

## The Cities Given to the Levites

### Joshua 21

Joshua 21 - *"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. <sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> So the children of Israel gave to the Levites from their inheritance, at the commandment of the LORD, these cities and their common lands:<sup>4</sup> Now the lot came out for the families of the Kohathites. And the children of Aaron the priest, who were of the Levites, had thirteen cities by lot from the tribe of Judah, from the tribe of Simeon, and from the tribe of Benjamin.<sup>5</sup> The rest of the children of Kohath had ten cities by lot from the families of the tribe of Ephraim, from the tribe of Dan, and from the half-tribe of Manasseh.<sup>6</sup> And the children of Gershon had thirteen cities by lot from the families of the tribe of Issachar, from the tribe of Asher, from the tribe of Naphtali, and from the half-tribe of Manasseh in Bashan.*

<sup>7</sup> *The children of Merari according to their families had twelve cities from the tribe of Reuben, from the tribe of Gad, and from the tribe of Zebulun.<sup>8</sup> And the children of Israel gave these cities with their common lands by lot to the Levites, as the LORD had commanded by the hand of Moses.<sup>9</sup> So they gave from the tribe of the children of Judah and from the tribe of the children of Simeon these cities which are designated by name,<sup>10</sup> which were for the children of Aaron, one of the families of the Kohathites, who were of the children of Levi; for the lot was theirs first.<sup>11</sup> And they gave them Kirjath Arba (Arba was the father of Anak), which is Hebron, in the mountains of Judah, with the common land surrounding it.<sup>12</sup> But the fields of the city and its villages they gave to Caleb the son of Jephunneh as his possession.*

<sup>13</sup> *Thus to the children of Aaron the priest they gave Hebron with its common land (a city of refuge for the slayer), Libnah with its common land,<sup>14</sup> Jattir with its common-land, Eshtemoa with its common land,<sup>15</sup> Holon with its common land, Debir with its common land,<sup>16</sup> Ain with its common land, Juttah with its common land, and Beth Shemesh with its common land: nine cities from those two tribes;<sup>17</sup> and from the tribe of Benjamin, Gibeon with its common land, Geba with its common land,<sup>18</sup> Anathoth with its common land, and Almon with its common land: four cities.<sup>19</sup> All the cities of the children of Aaron, the priests, were thirteen cities with their common lands.*

<sup>20</sup> *And the families of the children of Kohath, the Levites, the rest of the children of Kohath, even they had the cities of their lot from the tribe of Ephraim.<sup>21</sup> For they gave them Shechem with its common land in the mountains of Ephraim (a city of refuge for the slayer), Gezer with its common land,<sup>22</sup> Kibzaim with its common land, and Beth Horon with its common land: four cities;<sup>23</sup> and from the tribe of Dan, Eltekeh with its common land, Gibbethon with its common land,<sup>24</sup> Aijalon with its common land, and Gath Rimmon with its common land: four cities;<sup>25</sup> and from the half-tribe of Manasseh, Tanach with its common land and Gath Rimmon with its common land: two cities.<sup>26</sup> All the ten cities with their common lands were for the rest of the families of the children of Kohath.*

<sup>27</sup> *Also to the children of Gershon, of the families of the Levites, from the other half-tribe of Manasseh, they gave Golan in Bashan with its common land (a city of refuge for the slayer), and Be Eshterah with its common land: two cities;<sup>28</sup> and from the tribe of Issachar, Kishion with its common land, Daberath with its common land,<sup>29</sup> Jarmuth with its common land,*

*and En Gannim with its common land: four cities;<sup>30</sup> and from the tribe of Asher, Mishal with its common land, Abdon with its common land,<sup>31</sup> Helkath with its common land, and Rehob with its common land: four cities;<sup>32</sup> and from the tribe of Naphtali, Kedesh in Galilee with its common land (a city of refuge for the slayer), Hammoth Dor with its common land, and Kartan with its common land: three cities.<sup>33</sup> All the cities of the Gershonites according to their families were thirteen cities with their common lands.<sup>34</sup> And to the families of the children of Merari, the rest of the Levites, from the tribe of Zebulun, Jokneam with its common land, Kartah with its common land,<sup>35</sup> Dimnah with its common land, and Nahalal with its common land: four cities;<sup>36</sup> and from the tribe of Reuben, Bezer with its common land, Jahaz with its common land,<sup>37</sup> Kedemoth with its common land, and Mephaath with its common land: four cities;<sup>38</sup> and from the tribe of Gad, Ramoth in Gilead with its common land (a city of refuge for the slayer), Mahanaim with its common land,<sup>39</sup> Heshbon with its common land, and Jazer with its common land: four cities in all.<sup>40</sup> So all the cities for the children of Merari according to their families, the rest of the families of the Levites, were by their lot twelve cities.<sup>41</sup> All the cities of the Levites within the possession of the children of Israel were forty-eight cities with their common lands.<sup>42</sup> Every one of these cities had its common land surrounding it; thus were all these cities.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.”*

## Background Notes

The Levites received no territory in Israel because of their forefather, Levi, participated with his brother Simeon in leading the unholy slaughter of the people of Shechem (Genesis 34). As a result of this gross sin, Levi's descendants received no tribal territories in the Land. The descendants of Simeon were given only scattered cities within Judah.

However, the Levites were given the special role of servants of the Lord because they stood with Moses at that tragic event of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32). As a result of their loyalty to Moses and to the Lord, the Levites then took the place of the firstborn, as God's own possession. You can read about that in Numbers 3 and 8. The Lord commanded through Moses that the Levites were to be given 48 cities scattered throughout the land (Numbers 35:1-5), and in Joshua 21 these special cities were allotted to the Levites.

There were three groups of Levites tracing back to the three sons of Levi: the Kohathites, the Gershonites, and the Merarites. Aaron was a Kohathite, and therefore the priests were Kohathites. They received thirteen cities that were

basically in the area around Jerusalem. Verses 20-26 list the 10 cities given to the rest of the Kohathites; verses 27-33 list the 13 cities that were given to the Gershonites; and verses 34-40 list the 12 cities that were given to the Merarites.

## Doctrinal / Teaching Points

### 1. God provides Levites for His people.

As God's servants, the Levites did more than just maintain the Tabernacle (and later the Temple). The Levites became the official scribes and interpreters of the Law. They taught the people the Word of God. That's why God had the Levites situated throughout the land in 48 cities, not just around Jerusalem and the Temple where the priests were. If you locate

these cities on Bible map, you will find that no Israeli lived more than 10 miles from a Levitical city. Anyone who had questions about the Law and the Word of God could easily go to one of the 48 cities and speak to the Levites.

The Levites served the Lord and His people full-time. They were to know the Word of God and teach it to the people. When Moses blessed the tribes before God, He said of Levi, in Deuteronomy 33:10, *“They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your law...”* In addition, the Levites maintained the cities of refuge. God provided the Levities for His people.

This is true today. God provides servants and teachers of the Word for His people. In Ephesians 4:11-12 we read, *“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,<sup>12</sup> for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ...”* Notice that the topic here is not the various spiritual gifts given to individual Christians, but rather a list of certain gifted believers that God has given to the Church. The Lord has provided certain servants to minister to His people, and this applies to the Church universal, as well as to the local church. Think of the Lord’s servants who have taught the Word of God to you over the years – in their writing, in their preaching, or in their teaching. God provides Levites for His people.

## **2. God provides His people for the Levites.**

God provided the Levites as servants of His sanctuary, the Tabernacle, and as teachers and ministers of the Word of God for His people -- but who was to care for the Levites? Answer: God provided His people for the Levites. The various tribes gave up 48 of their cities for the Levites. Notice that in every case it was not just the city itself, but the surrounding pasture and farm areas as well. God’s people were to provide for the needs of the Levites.

Furthermore, we know that the Levites were supported by the tithes of the people. The priests were supported by the offerings of the people, and the Levites were supported by the tithes of people (Number 18:21). God provided His people for the Levites.

Once again, this is true today. God provides His people for His servants -- that is, God’s people are to provide for God’s full-time servants. Galatians 6:6 says, *“Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.”* 1 Corinthians 9:13-14 says, *“Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar?<sup>14</sup> Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.”* So God provides for His full-time servants through His people.

When God’s people don’t provide for God’s servants, the work of the Lord suffers. That’s exactly what happened in the closing days of the Old Testament period. In Nehemiah 13:10-12 we read, *“I also realized that the portions for the Levites had not been given them; for each of the Levites and the singers who did the work had gone back to his field.<sup>11</sup> So I contended with the rulers, and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” And I gathered them together and set them in their place.<sup>12</sup> Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse.”*

When the people did not give the Levites their proper “portion,” the Levites had to find other employment (v11-12). To provide for their families, the Levites had to farm full-time, rather than teaching and serving full-time. So God sent Nehemiah -- not only to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, but also to restore order so that the work of the Lord didn’t suffer. God provides His people for the Levites.

Do you at least tithe? Do you give at least a tenth of your income to the Lord, so that the work of the Lord doesn't suffer? Now you might say, "Tithing is an Old Testament commandment under the Law, so we don't have to tithe today." Wrong! Tithing is a **biblical principle**. Before the Law was given, the principle of tithing was practiced. Abraham tithed.

It's true that tithing is not mentioned in the New Testament. God doesn't want you to **limit** your giving to just a tenth! But if you're not giving **at least** a tenth of your income to the Lord, I would say that you're not following biblical principles for giving.

Now you may be thinking, "Well, Dave, that's easy for you to say, because you're in the 'Levite' category. You don't have to tithe!" Wrong again! The Levites had to tithe, just like the rest of the people. Numbers 18:26 says, "*Speak thus to the Levites, and say to them: 'When you take from the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them... then you shall offer up an offering of it to the LORD, a tenth of the tithe.'*" All God's people are to support the work of the Lord, and the Levites were part of God's people.

## Practical Application

**Remember, "rest land" is not "vacation land."**

Verses 43-45: "*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. <sup>44</sup> 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. <sup>45</sup> Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.*"

If you read the book of Judges, these verses sound like a contradiction. The various tribes did not fully possess their territories, because some pockets of enemy resistance remained. All the Canaanites were not driven out of the Land.

But this is not a contradiction! God did give all the land that He had promised, and He did give them rest from all the enemies in the Land. No remaining pockets of enemy resistance could stand before the various tribes -- if they moved in and possessed the Land!

God made good on all of His promises, but Israel didn't fully possess and occupy all the land that God had given them. They bogged down and got lazy. They treated the "rest land" as "vacation land."

We have to make sure that we don't make the same mistake. The Lord gives us rest in Christ. He gives us the rest of salvation! He gives us rest of soul! Matthew 11:28-29 "*Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*"

But we must defeat the pockets of enemy resistance in our lives before we can fully appreciate the promised rest. 1 Corinthians 15:58 "*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.*"

Let's not confuse rest with vacation. Remember, rest land is not vacation land!