

We find ourselves again in what could be thought of as one of the "boring bits" of the Old Testament. We should resist the temptation to skim through or skip over this chapter. It is vital, not only to the book of Joshua and Israel but to us.

This chapter is about the cities given to the Levites. This lengthy account is the culmination of the allotment of the land—indicating it is a significant part of Israel's life. Who were the Levites? What makes them essential? Why did God promise them cities and pasturelands?

The Levites were the tribe that descended from Levi, the son of Jacob. When Israel worshiped the golden calf while Moses was on Sinai, the Levites remained true to God (despite it being Aaron, a Levite, who made the calf). When Moses said in response to the idol worship, "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me," all the Levites gathered around him.<sup>1</sup> Then, Moses instructed the Levites to go through the camp, killing the Israelites who worshipped the calf, which they did. Afterward, Moses said, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day."<sup>2</sup> The Levites would be set apart in a unique way for service to the Lord. Thus, we might think of the Levites as a "priestly class" in Israel.

In our passage, we see how the Levites were divided by clans—Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites. Their order here is not by birth but by the importance of service.<sup>3</sup> The Kohathites served the "most holy objects"—the tabernacle's contents. The Gershonites would pack and carry the tent, the curtains, screens, hangings, ropes, etc. The Merarites handled the structural aspects of the tent.

As we see, the Kohathites were divided into two parts—those that descended from Aaron and those that did not. Aaron was the first High Priest—and the priests who served in the sanctuary descended from him. They were the only ones who could enter the holy place.

The Levites' service made them unique in Israel, which impacted their inheritance. We saw in Joshua 13:33, "Moses did not give a portion to the tribe of Levi. The Lord, the God of Israel, was their inheritance, just as he had promised them." They inherited the Lord. That said, the Levites were still humans and would still need a place to live and support their livestock and so forth. So, the Lord promised that the Levites would receive forty-eight cities and their surrounding pasturelands. These cities would be taken from each of the tribes in proportion to each tribe's size. The pasturelands would support their livestock and material needs. For income, the Lord said in Numbers 18:24, "I have given them the tenth that the Israelites present to the Lord as a contribution for their inheritance." Since they inherited the Lord and his service, they would live off of what the Lord received from Israel. (This is a good reminder of the New Testament principle that "the laborer deserves his wages," which is applied by encouraging believers to financially support those devoted full-time to spiritual work.)

Why did the Lord give them forty-eight cities, distributed throughout all the tribes, instead of one big city surrounding the tabernacle they served? In Leviticus 10:10-11, the Lord commanded the Levitical priests to "distinguish between the holy and the common, and the clean and the unclean, and teach the Israelites all the statutes that the LORD has given to them

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 32:25-29

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 32:29.

<sup>3</sup> See Numbers 4

through Moses.” To do that, they had to be present throughout the land. These forty-eight cities guaranteed that the Levites would be scattered amongst all the tribes of Israel.

So, what do we learn from the Levites in Joshua 21? This might be the most explicit lesson: We learn the importance of the priesthood. The Lord scattered the Levites throughout the nation because Israel's possession of the land depended on their faithfulness to the Law. The Levites would live amongst each tribe to teach them the Lord's commands and to know the Lord. When Israel failed to keep covenant, the Levitical priests would give instruction in purification and offer sacrifices for atonement.

When the Lord brought them out of Egypt, he promised Israel, “you will be my kingdom of priests and my holy nation.”<sup>4</sup> Now, the Lord is fulfilling his promise, scattering his priests throughout the kingdom so that the nation might represent him to the world.

What application does this have for us? It reminds us of our need for the priesthood! We need to know the Lord, be purified from uncleanness, and have our sin atoned for. Without this, we cannot possess the blessing of the Lord. This raises the question: where are our priests?

The New Testament speaks of Jesus as our “great high priest.”<sup>5</sup> But if you've ever heard Linus recite Luke 2, you know there's a problem here. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David, of the tribe of Judah. Joseph and Mary traveled there to register in the census because they descended from Judah. Jesus was *not* a Levite. If Jesus did not descend from Levi and Aaron, how can he be our priest? The author of Hebrews wrestles with the question when he writes in Hebrews 7:11-14:

Now if perfection came through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the law), what further need was there for another priest to appear...and not according to the order of Aaron? For the one these things are spoken about belonged to a different tribe. No one from it has served at the altar. Now it is evident that our Lord came from Judah, and Moses said nothing about that tribe concerning priests.

If the Levitical priesthood gave people the law, then perfection seems to have come from the Levitical priests. But if they brought perfection, why would we need another priest (our Lord Jesus)? He's "another priest" because he belongs to a different priestly class. He belonged to the tribe of Judah. No one from Judah ever served at the altar—and the Old Covenant had nothing to say about priests from Judah. And yet, we do have Jesus as our great high priest— one like Melchizedek (eternal and unending). He's not from Levi. He cannot be an Old Covenant priest. So, what's going on!?

His answer is a simple sentence in the middle of that passage. "For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must be a change of law as well." If the priesthood changes, then the law must change. If the priesthood is not from the Old Covenant, then it must be from a new covenant. That means the Old Covenant is obsolete and has passed away with the arrival of Jesus. This is why he goes on to write: "So the previous command is annulled because it was

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 19:6

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 4:14

weak and unprofitable (for the law perfected nothing), but a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.”<sup>6</sup>

His argument started, “If perfection came through the law, then why do we need a new kind of priest?” So he concludes: Perfection did not come through the Law; it perfected nothing. It was weak and unprofitable. Israel’s history before and after the book of Joshua makes that plain. The Levitical priesthood was an absolute failure in terms of perfecting the people of God. It was designed that way! They offered sacrifices year after year, demonstrating that their service (and, thus, the Law) had no power to actually atone for sin or stop their sinning.

But, God gave us a new and better priesthood in Jesus. And that means there must be a new covenant—a better one that brings us hope, a covenant through which we actually draw near to God. And so he goes on to finish Hebrews 7:

Because of this oath, Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant. Now many have become Levitical priests, since they are prevented by death from remaining in office. But because he remains forever, he holds his priesthood permanently. Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, since he always lives to intercede for them.

For this is the kind of high priest we need: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He doesn’t need to offer sacrifices every day, as high priests do—first for their own sins, then for those of the people. He did this once for all time when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak, but the promise of the oath, which came after the law, appoints a Son, who has been perfected forever.

Levites offered multiple sacrifices—first for their own sins, then for the people. Jesus died for sins only once. So that death must be for his sins and not ours *or* for our sins and not his own. He was raised from the dead to demonstrate his righteousness, indicating that he had sacrificed himself for our sins. That resurrection is eternal—he remains forever; he is a priest forever. “Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, since he always lives to intercede for them.”

The Israelites needed the continual presence of the Levites to make them holy. But the Levites themselves were sinful, and they died! But Jesus was not sinful and is resurrected to be a priest forever. He intercedes for us continually. Thus, only through Jesus’ priesthood are we perfected.

This is why we may never take a passage of Joshua and apply it directly to ourselves. Joshua speaks of the provision of the Old Covenant—which ends in condemnation, shame, and death. If we put ourselves under the requirements of the Law, then we commit ourselves to live by works. If we take any part of the Law (even a single command) upon ourselves, then we are obligated to keep the whole of it (it is indivisible). And there are no longer Levitical priests to offer Old Covenant sacrifices. That means we must be absolutely obedient and without sin—or be cursed by God.

Here’s what the author of Hebrews goes on to say in Hebrews 8:

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<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 7:18–19

Now the main point of what is being said is this: We have this kind of high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister of the sanctuary and the true tabernacle that was set up by the Lord and not man. ...Jesus has now obtained a superior ministry, and to that degree, he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been established on better promises.

Jesus mediates a better covenant...established on better promises. There's a link to our passage.

Joshua 21 ends by speaking of promises, reminding us that the Lord keeps all his promises. As you listen to verses 43-45, notice the repeated emphasis on promises and completeness:

Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

The Lord did everything he promised Israel's forefathers—he gave them the land in its entirety.

But there is tension in these verses. They clearly state that the Lord did *everything* he promised—he gave them *all* the land. But do you recall how this section opened? Joshua 13:1—“The LORD said to Joshua, ‘You are old and advanced in years, and there remains yet very much land to possess.’” Joshua ends with Israel *not* possessing all the land. Do they have all the land, or don't they?

That tension and that question are intentional on the author's part. They are critical to what he intends to communicate in this book. On the one hand, the Lord has done everything he promised their forefathers. He promised to bring them into this land and give it to them. He's done that. They're there. He kept his word to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

On the other hand, the question remains: Will Israel do everything that they promised the Lord? At Sinai, they entered a covenant in which they promised to do everything he commanded. They swore an oath with the Lord—one that stipulated they would be blessed if they obeyed, cursed if they disobeyed. Throughout Joshua, we find hints and indicators of their faithlessness and disobedience, which would one day result in forfeiting the land.

God always keeps his promises, but his people do not. The Old Covenant had no power to make them faithful. That is why we need a New Covenant in Jesus. Here is what the author of Hebrews goes on to say in Hebrews 8:7-13:

For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second one. But finding fault with his people, he says:

See, the days are coming, says the Lord,  
when I will make a new covenant  
with the house of Israel  
and with the house of Judah—  
not like the covenant  
that I made with their ancestors  
on the day I took them by the hand  
to lead them out of the land of Egypt.

I showed no concern for them, says the Lord,

because they did not continue in my covenant.  
For this is the covenant  
that I will make with the house of Israel  
after those days, says the Lord:  
I will put my laws into their minds  
and write them on their hearts.  
I will be their God,  
and they will be my people.  
And each person will not teach his fellow citizen,  
and each his brother or sister, saying, "Know the Lord,"  
because they will all know me,  
from the least to the greatest of them.  
For I will forgive their wrongdoing,  
and I will never again remember their sins.

By saying a new covenant, he has declared that the first is obsolete.  
This New Covenant promise is *better* than the promise made in the Old Covenant.

Under the law, they needed Levites scattered throughout Israel to teach them the law.  
But this is not necessary in the New Covenant. In Christ, the Lord puts his laws in our minds and on our hearts—not on external tablets and alters.

Under the law, they needed Levites to teach them how to know the Lord. This is because you could be a member of Old Covenant Israel without knowing the Lord! Some Israelites knew him; some did not. But in the New Covenant, "each person will not teach his fellow citizen, and each his brother or sister, saying, "Know the Lord." We may teach each other many things as Christians, but we do not teach each other how to know the Lord. Why? "because they will all know me, from the least to the greatest of them." The means of entering the New Covenant is knowing the Lord! If you don't know the Lord, you're not part of his covenant community. This means that every member of the New Covenant community—every Christian—knows the Lord.

How does the Lord give us knowledge of himself? "For I will forgive their wrongdoing, and I will never again remember their sins." If he has forgiven our sins and never calls them to mind, then nothing can cause us to turn his face from us. We have the assurance of eternal forgiveness because we are served by a better priesthood than the Levites. They offered repeated and temporary sacrifices. Jesus offered himself once for all. His sacrifice atoned for our sins forever. And now, he is always at God's right hand to intercede for us since he can never die.

Since we are "in Christ" through faith, we share his offices. He is our prophet, priest, and king. Peter says at Pentecost that we will all prophesy. Those in Revelation 5 proclaim about Jesus:

you purchased people  
for God by your blood  
from every tribe and language  
and people and nation.  
You made them a kingdom  
and priests to our God,

and they will reign on the earth.

In Christ, we are all prophets, priests, and kings. In Genesis 1-2, God created human beings to rule the earth and serve as priests in the garden sanctuary. We were to be kings and priests to God. In Christ and his redeemed people, God has fulfilled his purpose to have a kingdom of priests. This is not through the Law, but through Christ's death and resurrection, through forgiveness by grace through faith.

And this means that we have an inheritance of priests—God himself, a resurrection from the dead; we inherit the kingdom and the whole earth. Our inheritance is better than the promises celebrated as the culmination of Joshua 21. For our inheritance is eternal, unfading, and guarded for us in heaven until the return of Jesus Christ.

So our application is to set our hope firmly on Christ, our Great High Priest. For in Christ, God has made us entirely holy and promises to keep us blameless when Christ appears. He is faithful. He will do it. God always keeps his promises.