

Message #35

Joshua 21:1-42

When any religious group boasts about the fact that they do not pay their minister, they are really boasting about the fact that they do not obey the Word of God.

As we come to this text in Joshua, I assure you I have no axe to grind. This church is doing everything it can to take great care of us. So this exposition is not really about me, but this text does deal with the theme of **the minister, the ministry and the money**.

It is clearly the will of God in both the O.T. and the N.T. that specific people are singled out by God for full time ministry. The truth is those who are truly singled out by God are a minority, not a majority. There are those God does choose who have the responsibility to oversee and carry out God's ministry. They are to be totally dedicated to God's work and Word and they are to be paid.

There are those who seem to think that if one serves God one has no right to make a good living. That concept is not found anywhere in Scripture and it certainly is not found in the book of Joshua.

The group of people who were responsible to be in full time ministry in Joshua's day was a group known as the Levites. These Levites were chosen by God to be His ministers in Israel. Once the land had been distributed, God needed to send these ministers to various locations and He demanded that 48 cities, spread throughout the land, be given to these Levites so they could live and raise their families and minister for Him.

There are some great similarities between O.T. Levites and N.T. ministers, but there are also great dissimilarities. Abuse in either case will lead to a pagan popery, which features nothing more than ritualistic religion.

The primary point of these verses is this:

WHEN THE LAND WAS DISTRIBUTED, GOD DEMANDED THAT 48 CITIES BE GIVEN TO THE LEVITES SO THEY COULD MOVE TO VARIOUS LOCATIONS AND MINISTER IN THOSE LOCATIONS FOR HIM.

Perhaps the greatest chapter in the O.T. that spells out the responsibilities of the Levites and the congregation is Numbers 18:1-32. From this chapter we would like to make nine key observations, which were clearly established from what God expected for and from His people:

- 1) The Levites were to be joined with the people. 18:2 - not some travelling circuit ministry.
- 2) The Levites were responsible for all worship. 18:3 - they were to oversee everything.
Worship was not to be a free-for-all with everyone doing anything they want.
- 3) The Levites were God's gift to His people. 18:6a - exactly what Paul says about a minister-Eph. 4:11-16. Not all are gifted in this way. God gives a minister a gift and sends him to a specific place to use it.

- 4) The Levites were dedicated to the Lord for His service. 18:6b - like an ordination
- 5) The Levites formed a special priesthood that performed special service for God. 18:7
- 6) The Levites were to be given the best offerings. 18:8-19 (v. 12). They were to be well-paid. They were not to be given stuff no one else wanted.
- 7) The Levites were not to be given a specific land inheritance. 18:20 - they were given cities
- 8) The Levites were to be given all tithes. 18:24 - Giving to God meant giving to the Levites.
- 9) The Levites were to give tithes from that given to them - 18:26-29 - minister is to give his own offering.

It is quite obvious that God intended that these Levites be cared for and He intended that they carry out His ministry. As we shall see that happens in Joshua 21. The similarities between O.T. ministry and N.T. ministry are very similar (I Cor. 9:14). Arthur Pink said when it comes to this subject this is a Divine command, which demands obedience. It is not optional; it is obligatory.

Now there are three main thoughts we want to see from this text:

THOUGHT #1 – The Levites make their request. 21:1-2

This was not motivated by some mercenary greed. This was not some secret whispering taking place among the ministers; they are concerned; they are open and they are honest. These men are not trying to sow dissension by complaining that they have been neglected; they are handling this in a very orderly and dignified way.

Actually the first two verses are sad because the Levites had to ask for what should have been theirs. They were the last to be thought about. Everyone else had their inheritance. Everyone else was snuggled nicely in their land, but the Levites had kind of been lost in the shuffle. What they did was right. **They went to Eleazer the priest and to Joshua and to the heads of the households of the tribes and they reminded them of the fact that God had commanded by His Word through Moses that they were to have their own compensation and inheritance package.** God had **commanded** that His ministers were to be paid.

There is no question that when a minister has to constantly worry about his own provisions, it bogs him down. This is somewhat of a humiliating moment; but they did have to do this. If you have ever had to go to someone to remind them to give you what you are supposed to have or to pay you what you are owed, you know the hurt and humiliation of that. This is not some demand that they are going to leave. In fact, a true minister will at times minister when he has been neglected. But this is a sad thing.

Now the particular chapter that the Levites have in mind is Numbers 35. In Numbers 35, God spoke to Moses about the cities the Levites were to receive. They were not to get specific land, but they were to get specific cities, including pastures. From Numbers 35 we make three observations:

Observation #1 - These Levites were to be given cities from all the sons of Israel. Num. 35:2, 8

More cities were to be taken from the larger tribes and less from the lesser tribes.

Observation #2 - These cities were to be their cities and included pasture lands. **Num. 35:3-5**

These Levites were to have some breathing room where they could live and raise their families. They got the city and the suburbs.

Observation #3 - The total number of cities was 48. **Num. 35:6-7**

Six cities were to be cities of refuge, plus another 42 cities would equal the 48 cities.

It is obvious that these Levites remembered the Word of God and they are reminding these leaders of it.

There are two practical thoughts to consider for a moment:

- 1) God's Word does demand that His ministers be well-compensated. So whether or not this happens is directly related to obedience to the Word of God.
- 2) Sometimes God's ministers will have to remind God's people of this. This is not a pleasant subject, but it is a Biblical subject and they must remind the people. After all, the Levites knew the Word of God better than anyone else in Israel.

THOUGHT #2 – The people of God respond. **21:3**

You have to love these people and love this verse. It is short but powerful. God's people obeyed the Word of God and did just exactly what God's Word said they should do on this subject.

They did not hold a special prayer meeting or call a special congregational meeting to discuss it; they knew the Word of God said it and they did it. They were all willing to give up cities and pasture lands for the Levites, so they could move and minister in various parts of the land of Canaan.

H. A. Ironside said, "So long as the people were obedient to Him, the Levites would be well cared for. In after years, when the nation drifted away from God, the Levites suffered greatly and in many instances were obliged to forsake the special service committed to them in order to care for the fields and vineyards that they might properly provide for their families and themselves."

When the church of God supports a ministry and through that ministry people come to faith in Christ and grow in their relationship with God, it actually goes on the account of the people who supported that ministry (Philippians 4:17).

God keeps an eternal record of financial support and will reward those who supported the ministry. That is exactly what Paul said to the church of Philippi.

These people gave their own cities and land to the Levites and God would bless them for that.

THOUGHT #3 – The cities for the Levites are selected. **21:4-42**

Verses 4-7 explain how towns from each tribe are allotted to four tribes of Levites. Lots were to be cast and the cities and land was determined by the lot. Notice the repetition emphasis on the casting of lots (**21:4, 5, 6, 7, 8**). This was the process God sovereignly used to reveal His will.

There is a breakdown of four groups of cities:

Group #1 - The cities given to the Aaronites. **21:10-19**

Their special role would obviously place them near Jerusalem. Aaron was a descendant of Levi and he was the high priest. Cities came from Judah and Simeon and Benjamin. They get a total of 13 cities (**21:19**).

Group #2 - The cities given to the Kohathites. **21:20-26**

This group descended from the second son of Levi (Gen. 46:11). Cities were in Ephraim, Dan, West Manasseh and East Manasseh. The remaining Kohathites received 10 cities (**21:26**).

Group #3 - The cities given to the Gershonites. **21:27-33**

This group was descendants of Levi's first son. Their cities were cities from Issachar, Asher and Naphtali. Remaining cities given to Gershonites were 13 (**21:33**).

Group #4 - The cities given to the Merarites. **21:34-40**

Cities were taken from cities of Zebulun, Reuben and Gad. The remaining cities were 12.

What is significant to see is that God wanted these ministers spread out in different cities, so they could minister for Him. He saw to it that they were well-placed and well-compensated.

Verses 43-45 give us the results of this; the Lord blessed His people in every possible way. God blessed all of the people because they took good care of His ministers.

We would like to draw seven New Testament ministry applications from this very text:

- 1) The minister is not to make money the love of his life. I Tim. 6:10-11; Heb. 13:5
- 2) The minister is to be prepared to endure financial stress for the sake of ministry. II Cor. 6:3-4

- 3) The minister is to be compensated for his ministerial work. I Cor. 9:13-14
- 4) The minister is to be compensated by those in the church who are being taught under his ministry. Gal. 6:6-9
- 5) The minister is to be compensated, if possible, at a level that is expense free. I Cor. 9:7
- 6) Any fruit of the ministry is shared by those who financially support that ministry. Phil. 4:17
- 7) The gracious blessings of God will be poured out on those who generously support the ministry. II Cor. 9:6-12