

# CHAPTER 21

It had been often said that the tribe of Levi should have “no inheritance with their brethren,” no particular part of the country assigned them, as the other tribes had, no, not the country about Shiloh, which one might have expected to be appropriated to them as the lands of the church; but, though they were not thus cast into a country by themselves, it appears, by the provision made for them in this chapter, that they were no losers, but the rest of the tribes were very much gainers, by their being dispersed. We have here,

- I.** The motion they made to have their cities assigned them, according to God's appointment (v. 1, 2).
- II.** The nomination of the cities accordingly out of the several tribes, and the distribution of them to the respective families of this tribe (v. 3-8).
- III.** A catalogue of the cities, forty-eight in all (v. 9-42).
- IV.** A receipt entered in full of all that God had promised to his people Israel (v. 43-45).

## ~~1620~~ JOSHUA 21:1-8

### THE CITIES OF THE LEVITES

Here is,

**I.** The Levites' petition presented to this general convention of the states, now sitting at Shiloh, v. 1, 2. Observe,

**1.** They had not their lot assigned them till they made their claim. There is an inheritance provided for all the saints, that royal priesthood, but then they must petition for it. *Ask, and it shall be given you.* Joshua had quickened the rest of the tribes who were slack to put in their claims, but the Levites, it may be supposed, knew their duty and interest better than the rest, and were therefore forward in this matter, when it came to their turn, without being called upon. They build their claim upon a very good

foundation, not their own merits nor services, but the divine precept: “*The Lord commanded by the hand of Moses to give us cities*, commanded you to grant them, which implied a command to us to ask them.” Note, The maintenance of ministers is not an arbitrary thing, left purely to the goodwill of the people, who may let them starve if they please; no, as the God of Israel commanded that the Levites should be well provided for, so has the Lord Jesus, the King of the Christian church, ordained, and a perpetual ordinance it is that *those who preach the gospel should live of the gospel* (~~404~~ 1 Corinthians 9:14), and should live comfortably.

**2.** They did not make their claim till all the rest of the tribes were provided for, and then they did it immediately. There was some reason for it; every tribe must first know their own, else they would not know what they gave the Levites, and so it could not be such a reasonable service as it ought to be. But it is also an instance of their humility, modesty, and patience (and Levites should be examples of these and other virtues), that they were willing to be served last, and they fared never the worse for it. Let not God's ministers complain if at any time they find themselves postponed in men's thoughts and cares, but let them make sure of the favour of God and the honour that comes from him, and then they may well enough afford to bear the slights and neglects of men.

**II.** The Levites' petition granted immediately, without any dispute, the princes of Israel being perhaps ashamed that they needed to be called upon in this matter, and that the motion had not been made among themselves for the settling of the Levites.

**1.** The children of Israel are said to give the cities for the Levites. God had appointed how many they should be in all, forty-eight. It is probable that Joshua and the princes, upon consideration of the extent and value of the lot of each tribe as it was laid before them, had appointed how many cities should be taken out of each; and then the fathers of the several tribes themselves agreed which they should be, and therefore are said to give them, as an offering, to the Lord; so God had appointed. ~~405~~ Numbers 35:8, *Every one shall give of his cities to the Levites*. Here God tried their generosity, and it was found to praise and honour, for it appears by the following catalogue that the cities they gave to the Levites were generally some of the best and most considerable in each tribe. And it is probable that they had an eye to the situation of them, taking care they should be so

dispersed as that no part of the country should be too far distant from a Levites' city.

**2.** They gave them *at the commandment of the Lord*, that is, with an eye to the command and in obedience to it, which was it that sanctified the grant. They gave the number that God commanded, and it was well this matter was settled that the Levites might not ask more nor the Israelites offer less. They gave them also with their suburbs, or glebe-lands, belonging to them, so many cubits by measure from the walls of the city, as God had commanded (~~0354~~ Numbers 35:4, 5), and did not go about to cut them short.

**3.** When the forty-eight cities were pitched upon, they were divided into four lots, as they lay next together, and then by lot were determined to the four several families of the tribe of Levi. When the Israelites had surrendered the cities into the hand of God, he would himself have the distributing of them among his servants.

**(1.)** The family of Aaron, who were the only priests, had for their share the thirteen cities that were given by the tribes of Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin, v. 4. God in wisdom ordered it thus, that though Jerusalem itself was not one of their cities, it being as yet in the possession of the Jebusites (and those generous tribes would not mock the Levites, who had another warfare to mind, with a city that must be recovered by the sword before it could be enjoyed), yet the cities that fell to their lot were those which lay next to Jerusalem, because that was to be, in process of time, the holy city, where their business would chiefly lie.

**(2.)** The Kohathite-Levites (among whom were the posterity of Moses, though never distinguished from them) had the cities that lay in the lot of Dan, which lay next to Judah, and in that of Ephraim, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, which lay next to Benjamin. So those who descended from Aaron's father joined nearest to Aaron's sons.

**(3.)** Gershon was the eldest son of Levi, and therefore, though the younger house of the Kohathites was preferred before his, yet his children had the precedence of the other family of Merari, v. 6.

**(4.)** The Merarites, the youngest house, had their lot last, and it lay furthest off, v. 7. The rest of the sons of Jacob had a lot for every tribe only, but Levi, God's tribe, had a lot for each of its families; for there is a particular providence directing and attending the removals and settlements of

ministers, and appointing where those shall fix who are to be the lights of the world.

## ~~(121)~~ JOSHUA 21:9-42

### THE CITIES OF THE LEVITES

We have here a particular account of the cities which were given to the children of Levi out of the several tribes, not only to be occupied and inhabited by them, as tenants to the several tribes in which they lay — no, their interest in them was not dependent and precarious, but to be owned and possessed by them as lords and proprietors, and as having the same title to them that the rest of the tribes had to their cities or lands, as appears by the law which preserved the house in the Levites' cities from being alienated any longer than till the year of jubilee, ~~(125)~~ Leviticus 25:32, 33. Yet it is probable that the Levites having only the cities and suburbs, while the land about pertained to the tribes in which they lay, those of that tribe, for the convenience of occupying that land, might commonly rent houses of the Levites, as they could spare them in their cities, and so live among them as their tenants. Several things may be observed in this account, besides what was observed in the law concerning it, Numbers 35.

**I.** That the Levites were dispersed into all the tribes, and not suffered to live all together in any one part of the country. This would find them all with work, and employ them all for the good of others; for ministers, of all people, must neither be idle nor live to themselves or to one another only. Christ left his twelve disciples together in a body, but left orders that they should in due time disperse themselves, that they might *preach the gospel to every creature*. The mixing of the Levites thus with the other tribes would be an obligation upon them to walk circumspectly, and as became their sacred function, and to avoid every thing that might disgrace it. Had they lived all together, they would have been tempted to wink at one another's faults, and to excuse one another when they did amiss; but by this means they were made to see the eyes of all Israel upon them, and therefore saw it their concern to walk so as that their ministry might in nothing be blamed nor their high character suffer by their ill carriage.

**II.** That every tribe of Israel was adorned and enriched with its share of Levites' cities in proportion to its compass, even those that lay most remote. They were all God's people, and therefore they all had Levites among them.

**1.** To show kindness to, as God appointed them, <sup><529></sup>Deuteronomy 12:19; 14:29. They were God's receivers, to whom the people might give their grateful acknowledgments of God's goodness, as the occasion and disposition were.

**2.** To receive advice and instruction from; when they could not go up to the tabernacle, to consult those who attended there, they might go to a Levites' city, and be taught the good knowledge of the Lord. Thus God set up a candle in every room of his house, to give light to all his family; as those that attended the altar *kept the charge of the Lord*, to see that no divine appointment was neglected there, so those that were scattered in the country had their charge too, which was to see that no idolatrous superstitious usages were introduced at a distance and to watch for the souls of God's Israel. Thus did God graciously provide for the keeping up of religion among them, and that they might have the word nigh them; yet, blessed be God, we, under the gospel, have it yet nigher, not only Levites in every county, but Levites in every parish, whose office it is still to teach the people knowledge, and to go before them in the things of God.

**III.** That there were thirteen cities, and those some of the best, appointed for the priests, the sons of Aaron, v. 19. Aaron left but two sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, yet his family was now so much increased, and it was foreseen that it would in process of time grow so numerous, as to replenish all these cities, though a considerable number must of necessity be resident wherever the ark and the altar were. We read in both Testaments of such numbers of priests that we may suppose none of all the families of Israel that came out of Egypt increased afterwards so much as that of Aaron did; and the promise afterwards to the house of Aaron is, *God shall increase you more and more, you and your children*, <sup><512></sup>Psalms 115:12, 14. He will raise up a *seed to serve him*.

**IV.** That some of the Levites' cities were afterwards famous upon other accounts. Hebron was the city in which David began his reign, and in Manhanaim, another Levites' city (v. 38), he lay, and had his headquarters when he fled from Absalom. The first Israelite that ever wore the title of

king (namely, Abimelech, the son of Gideon) reigned in Shechem, another Levites' city, v. 21.

**V.** That the number of them in all was more than of most of the tribes, except Judah, though the tribe of Levi was one of the least of the tribes, to show how liberal God is, and his people should be, to his ministers; yet the disproportion will not appear so great as at first it seems, if we consider that the Levites had cities only with their suburbs to dwell in, but the rest of the tribes, besides their cities (and those perhaps were many more than are named in the account of their lot), had many unwall'd towns and villages which they inhabited, besides country houses.

Upon the whole, it appears that effectual care was taken that the Levites should live both comfortably and usefully: and those, whether ministers or others, for whom Providence has done well, must look upon themselves as oblig'd thereby to do good, and, according as their capacity and opportunity are, to serve their generation.

## ~~1218~~ JOSHUA 21:43-45

### THE CITIES OF THE LEVITES

We have here the conclusion of this whole matter, the foregoing history summed up, and, to make it appear the more bright, compar'd with the promise of which it was the full accomplishment. God's word and his works mutually illustrate each other. The performance makes the promise appear very true and the promise makes the performance appear very kind.

**I.** God had promised to give the seed of Abraham the land of Canaan for a possession, and now at last he performed this promise (v. 43): *They possessed it, and dwelt therein.* Though they had often forfeited the benefit of that promise, and God had long delayed the performance of it, yet at last all difficulties were conquer'd, and Canaan was their own. And the promise of the heavenly Canaan is as sure to all God's spiritual Israel, for it is the promise of him that cannot lie.

**II.** God had promised to give them rest in that land, and now they had rest round about, rest from the fatigues of their travel through the wilderness (which tedious march, perhaps, was long in their bones), rest from their

wars in Canaan, and the insults which their enemies there had at first offered them. They now dwelt, not only in habitations of their own, but those quiet and peaceable ones; though there were Canaanites that remained, yet none that had either strength or spirit to attack them, nor so much as give them an alarm. This rest continued till they by their own sin and folly put thorns into their own beds and their own eyes.

**III.** God had promised to give them victory and success in their wars, and this promise likewise was fulfilled: *There stood not a man before them*, v. 44. They had the better in every battle, and which way soever they turned their forces they prospered. It is true there were Canaanites now remaining in many parts of the land, and such as afterwards made head against them, and became very formidable. But,

**1.** As to the present remains of the Canaanites, they were no contradiction to the promise, for God had said he would not drive them out all at once, but by *little and little*, <sup><0230></sup>Exodus 23:30. They had now as much in their full possession as they had occasion for and as they had hands to manage, so that the Canaanites only kept possession of some of the less cultivated parts of the country against the beasts of the field, till Israel, in process of time, should become numerous enough to replenish them.

**2.** As to the after prevalency of the Canaanites, that was purely the effect of Israel's cowardice and slothfulness, and the punishment of their sinful inclination to the idolatries and other abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord would have cast out before them but that they harboured and indulged them. So that the foundation of God stands sure. Israel's experience of God's fidelity is here upon record, and is an acquittance under their hands to the honour of God, the vindication of his promise which had been so often distrusted, and the encouragement of all believers to the end of the world: *There failed not any good thing*, no, nor *aught* of any good thing (so full is it expressed), *which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel*, but in due time *all came to pass*, v. 45. Such an acknowledgment as this, here subscribed by Joshua in the name of all Israel, we afterwards find made by Solomon, and all Israel did in effect say *Amen* to it, <sup><1086></sup>1 Kings 8:56. The inviolable truth of God's promise, and the performance of it to the utmost, are what all the saints have been ready to bear their testimony to; and, if in any thing the performance has seemed to come short, they have been as ready to own that they themselves must bear all the blame.