

ENTER AT YOUR OWN REST

Studies in the Book of Joshua

“Full blessing in the Christian life is not bestowed except to eager, hungry people who press in to receive it”

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Text

Joshua 21:1-45

Topic

The Levites can be seen as a type for believers of how we are to live the everyday, ordinary, average Christian life

Title

“You are Joe (or Josephine) the Christian”

Joshua 21:1 Then the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites came near to Eleazar the priest, to Joshua the son of Nun, and to the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the children of Israel.

Joshua 21:2 And they spoke to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, saying, "The Lord commanded through Moses to give us cities to dwell in, with their common-lands for our livestock."

Joshua 21:3 So the children of Israel gave to the Levites from their inheritance, at the commandment of the Lord, these cities and their common-lands:

Joshua 21:41 All the cities of the Levites within the possession of the children of Israel were forty-eight cities with their common-lands.

Joshua 21:42 Every one of these cities had its common-land surrounding it; thus were all these cities.

Joshua 21:43 So the Lord gave to Israel all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it.

Joshua 21:44 The Lord gave them rest all around, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers. And not a man of all their enemies stood against them; the Lord delivered all their enemies into their hand.

Joshua 21:45 Not a word failed of any good thing which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.

Introduction

You've probably never heard of the documentary titled *Starbucking*. Its tagline is, "The true story of one man's highly caffeinated journey." It tells the story of a guy who is on a quest to visit every Starbucks in the world.

One thing you've got to love about Starbucks is you can always find one. They are a great aid to travelers who wish to stay caffeinated. You're never very far from one of their stores.

In ancient Israel the thing you never wanted to be very far from was a certain person and that certain person was a Levite. They were the ones who had the task of teaching the people about the Lord.

As it turns out no Israelite was more than ten miles from the nearest Levite. Anyone who had a biblical question or concern, or who needed godly counsel, could have their spiritual needs met by one of the more than twenty-three thousand Levites dispersed throughout the Promised Land in forty-eight designated cities.

In a similar way I'd say that no nonbeliever - at least in our immediate area - is ever very far from the nearest Christian. God has dispersed believers in such a way that anyone who has a biblical question or concern, or who needs godly counsel, can have their spiritual needs met by one of us or another Christian dispersed throughout the various neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools where we find ourselves.

There's an odd expression you may have heard, and it goes like this: *Wherever you go, there you are*. Whatever its origins I'd like to hijack it for Jesus. Wherever you go as a Christian is someplace you've been sent by God and you are there to represent Him to those around you.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Wherever You Go, That's Where God Has Sent You, and #2 Wherever You Are, That's Where You Represent God.

#1 Wherever You “Go,”
That’s Where God Has Sent You
(v1-42)

Under Joshua’s leadership the Israelites had entered the Promised Land and subdued all their enemies. After each tribe received their portion of land by the casting of lots two special types of cities were designated throughout the land. The first were the cities of refuge. We learned in chapter twenty that six cities were dedicated, three on each side of the Jordan River, as cities to which a person could flee for safety if they were guilty of manslaughter. There their case would be heard and if the slaying was found to be unpremeditated they would be sentenced to live in the city of refuge until the death of the current high priest.

The second type of cities to be designated were those in which the Levites would live. Some forty-eight cities were chosen by lot.

The tribe that descended from Levi, one of the original twelve sons of Jacob, has an interesting history. Back in the Book of Genesis Levi and his brother Simeon concocted a plan to murder all the men in an entire city because one of them had defiled their sister, Dinah. Their father ultimately cursed them both, saying “I will divide them... and scatter them in Israel” (49:7).

Some years later, during the Exodus, the tribe of Levi distinguished itself. When Moses came down from receiving the Ten Commandments the Israelites were worshipping the Golden Calf. Moses asked, “Who is on the Lord’s side?” and the Levites responded. He assigned them the task of going through the camp and slaying three thousand of the idolators. On account of their zeal Moses blessed them to become the spiritual leaders of Israel.

While they must still be scattered throughout the land, the curse was turned into a blessing on account of their zeal to serve the Lord. The Levites would not be given their own portion of land but had the Lord as their inheritance. The whole land would be open to them to live in certain designated cities and be able to better influence the spiritual life of the nation.

Think of the many curses God has turned to blessing in your life by His mercy and grace! No matter your failures God still uses you to influence the spiritual lives of those around you.

There were three lines of descent from Levi's three sons, Kohath, Gershon, and Merari. The line was further divided because one of Kohath's four sons, Amram, was the father of Moses and Aaron. Aaron and all his male descendants were appointed priests (Exodus 28:29). Thus all priests were from the tribe of Levi, but not all Levites were priests. Those who were not priests descended directly from Aaron served their brothers in the more menial but still essentially work of the Tabernacle. All of them were Israel's teachers.

The first forty verses of the chapter show how the forty-eight cities were designated:

- The Kohathites who were direct descendants of Aaron were dispersed in thirteen cities.
- The Kohathites who were not descended directly from Aaron were dispersed in ten cities.
- The Gershonites were dispersed in thirteen cities.
- The Merarites were dispersed in twelve cities.

I might mention, too, that the six cities of refuge were also cities designated for the Levites.

There is one very simple application I want to draw from the way the cities were designated. It's what I've already said. No Israelite was very far from a Levite.

No nonbeliever is very far from a Christian. The Lord wants us to think of ourselves as being dispersed into our neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools in a sovereign way that puts us near to those in spiritual need.

I think we know that but often forget its impact. There is a sense in which where I live and what I do for a living is secondary to the fact I am sent there by God. Even though I seem to have chosen my living and livelihood, God remains sovereign and has put me where He wants me.

Maybe another perspective on this will bring it home. We are familiar with what is called The Great Commission. Jesus told His original disciples, and us through them,

Matthew 28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Matthew 28:20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

We normally think of the command to "Go" in the sense of those who make it their vocation to "go." Missionaries who leave everything to "go" to another country or culture are the poster boys and girls for the word "go."

But the real sense of this word is *as you are going*. It can mean *to walk, to live, and to conduct yourself*. Read that way it applies to all believers - not just vocational missionaries. As you and I, Joe and Jane the Christian, are going through life we are to conduct ourselves as those who have been dispersed by God to reveal Him to others and deal with their spiritual needs.

Unless you are in sin or somehow running from God, He has you right where He wants you. And it is in the midst of folks who, whether they know it or not, have incredible needs that only Jesus can meet and satisfy.

Which brings us to our second point.

#2 Wherever You Are,
That's Where You Represent God
(v43-45)

The Levites were born into the position of representing God. You and I are born-again into the same position.

What is it we should represent about God? It's an important question. For the most part I'd say that people have a bad impression of Christians and what it means to be a Christian. It translates into them having the wrong impression of our Father. We want them to see our Father - His grace and mercy, His love and compassion.

The last three verses of chapter twenty-one can help us answer the question, What is it we should represent about God. First let's study them in their context for Israel.

Joshua 21:43 So the Lord gave to Israel all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it.

Joshua 21:44 The Lord gave them rest all around, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers. And not a man of all their enemies stood against them; the Lord delivered all their enemies into their hand.

Joshua 21:45 Not a word failed of any good thing which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.

These three verses summarize and bring to a conclusion everything we've read thus far in Joshua. God had kept His promises to His chosen people. The land was under their control. Though there were still pockets of resistance, God would give them continued victory as they walked with Him.

Each of these verses also speaks to us in terms of how we are to represent God to those around us.

In verse forty-three God did for the Israelites exactly what He said He would do. He had the power to deliver them from their enemies and He was faithful to give them victory. We are therefore to represent God as both powerful and faithful.

God is powerful. He can forgive a person their sins based on the work of Jesus on the Cross. They can be born-again and receive the Holy Spirit indwelling them. They can be empowered to walk in a manner that is pleasing to God, yielding themselves to right behavior rather than being enslaved by sin.

God is faithful. Though we continue to sin, He is faithful (and just) to forgive us our sin. He cleanses us and gives us as many second chances as we need. He has promised to make us like Jesus and will continue to work in us until He accomplishes it. He will never leave us or forsake us. He will bring us home to Heaven and the place He is preparing for us.

We are to represent God as He truly is - able to save to the uttermost!

In verse forty-four God gave the Israelites “rest.” It was an active rest as they needed to continue to drive out enemies. But victory was assured them.

Too often God is represented as giving us work rather than rest. Too often we are hammered by exhortations we are not doing enough for God and that He is somehow disappointed with us. Too often we are the recipients of condemnation when the Bible clearly heralds that there is now no more condemnation to those who are in the Lord.

There is work to do, spiritual work, and it is done in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the person who understands just how much God has done for them who works the hardest. His or her work is a joy, not a burden, because it is the work of a son or a daughter in love with their Father.

Nonbelievers almost universally think that they must do something religious in order to approach God. We must represent Him as extending grace through faith. Ours is not a religion of works but a relationship of love.

Then in verse forty-five there is a strong statement about the Word of God:

Joshua 21:45 Not a word failed of any good thing which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.

We have God’s completed Word, the Bible. It is authoritative, infallible, and inerrant. It contains everything we need for godly living. It has the supernatural ability to get deep into the human heart, to divide between the soul and the spirit, and speak to each person.

This, then, is how to represent God: God has given us His Word He will forgive us our sins and bring us safely to Heaven as new creations. Along the way He will empower us to defeat any and all spiritual enemies as we enter into the rest of yielding ourselves to His indwelling Holy Spirit. He will give us abundant life, and He will do it both now and forever.

Why make it any more complicated than that?