

*Merciful Provisions: Joshua 20-21*

Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church

Sunday, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015

The sermon title for this morning is “Merciful Provisions.” What we’re going to see in these two chapters of Joshua are some very merciful provisions which the Lord makes for His people.

We serve a very merciful God. He is a God of justice, yes. And He is also a God of abundant mercy. I hope each of us can gain a deeper glimpse into God’s mercy today as we consider this portion of Scripture.

We’re nearing the end of our study of the Old Testament book of Joshua. We’ve been gleaning spiritual truths from these amazing stories about Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land. The Lord has led them, miraculously, into the Promised Land and given them success in battle. Last Sunday we studied chapters 13-19 that tell of the distribution of the land to the various tribes.

This morning we’re going to look at 2 more chapters that conclude the section about the distribution of the land. In chapters 13-19 all but one of the tribes received a specific allotment of land. The tribe of Levi is the one tribe that hasn’t yet been told where to reside. That’s what we’re going to find out in chapters 20-21. Chapter 21 lists 48 cities that were designated for the Levites. Chapter 20 lists 6 of those Levitical cities which are to be cities of refuge.

So let’s look at God’s merciful provision to His people. First, His merciful provision in appointing these cities of refuge. Then secondly, His merciful provision in giving the Levites cities spread throughout all the land. As we’ll see, this was a mercy to the Levites as well as to all of the tribes.

### **Cities of Refuge**

Read Josh 20:1-6

Now, to understand this better, we need to include the fuller set of instructions communicated through Moses. Notice in verse 2 the Lord says, “Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses . . .”

If you want to look at the fuller set of instructions about these cities, you can find them in Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19. I’ll summarize the main points for you based on what I’ve just

read from Joshua 20, and then filling in further details from Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19.

There are 3 key individuals spoken of here. First, there is someone who has died. Second, there is the manslayer, the person who caused the death. And third, there is an avenger of blood. This individual is a family member of the person who died, and this avenger of blood takes responsibility for carrying out the death penalty. That's how it worked at this point in Israel's history. There was to be an avenger of blood who would go and kill the murderer.

We see God's mercy and fairness in appointing these cities of refuge, because it's a measure that assures only murderers receive the death penalty, and not those who accidentally bring about somebody's death. The passages in Numbers and Deuteronomy give some examples of each category.

If a person is known to hate another individual, and they lie in wait for them, and use an iron or stone or wooden weapon to kill them, then the person is a murderer. The murderer is to be put to death.

However, if the manslayer had no hatred toward the other individual, was not seeking their harm, was not lying in wait for them, but instead something happened by accident . . . For instance, dropping a stone without seeing the person there, or swinging an axe and the head of the axe slips from the handle . . . in those situations the manslayer is not a murderer.

The cities of refuge are to protect that individual from the death penalty. Sadly, someone has died. And the instinct of the avenger of blood is to avenge the blood of their loved one. My brother died, therefore the one responsible for his death should die too. But God says, No. God makes a way for the accidental manslayer to be protected.

### The Value of Human Life

Now, let's back up for a moment and talk about the value of human life. I've mentioned that the murderer is to be put to death. If a person intentionally murdered another human being, out of hatred in his heart, premeditated, then the murderer was to be put to death. Why is that?

We find an explanation for that in Genesis 9, following the Flood.

At the beginning of Genesis 9, after God tells Noah and his sons to be fruitful and multiply, he says that animals will fear them. And then He says, “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.” This shows us the drastic difference between human life and animal life. Human life is infinitely more valuable and precious. Animals can be used for food. We have clear biblical sanction here to eat meat. That’s one of the reasons God put animals here. That doesn’t mean we can be cruel to animals. Proverbs says, “Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast” (Proverbs 12:10). Animals aren’t here for us to torture or torment. But we are allowed to kill and eat.

This is not true when we talk about human life. Human life is on a different level, because we are made in God’s image. And therefore it is an extremely serious offense against God to take the life of another human being. God shows us how serious it is by establishing capital punishment as the appropriate penalty for murder. Genesis 9:6 says, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” Murder is so serious that the murderer must be executed.

We also see in this God’s provision for His creation. This penalty is a means by which murder is restrained. Those who murder should be executed. Romans 13 in the New Testament specifies that it is the governing authorities who must bear the sword in order to punish the wrongdoer. The kind of punishment that God commands in Genesis 9 is appropriate and just, and a healthy society will have a respect for human life and will demonstrate that respect by putting to death those who murder.

So the death penalty is one very important aspect of justice. Another very important aspect of justice is making sure only murderers receive the death penalty. That’s what the cities of refuge are all about. God doesn’t want everyone taking these things into their own hands and doing whatever seems right in their own eyes. Instead, there’s a system for administering justice. The innocent manslayer, the individual who accidentally killed another person, could flee to one of the cities of refuge. Once there, the elders of the city were to listen to the explanation of what happened and listen to other witnesses as well (Numbers 35:30). And the congregation participated in this also, as it mentions here in Joshua 20:6. If there’s no evidence that the person maliciously murdered, then the innocent manslayer is permitted to remain safely in that city of refuge. The avenger of blood will not be allowed to kill the person as long as they remain in the city of

refuge. And then, at the time the high priest dies, the manslayer is allowed to return to his own city.

A couple more observations about this merciful provision.

One thing to notice is the location of these cities. They were evenly distributed throughout all of the land, so that wherever an incident might occur, an individual would have an opportunity of finding their way to refuge.

Another thing to notice is that the refuge is for anyone, including strangers and sojourners. Read verse 9. This reminds us of God's merciful inclusion of Rahab and her family as well as the Gibeonites.

In terms of application, one very practical and simple admonition from this is to pursue justice and fairness and mercy. God is just and merciful. As His children, we should be seeking, by His grace, to embody both justice and mercy. We should pray for discernment and impartiality when we're called upon to be peacemakers. In areas of leadership in your home or work, or in government, there should be a desire to give fair consequences for wrongdoing, while at the same time making sure individuals are not punished for things that aren't really their fault.

Parents, we can certainly think about this as we try to discipline our children appropriately. That requires a lot of wisdom, which is why we should be praying for God's wisdom as we shepherd our kids.

If you have a position in government, or at some point in the future find yourself serving in a role like that, definitely keep these principles in mind. We need justice and fairness in our land. We need judges who will make decisions based on unchanging moral principles rather than their own changing feelings.

And if you're a leader in the workplace, if you have people who report to you, there are things to think about there as well. How can you strike that appropriate balance of justice and mercy?

Another application we can make from these cities of refuge is to think about Christ as our refuge. Here we notice some similarities and differences. The cities of refuge were to protect those who had done something unintentional. Christ is a refuge for us, forgiving even our very intentional sins.

So run to Christ, like the unintentional killer would have run to one of those cities. Just imagine the energy and focus of that journey. If a man was in the woods, and the head of his axe

flew off and killed someone, he would know that he only has a short time to get to one of those cities. Within a short time the avenger of blood would be after him. So he would literally be running for his life.

That's how it is as we run to Christ. He is our only hope of refuge. Our sins are after us, seeking to condemn us. But we look to Christ. It's in Him we can have forgiveness. It's in Him that we can have the pronouncement made over us, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

### **Cities for the Levites**

The background we need to understand begins in Genesis 49. This is part of the story of Joseph. At this point in the story the entire family has moved to Egypt to live in the land of Goshen. And now Joseph's father Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel) calls his 12 sons to gather around him so that he can prophecy about their future. He begins with the oldest, Reuben, then Simeon and Levi. For all three of them, their "blessings" are really indictments. For Simeon and Levi, their fault was the rash way in which they responded when their sister was raped. That story is in Genesis 34.

Here's what Jacob says about Simeon and Levi in Genesis 49:5-7.

*"Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel."* (Genesis 49:5-7, ESV)  
In other words, they're not going to get their own inheritance, their own allotment of land.

The way this played out for the tribe of Simeon is that they received an inheritance within the allotment for Judah. The beginning of Joshua 19 describes that. Simeon was given some cities within Judah's territory.

For the Levites, they received 48 cities spread throughout the whole land. That's how they were scattered. Backing up again, another significant event in Levi's history is in Exodus 32 following the incident with the golden calf. Moses came down from the mountain and, to his dismay, found the people worshipping a golden calf. Part of Moses' response was to bring

punishment on the people by killing many of them. And it was the Levites who carried out this punishment. Moses said, “Who is on the Lord’s side? Come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. (Exodus 32:26) And the Levites put to death about 3,000 Israelites that day.

It was at that point that the Levites found out they were to be priestly tribe. They were to be specially designated to the service of the Lord. (Exodus 32:29)

This background helps us to appreciate what’s going on in Joshua 21. These are merciful provisions. It is a merciful provision to the Levites, that they receive a portion from every other tribe’s inheritance. And it’s also a merciful provision for the rest of the tribes, because they will have Levites, priests, living in their midst. Isn’t God amazing in the way He orchestrates these things? His sovereign goodness is all over this. Joshua 21 may seem like a boring chapter, because it’s basically a list of cities. But there’s a strong message here of God’s kindness to Levi, and to all of Israel.

### **Giving**

There are some lessons about giving in this story. That may sound like an odd application from this chapter. But when we understand what’s going on we can understand God’s intent for the Levites and their relationship with the rest of Israel. You see, the Levites were not given an inheritance of their own. Rather, God’s design was that the other tribes would each *give* a portion of their inheritance to the Levites. Numbers 35:8

*“The cities that you give to the Levites shall be the six cities of refuge, where you shall permit the manslayer to flee, and in addition to them you shall give forty-two cities. All the cities that you give to the Levites shall be forty-eight, with their pasturelands. And as for the cities that you shall give from the possession of the people of Israel, from the larger tribes you shall take many, and from the smaller tribes you shall take few; each, in proportion to the inheritance that it inherits, shall give of its cities to the Levites.”* (Numbers 35:6–8, ESV)

There’s the principle of proportionate giving. The Lord didn’t give the Levites an inheritance of their own, but designed that the other tribes would give gifts to the Levites, of land and food, according to what they had been given. And the Levites, in turn, were a blessing to the other tribes through their priestly service. It was to be a mutually edifying relationship, a merciful provision from God for the good of the whole people.

And here we see the roots of the New Testament instructions concerning proportionate giving for the benefit of those in need as well as to support the work of Gospel proclamation.

Let's look at that piece by piece: giving to those in need, and giving to support Gospel ministry.

### Giving to Those in Need

2 Corinthians 8:9-15 (page 968 in pew Bibles)

Notice in verse 10 he mentions the Corinthians' *desire* to participate in this collection. Paul is reminding them of a commitment they made a year prior to this. They had started gathering resources for the Jerusalem church. And verse 10 focuses not just on the fact that they were doing this, but that they *wanted* to do it! That's very important for Paul. He mentions it again in verse 11. He's exhorting them to finish what they started, and he refers to their readiness in desiring it. He wants their readiness, their eagerness, their desire, to be completed by following through with this collection.

Then he clarifies the expectations. He has spoken of the Macedonians who gave not only according to their means but beyond their means. He now clarifies that he's not asking the Corinthians to match or try to outdo the Macedonians. He's asking something very simple. He's asking them to give out of what they have (end of verse 11). He's asking them to give according to what they have, not according to what they do not have (verse 12). He wrote in a similar way in 1 Corinthians 16:2, where he was giving them instructions about this same collection. He wrote, "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, *as he may prosper*, so that there will be no collecting when I come." That's proportionate giving. According to the measure of your prosperity, you give out of that. As you prosper, you give. Those who have less will give less. Those who have more will give more. The point is: give according to what you have.

What he's clearly not saying is that people should give away every last dime they have so that they become destitute and homeless. Verse 13, "I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened . . ." That's not the way this works. That's not what Paul is calling for. He knows that some folks might be suspicious of this collection, and so he wants to assure them that he's not trying to take all their money in order that the Jerusalem saints might live in luxury. That's not what he's trying to do. He's

not trying to make the Corinthian believers materially poor and make the Jerusalem believers materially rich.

Another thing to notice in this collection that Paul is taking up . . . there's a special relationship between the Jewish believers in Jerusalem and these Gentile churches. The Jewish believers may have some desperate financial needs, but in terms of spiritual heritage and Christian leadership they have a lot to offer. So this seems to be a pretty fair exchange. The Gentiles have received spiritual blessings by way of the Jews, and now these Gentile churches have the opportunity to bless the Jewish believers with financial assistance. This is somewhat akin to the relationship between the Levites and the rest of Israel. The nation as a whole receives spiritual blessing through the priestly service of the Levites. And the Levites receive material blessings from Israel.

Another place where Paul talks about the collection for the Jerusalem believers is in Romans 15. "At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem [notice that theme again of *desiring* to give]. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them [Paul is saying that in some way the Gentile churches owe this contribution to the Jewish believers]. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings." (Romans 15:25-27)

This is fitting. This is appropriate. This is fair. And Paul wants the Corinthians to give *as they are able* in order to help the believers in need. He's asking for proportionate giving. The Macedonians gave very generously and sacrificially, but they still might not have actually given that much stuff. Even though they gave beyond their means, they just didn't have a whole lot to give. But the Corinthians, on the other hand, at least some of them, could have been pretty well off. They had a surplus. They had excess that they could either use to make their own lives more and more comfortable, or they could give it away. And Paul is saying, that's what needs to happen. You need to give it away. Those who have more than they need should give that surplus to help those who don't have enough.

As Americans, it may be difficult for us to distinguish needs and wants. There are a lot of wants that we quickly begin to think of as needs. I don't have a simple solution to this. But my hope is that we will be more and more shaped by the Scriptures and have a passion for the things that God is passionate about, and



that we will be loving and kind and sacrificial and generous like our Lord Jesus Christ. I hope that as the Lord provides for us that we would not be constantly on the lookout for new ways to spend money on ourselves. The media is certainly very good at bombarding our minds with things we simply *have to buy!* I hope instead, by God's grace, we will be constantly on the lookout for new ways to spend money on others—to help those in need, to be kind and generous to those around us, to support the church, to fund missions. So there's a question for you (and for me) to mull over this week. What do you really need? And what are some resources you have that you could use to bless others? Rather than turning inward and scheming about how you can spend it on yourself, look outside of yourself and strategize about how to make an eternal impact with your money and time and talents.

### Giving to Gospel Ministry

Another principle we see in the New Testament, rooted in what we've seen about the Levites, is giving to support those who proclaim the Gospel.

Paul speaks to this in a couple places. One is 1 Corinthians 9:13-14

*“Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.”* (1 Corinthians 9:13–14, ESV)

And then there's the unflattering passage in 1 Timothy 5 where Paul compares elders to an ox.

*“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, ESV)

So we see this principle carrying through in the New Testament. God calls some individuals to devote their vocational life to the work of Gospel ministry, whether that be someone like me serving as a pastor of a local church, or a missionary who is learning another language and seeking to communicate the Gospel to an unreached people group, or many other roles in Gospel ministry. It's a beautiful thing that God equips us and gifts us in different ways and brings Christians together in a mighty cooperation for the spread of the Gospel. Through the generous,

proportionate giving of God's people, many pastors and missionaries can focus all their time on the work of the church and missions.

### **God Keeps His Promises**

I want to close by commenting briefly on the last few verses of chapter 21.

Read Joshua 21:43-45

If you're tracking closely with the story in the book of Joshua, you'll feel some uneasiness as you read those verses. Because, as we learned last week, the people have not taken all the land the Lord has given. Nonetheless, it is still true that the Lord has been faithful to all His promises. And that should certainly encourage us.

Richard Hess, in his very helpful commentary on Joshua, makes this statement about the tension in these verses. "For the Christian, this text illustrates the tension between two opposites. On the one hand, there is the power of God's word to effect his will and to bring about a good end to his plan of redemption. On the other hand, sin and suffering remain in the world. These two contrasting 'plots' of world history await resolution in the final victory of Christ and his eternal rule of salvation, health and peace."<sup>1</sup>

That's a great application for us. God is faithful to His promises. His word is true and powerful, and His purposes will certainly come to fruition. But we still live in this fallen world. We still struggle against temptation and sin. And that should cause us to look longingly to Christ's return. There will come a day, brothers and sisters, when we experience rest on every side, when we will have perfect peace and eternal rest with our Savior. And that will be in our eternal Promised Land, our heavenly home, the incredible inheritance God is storing up for us.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hess, page 286