

## Sermon Outline

### **“AND THE LORD GAVE THEM REST”: A CHRISTIAN READING OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA**

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#### THE LORD GOD OF ISRAEL IS THEIR INHERITANCE (JOSHUA 13:33)

#### **I. Introduction**

#### **II. The Levites and Their Far Greater Inheritance (Joshua 13:33)**

- A. Joshua 13 focuses on the issue of the inheritance of the land east of the Jordan by three tribes (or two-and-a half tribes, to be exact).
- B. As we close of this chapter, verse 33 states: “But to the tribe of Levi Moses gave no inheritance...”
- C. But this statement is quickly followed by the reason the Levites were not given land: It was because “the LORD God of Israel is their inheritance, just as he said to them.”
- D. To understand what it means for the Levites to have God as their inheritance, we need to consult earlier portions of Scripture—especially portions in the *Torah*, the Five Books of Moses.

**\*Questions for reflection:** (1) What is the main topic in Joshua 33? (2) Why, according to v 33, were the Levites not given land?

#### **III. A Short History of the Levites**

- A. We will consult five portions in the writings of Moses
  1. Genesis 34
  2. Genesis 39
  3. Exodus 32
  4. Numbers 8
  5. Numbers 18
- B. Genesis 34: Levi’s violent act
  1. Levi was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, Israel’s forefather.
  2. Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, was violated by a Hivite named Shechem.

3. But Shechem was willing to marry Dinah, because he had fallen for her.
4. Shechem asks his father Hamor to negotiate a marriage agreement with Jacob.
5. Jacob's sons wanted to avenge their sister and so deceived Hamor.
6. They explained to Hamor that they were willing to allow Shechem to marry their sister—but only if the Hivites of his household underwent circumcision (Gen 34:15).
7. Hamor agreed.
8. While the men of Hamor's house were healing from their circumcision, Simeon and Levi attacked them.  
—Genesis 34:26: "They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword and took Dinah out of Shechem's house and went away."
9. Jacob was disgusted at the violence of his two sons did.

C. Genesis 39: The curse on Levi

1. It seems that God did not think well of the actions of Simeon and Levi.
2. While Levi was justified in wanting justice for his sister, they were not justified in going on a killing spree, failing to differentiate between criminals and innocent parties.
3. Jacob places a curse on his Simeon and Levi in Genesis 49:5-7:

"Simeon and Levi are brothers;  
 weapons of violence are their swords.  
<sup>6</sup>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.  
<sup>7</sup>*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.*

4. That is why Levi's children will not have any land.  
—It wasn't first because they were a special, upright people. Rather, it was because of their unjustified violence.

D. Exodus 32: Redemption of the Levites

1. Yet, God shows mercy to undeserving people.
2. Even a curse can become a channel of future blessing.
3. In Exodus 32, the tribe of Levi redeems itself through an act of fidelity.
4. When Moses was on the mountain receiving the Law of God, some of the Israelites took it upon themselves to create an idol of gold—a golden cow—for the people to worship.
5. The Lord informed Moses of what was happening at the foot of the mountain.
6. Upon seeing the blatant idolatry and immorality, Moses breaks the two tablets of stones, on which God’s Law was written; and orders that the people choose their sides—whether for the Lord or for the golden calf.
7. The sons of Levi show themselves faithful.
  - a. The same fierce zeal that was used unjustly against innocent people is now used in the service of God.
  - b. For this, God enlists the Levites into his holy service (Ex 32:25-29).
  - c. That was how the Levites regained their honor—by zealously preserving the glory of the Lord amongst his people.

E. Numbers 8: The consecration of the Levites

1. Here we have the dedication service where the tribe of Levi is set aside for the service of the Lord.
2. Near the start of this chapter, the Lord instructs Moses to perform a cleansing ritual on the Levites.
3. The ritual set aside the Levites from the rest of Israel and marked them out as a special tribe devoted to the service of the Lord at his tabernacle.
4. The Lord states clearly that the Levites belonged to him: “Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the people of Israel, and *the Levites shall be mine*” (v 14).
5. The Lord says, “And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the people of Israel, to do the service *for the people of Israel* at the tent of meeting and to make atonement *for the people of Israel*, that there may be no plague among the people of Israel when the people of Israel come near the sanctuary” (v 19).

F. Numbers 18:20: Concerning the inheritance of the Levites

1. “And the LORD said to Aaron, ‘You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel’” (v 20).
2. The Lord will devote himself to the Levites in a special way.
3. But what does it mean to have the Lord as an inheritance?
4. Verses 21-24 say, “‘To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance [.]’”
  - a. A tithe is a tenth of a portion.
  - b. Every tenth of the agricultural offerings from the people will be given to the Levites.
5. The Lord explains that this is “in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting [.]”  
—The Lord will provide for his household attendants!
6. Verses 22-23 explain the importance of the Levites’ work: “so that the people of Israel do not come near the tent of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. But the Levites shall do the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity.”
7. Verse 24 restates the reason for the Levites’ non-inheritance of land: “For the tithe of the people of Israel, which they present as a contribution to the LORD, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance. Therefore I have said of them that *they shall have no inheritance* among the people of Israel.”

#### G. Concluding thoughts

1. The Levites don’t have land was because they were punished for their ancestor’s unjust violence.
2. Since they demonstrated zeal for the Lord, God himself redeems this tribe.
3. While the withholding of land remains, the Lord draws near to the Levites in a special way.
4. The Lord has adopted the Levites to be the personal attendants of his house.
5. Out of the tribe of Levi will come the priests and servants who will serve in the Lord’s house on behalf of the rest of the nation of Israel.
6. Through the Levites, Israel will learn the Word of God—and Israel will be reconciled to God.

7. For this great honor which they already have, the Levites can afford to forego land—it is a small deprivation considering all that they already have.
8. The Lord will provide for his own servants and meet their needs through the offerings that go to him.
9. Most of all, the Lord himself will be the portion of his servants.

**\*Questions for reflection:** (1) Why were the Levites cursed by Jacob in Gen 34? (2) How did the Levites regain their honor in Exodus 32? (3) How does the Lord override the consequences of the initial curse over the Levites?

#### **IV. The Levites As Symbols of Life Before God**

- A. Like the ordinary Israelites, we look at the Levites and wonder what it would be to serve the Lord in such close proximity to the divine Presence.
- B. We long for a closer walk with God—a longing placed in our hearts by our heavenly Father himself.
- C. God answers this longing by uniting us to the Lord Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, who is also God in human flesh.
- D. We need to consider Colossians 3:1-4 at this point.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup>For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup>When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

1. In this portion of Scripture, we see the realization of the reality of the Levitical spirit in our lives today.
2. The apostle Paul assumes that he is writing to people who have repented of their sins and put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. By faith in Christ, we have been joined to him.
4. Because we are joined to Christ, what is true of Christ is now true for us—in the sight of God.
  - a. If Christ has died to sin, then we have also died to sin.

- b. If Christ has been raised from the dead, then we too have been raised from the dead.
    - c. If Christ has been raised into heaven to the right hand of God, then we too have been raised with him.
  - 5. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, Paul teaches Christians that in Christ, we are now in the presence of God in heaven.
  - 6. Thus, we are to set our minds and our hearts on “the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God...”
  - 7. In fact, Paul goes even further to say that our life is actually “hidden *with Christ in God.*”
  - 8. The center of our existence is *with Christ and in God*—Christ Jesus, who dwells before God, is the Center of our lives.
  - 9. Thus, not only are our identities secure and safe from all the unpredictable powers of this world; but God calls us no longer to waste our time pursuing things that will not last.
  - 10. Like the Levites, we are to devote our whole lives to God—making God’s interests the primary objective of our lives.
- E. God does not forbid us from pursuing our ambitions. But we are to turn our works into service to God.
- F. The Levites can serve as examples for us.
  - 1. While the Levites served the house of God, not all the Levites actually became priests.
  - 2. While those Levites from the family of Aaron served as priests, Levites from other households served the house of God in other roles (cf. Num18:2-6).
    - a. Consider Numbers 3.
      - i. Gershon’s family was responsible for the fabrics of the tabernacle, with the exception of the most holy fabric of the inner veil (3:25-26).
      - ii. Merari’s family was responsible for the framework of the tabernacle—the boards, bars, and pillars of the outer court (3:33-37).
      - iii. Kohath’s family was in charge of the holiest items—the Ark of the Covenant, the Veil, the Altar, and so on (3:27-32).

- iv. The Levites served as the logistics people as well as the security guards of the house of the Lord God.
- b. Consider 1 Chronicles 23-26.
  - i. Some Levites were musicians (1 Chron 25).
  - ii. Some served in administrative functions like the treasury (1 Chron 26:20).
  - iii. Others may have served in maintenance functions; keeping the temple grounds clean; or maintaining the logistics and structure of the temple (1 Chron 23:28).
- 3. From the Levites, we learn that in everything we do must be done and can be done as conscious acts of love for God and for God's people.
- G. Right away, we see the tremendous potential of this perspective for our lives.
  - 1. The Christian can go anywhere under the sun and serve God (so long as the work itself is not sinful).
  - 2. The things of the world can be offered in service to God (cf. 1 Tim 4:5).
  - 3. To use Paul's language, we can "do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31).
  - 4. We work as to the Lord Jesus Christ, doing the will of God from the heart (Eph 6:5, 6; Col 3:23).
  - 5. But remember that God's heart is first for the Church. So we do not use glorifying God in our work as an excuse to neglect God's own people.

**\*Questions for reflection:** (1) How do the Levites serve as an example for us in devoting our work to God? (2) How can you more intentionally commit your work to God? How can you make your work or learning count for the Kingdom of God?

## V. The Lord God Is Our Inheritance

**Through the Lord Jesus, God has become our Inheritance. And through the Levites of old, our heavenly Father teaches us something about what it means to have him as our greatest Treasure. It is to dwell before him always. It is to live in fellowship with him. It is to be completely devoted to his service.**

Now that we have God and God has us, we don't need to have "everything" in this world in order to be happy. We can hold loosely to the goods of this world, because we already have the Best. God is our Father, our Savior, and our Sustainer. God will provide for us. Let us live for him.

**\*Questions for reflection:** (1) What are some of your most cherished dreams? What are some fears you have about living for God? (2) How can you bring your own heart to a point of openness to God?