people with many noteworthy leaders. We've already mentioned Moses and Aaron.

Consider Moses in particular. His godly parents, Amran and Jochebed, protected him from Pharaoh, and Lord honored this by taking Moses into Pharaoh's house, where he received the best education of the day. He enjoyed tremendous privilege and power, and could have become a Pharaoh himself someday. But instead he chose his own people and their God. The book of Hebrews says, *By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible. Through faith he kept the passover, and the sprinkling of blood, lest he that destroyed the firstborn should touch them (Heb. 11:24–28).*

Likewise, Moses' brother Aaron received the priesthood. The third high priest in his line was a man named Phinehas, who is best known for exercising God's judgment in Numbers 25. When Balaam dispatched a horde of pagan harlots among the people of God to secure their downfall by sexual immorality and idolatry, Phinehas took action. He killed a man named Zimri and his Moabite prostitute with a single spear, thus stalling the plague of God's wrath. God honored him by giving him an everlasting priesthood. He said, *Behold, I give unto him my covenant of peace: And he shall have it, and his seed after him, even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was zealous for his God, and made an atonement for the children of Israel (vv. 12–13).*

Eli was also a Levite. Although he failed to correct his wayward sons, God allowed him to serve as a judge in Israel for forty years and let him live to the ripe old age of ninety-eight (1 Sam. 4:15, 18).

Ezra, the scribe who served with Nehemiah, was from the same tribe. He was a man of conviction and wrote the book that bears his name.

In the New Testament, we find that John the Baptist was a Levite. His father was a priest in the division of Abijah, and his mother was a direct descendent of Aaron (Luke 1:5). The Lord sent him to prepare for the Messiah's arrival, as the prophets Isaiah and Malachi predicted centuries earlier.

Isaiah wrote, *The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: and the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it* (Isa. 40:3–5). Malachi added two prophecies, one foretelling the Messiah coming to his temple (Mal. 3:1–3) and another predicting the coming of Elijah the prophet before *the great and dreadful day of the Lord* (Mal. 4:5–6). John, indeed, came *in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord* (Luke 1:17). Even Jesus said of him, *Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist* (Matt. 11:11).

So, by scattering the tribe of Levi among the people of God, the Lord prospered them all. God's people saw his righteous judgment of sin turned into an unimaginable blessing.

## A Continuing Light

Now, what does this mean for us? Because of their priesthood, the Levites were a light among the people of God, reminding them that God himself would take away the sins of those who believe. The New Testament applies this to believers.

Consider what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven* (Matt. 5:16). And the apostle Paul exhorted the Philippians to *do all things without murmurings and disputings: that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life* (Phil. 2:14–16a). Our good works draw attention to our commitment to Jesus Christ and therefore glorify God, but they're incomplete unless we tie them to the gospel with words. We need to talk about Jesus. The gospel explains why we do what we do and holds out hope for sinners whose lives are a mess.

Peter followed a similar line of thought in the second chapter of his first epistle. Citing Exodus 19, he wrote that we are *a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ* (v. 5). Every believer is a priest in the sense that we present our bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord (Rom. 12:1). We pray for each other. We hold our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. Yes, we even pray for the conversion of the lost. The Lord gave us the gift of faith so that we could do these things, so that we could shine as lights in the world. But Peter was even more specific than this. A few verses later, he repeated our glorious status before God. He wrote, *But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people*. But this time he didn't

leave it up to us to figure out what our spiritual service should be. The verse continues: *That ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light* (v. 9). Because the light of the gospel has shined on us, our spiritual service is to broadcast that light for others. And how do we do this? By showing forth the praises of God. Here the verb translated *shew forth* (ἐξαγγεΐλητε) literally means to proclaim or report. It's talking about a verbal testimony. We testify to each other and to those outside the church about all that God has done for us through Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection.

Like the Levites, we're scattered. Paul said that we live in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. And yet, we can also bear a vibrant testimony for our Savior in deed and word. Not only does the Holy Spirit work *in* us, he also works *through* us. This is all part of what he calls us to as his people and servants. Amen.