

CITIES OF THE LEVITES

by Doug Goins

This is a season of change at PBC. We have some exciting new opportunities at hand that are the culmination of a two-year process for the board of elders and the pastoral staff. We studied our doctrinal statement together for almost a year, and then we began to talk about its implications for PBC in terms of our unique identity and priorities. The culmination of all that was the writing of a vision statement that identifies three priorities that we are recommitting ourselves to:

"As a local church, operating under the direction of Jesus as Lord and Head, Peninsula Bible Church is called to serve God in three ways:

- to serve Him directly in worship;
- to serve His redeemed people in nurture;
- to serve His lost world in witness."

The vision statement briefly amplifies those three priorities as follows: We desire to be a worshipping church, "gathering corporately in adoring veneration of God as a response of love and living our individual lives in obedient service to our Lord as living sacrifices." We desire to be a nurturing church, "training and equipping believers for growth in spiritual maturity." We desire to be a witnessing church, "creatively reaching out collectively and individually to a lost world with the evangel (good news, gospel) of salvation in Jesus Christ."

As pastors and elders of PBC, we've been praying together, asking God to bring us into a healthier balance of worship, nurture, and witness. Last week as I was studying to preach on Joshua 21, I discovered that God sovereignly set aside forty-eight cities for the tribe of Levi and scattered them throughout the nation. They too were called to be communities first of worship, then of nurture, then of witness.

We've heard before in these studies that God did not intend for the tribe of Levi to have their own territorial allotment. He scattered them through the nation in all these different cities. Now we've come to the final act of settlement of all the tribes. The Levites came to Shiloh, the center of worship and administration in the nation, and made their request. The request was based on the word of God previously revealed in the Pentateuch through Moses. Look at Joshua 21:1-3, where the Levites claimed their rightful place in the land:

Then the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites came to Elea'zar the priest and to Joshua the son of Nun and to the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the people of Israel; and they said to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, "The Lord commanded through Moses that we be given cities to dwell in, along with their pasture lands for our cattle." So by command of the Lord the people of Israel gave to the Levites the following cities and pasture lands out of their inheritance.

Called to worship

Let's review a bit of the history of the tribe of Levi and their place in the nation. All throughout the forty years of the wilderness period of Israel's history, the tribe of Levi primarily served the worship life of the nation. They always camped the closest to the tabernacle, literally surrounding the tabernacle as it moved through the wilderness. It was important for the Israelites to have qualified, authorized people to minister in the tabernacle. The Levites had responsibility for transporting the ark of the covenant from place to place. Remember, as we studied the crossing of the Jordan River in chapters 3 and 4, it was the Levites who stood all day in the bed of

the Jordan River and held the ark of the covenant high. The Levites were in charge of maintaining the tabernacle itself with all its cords and curtains and coverings. They had responsibility for all of the sacred furniture of the tabernacle, all the vessels for worship and sacrifice, and all the poles and boards and bars that held the tent up.

But now the tabernacle wasn't moving anymore; it was going to be settled in Shiloh, a central location. Eventually the tabernacle would end up in Jerusalem, the capital of the united monarchy. But the worship leadership of the Levites would continue on, first in Shiloh and later in Jerusalem. They would serve in the temple, that place of unified corporate worship in the life of the nation. They would assist in all of the great annual feasts and festivals, the high holy days for the nation. They would lead musical worship in great choirs and orchestras, and become composers of psalms and hymns of praise for the nation. They would be part of the sacrificial system as the problem with sin was dealt with in the life of the nation.

But the text in Joshua 21 tells us that they were supposed to live scattered all through the nation. God didn't want the Levites concentrated around Shiloh, or eventually around Jerusalem. God ordained this so that they could model worship as a lifestyle and teach it as they traveled back and forth between their home towns and the temple. In addition to their singing alleluias and amens, their very lives were to become sacred alleluias as they traveled throughout the nation in this responsibility of worship leadership.

Verses 4-8 broadly summarize the dispersion of the Levites to the forty-eight cities that were sovereignly determined by the Lord through the lot. In verses 4 and 5 the sons of Kohath were given twenty-three cities from six different tribes. In verse 6 the sons of Gershon received thirteen cities from four of the tribes. In verse 7 the sons of Merari were given twelve cities from three different tribal territories. Verse 8 concludes:

These cities and their pasture lands the people of Israel gave by lot to the Levites, as the Lord had commanded through Moses.

Levi was one of the twelve sons of Jacob. The tribe descended from him consisted of three main branches, which were the three sons of Levi: Kohath, Gershon, and Merari. The Kohathites were the most distinguished and had the most cities assigned to them, because Moses and Aaron were sons of Kohath; thus the Aaronic priesthood came from this branch of the Levites.

The Levites were spiritual leaders of the nation as a whole, and their character was trans-tribal; that is, they weren't bound by any particular tribal grouping or boundary. We were told in 18:7 that instead of being given land by Joshua, "The Levites have no [physical] portion among you, for the priesthood of the Lord is their heritage...." It made clear that the Levites didn't even own the forty-eight Levitical cities or the grazing land around the cities. They probably lived in those cities side-by-side with the members of the tribes that owned the respective territories.

Called to nurture

The second ministry of the Levites in the land was that of nurture, or the teaching of the Law. They were to influence each tribe to be faithful to the Lord. Moses himself had prophesied of this ministry of the tribe of Levi on the plains of Moab before they entered the land (Deuteronomy 33:9b-10a):

"For they observed thy word,
and kept thy covenant.

They shall teach Jacob thy ordinances,
and Israel thy law...."

So in fulfillment of that promise of God that Levi would have this nurturing ministry in the nation, the Levites became the teachers, theologians, storytellers, counselors, and inspired preachers in that new society in the land. They were responsible for integrating into a coherent body the history of God's work among his people.

These forty-eight Levitical cities became centers of teaching about God's covenant relationship with his people and what a covenant lifestyle was all about. They were places where people like Rahab and her family, converts who needed understanding of the Israelite faith, could come to be initiated into the important truths of what it meant to be a people in relationship with God.

This Levite ministry of spiritual nurture continued to the period of the monarchy. Second Chronicles 17, written hundreds of years later during the reign of Jehoshaphat, described a teaching team King Jehoshaphat sent from Jerusalem throughout Judah. The team was made up of five of his own princes, two priests, and nine Levites. This is what it says about the team (verse 9): "And they taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the Lord with them; they went about through all the cities of Judah and taught among the people." The common people didn't have copies of the Scriptures available to them, so it was important that the Levites be able to explain the sacred Scriptures to the people and identify with them. These Levitical cities scattered throughout the nation were located such that nobody would ever be too far away from a place where they could have the Scriptures explained to them.

Called to witness and offer refuge

I made a wonderful discovery last week in studying verses 9-42: These Levitical cities were also supposed to be cities of witness or outreach. These verses are a broad survey of each city. In verses 9-26 the twenty-three cities of Kohath are summarized. In verses 27-33 the thirteen cities of Gershon are summarized. In verses 34-40 the final twelve cities of Merari are summarized. Verse 41 concludes:

The cities of the Levites in the midst of the possession of the people of Israel were in all forty-eight cities with their pasture lands. These cities had each its pasture lands round about it; so it was with all these cities.

Those forty-eight cities are listed in very careful detail. If you look at a map of Canaan and note the location of each of the forty-eight cities, you see that even though they were selected from every tribe, they were not evenly distributed throughout the land. Those forty-eight cities formed an oval around the center of the nation. Remember that under Joshua the Israelites had pacified the central section north to south, but there were frontier lands remaining that completely surrounded the nation. These lands were inhabited by the Philistines on the Mediterranean Sea coast, the Sidonians in the north by Tyre and Sidon (now Lebanon), and the Amalakites and the Midianites in the desert. It jumped off the page at me as I looked at the map of these cities: God chose not to cluster the cities of the Levites in the center where it was safe and secure, but he scattered them out on the frontiers. The geography suggested to me that those cities were to stand as a clear substitute for the pagan Canaanite high places of worship and the shrines, altars, and idolatrous paraphernalia that were present in the land at the time of the conquest. The Levites were to be a "saturation presence" in the land in place of pagan worship. Their cities were to be cities of witness, constantly reminding the unbelieving nations all around Israel about the God who had saved that nation out of bondage in Egypt, sustained them in the wilderness, brought them into the land, and led them in the conquest of the land he gave them.

Another observation I made reading this list of the forty-eight cities is that the six cities of refuge (see the last message, Discovery Paper 4471) are listed here among the cities of the Levites. Part of the Levitical ministry was to guarantee safety and due process of law to those who fled to these cities for refuge. There's a wonderful irony that struck me in this-initially both the cities of witness and the cities of refuge were in parts of the nation that were not yet safe and secure.

The priorities of our local church

The Levitical cities were to be places of worship, nurture, witness, and safety. Can you see the clear parallels between these cities and what we're supposed to be as the local church that God has placed in our community? First, we are to be a place of corporate worship. Hebrews 10:25 challenges us not to neglect the assembling of ourselves together, because something unique happens when we all gather together as people of God, expressing music of praise and worship, praying together, being challenged through the Scriptures and through the table of the Lord. The Scriptures and the table help us realize more of our identity in Christ. We are tremendously privileged to be part of an extended family of God gathered in worship. And the Scriptures teach that our corporate worship is to overflow so that our individual lives express worship and praise of God.

Wherever we go in our communities, our lives become alleluias to the Lord. We have a lifestyle of worship, of thankfulness and delight in who the Lord is, that is attractive and intriguing to people.

Second, we're to be a place of spiritual nurture, of Biblical teaching, training of new believers, counseling, discipleship, leadership development, equipping for ministry. The leaders of this church are committed to these things. This is the expansion of our commitment in the vision statement: "The goal of nurture is found in God Himself: To know the Lord, to be like the Lord, to do the Lord's will. We are committed to knowing the Lord through the Spirit and through the work of Christ. We are committed to becoming like the Lord. We are committed to doing the Lord's will. Life-related Biblical instruction will underlie all our efforts to bring believers to spiritual maturity. We will communicate 'the whole counsel of God' methodically & expositionally-teaching the great liberating principles of Scripture in every creative way possible."

This must happen in the context of relationships within the community of faith, whether in one-on-one mentoring, small intimate groups, or a more formal classroom setting. We can't go it alone in life. We need the spiritual nurture of instruction, counsel, and mutual support in the body of Christ.

Third, we are to be a place of witness to people in our community who don't yet know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Again, the new vision statement represents a strengthened resolve to be an evangelistic church: "Our evangelism is not an option, but is driven by a clear mandate of our Lord Jesus. We enjoy an uninhibited spiritual optimism in the power of God at work in the gospel. Our evangelism is done in the confidence that we are 'Christ's ambassadors-ministers of reconciliation.' We desire to compassionately serve unbelievers in physical and material ways, whether they are in the process of being saved or have rejected the gospel. We are committed to helping the body at PBC live out a lifestyle of witness." Like the Levites, we individually are to be a saturation presence in our communities.

But like the frontier location of the Levitical cities, this kind of lifestyle is going to place us uncomfortably close to those who don't yet have a relationship with Christ. It can feel better to do evangelism from a distance-leafleting, pamphleting, using phone mail, and so forth-because when we get close to people who don't know Christ yet, we can get hurt. Further, if we get close to people in our communities, they're going to see us for who we are; they'll either see the credibility of our witness because of our Christ-likeness or holy living, or they'll see the hypocrisy that we're comfortable with. It's risky and complicated to get close to people in evangelism.

I got a note from Judy Squier last week responding to our previous study on the cities of refuge. In that study we surveyed the necessity that fugitives who were on the run in Israel enter the doors of the cities of refuge so they could find asylum from the avenger of blood. We drew a parallel with the necessity that we run to Jesus Christ for salvation from the consequence of our guilt and sinful rebellion. Even Jesus himself said that we need to enter a gate that is very narrow. In her note, Judy quoted Sam Shoemaker, an Episcopalian minister from New York City back in the fifties and early sixties. He was involved in the early stages of Alcoholics Anonymous. He was also one of the original founders of the Faith at Work movement. But above all, Sam Shoemaker was an evangelist. Listen to his observation about the presence that he desired to have and that we are called to have:

I stand by the door. I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out. The door is the most important door in the world-it's the door through which men walk when they find God. There's no use my going way inside and staying there, when so many are still outside and they, as much I, crave to know where the door is. And all that so many ever find is only the wall where a door ought to be. They creep along the wall like blind men, with outstretched, groping hands, feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door...Yet they never find it...So I stand by the door.

That's the heart of Levitical witness-a godly desire to help people find their way into a city of salvation.

Fourth, we are to be a place of safety and security. There are many people today, both Christian and non-Christian, who do not see the local church as a place of refuge. They don't see PBC as a place where they can be understood and accepted, where they can be at home. At a congregational meeting we had last week,

Ted Wise asked us a very pointed question: Are we still a place of hospitality and openheartedness to all different kinds of people, or are we becoming a place that is more focused on religious externals? Or, thinking in terms of the Levitical cities, are we moving away from the frontier of faith, where all kinds of Canaanite influences swirl around us, back to the safety of the religious center, to Jerusalem and Shiloh?

We live in a frightening world, and being a Levitical city of refuge means functioning in unsecured territory as a place of stability, acceptance, truth, and patient support for Canaanites who are in the long, slow process of being transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son. The Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tournier wrote a remarkable book, *A Place for You*. In it he underlines the importance of the church as a place of safety, and he speaks on behalf of those who are looking to us to provide a place where they can work through deep spiritual issues. He writes:

The ideal support, then, is a presence; a vigilant, unshakable, indefectible presence, but one that is discreet, gentle, silent and respectful. We want help in our struggles, but do not want our personal responsibility to be taken away from us. A look, a smile, an intense emotion—these are things that can help us to win our victories over ourselves.

Although the church isn't always like this, this describes what it ought to be. What better place than here for people to find safety?

Our behavior ought to reflect the heart of Paul in his encouragement in Colossians 3:12-17. Think about the call to worship, nurture, witness, and provide safety as you listen to this:

"And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against any one; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father."

That's who we're called to be, individually and collectively.

Our passage in Joshua 21 ends with three affirmations of faith in verses 43-45. These verses are the conclusion of the long section on the settlement of the land, chapters 13-21. But these closing verses can also be applied to our own calling to be the church of Jesus Christ here and now. The same resources that were available to Moses, Joshua, all the tribes of Israel, and the Levites themselves are available to us. We at PBC can be a city of refuge, a city of the Levites. And we ought to read these verses against the backdrop of God's amazing grace, because this closing section is really a grateful recognition of God's grace, his faithfulness, his consistent follow-through.

Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land which he swore to give to their fathers; and having taken possession of it, 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 of all the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

The first great affirmation of faith in verse 43 is that God was faithful. He gave Israel the land. He kept the covenant. He consistently adhered to the relationship he had established with Moses and with the fathers.

The second affirmation of faith in verse 44 is that God gave Israel victory over all their enemies, and then gave them rest from warfare. What the ten spies forty years earlier hadn't believed at all did come true. God gave them what he promised, because Joshua and the people believed him and obeyed his word.

The third affirmation of faith in verse 45 is that God keeps his promises. At the close of his life, Joshua

affirms that in Joshua 23:14: "And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one thing has failed of all the good things which the Lord your God promised concerning you; all have come to pass for you, not one of them has failed."

As people of God today, we can claim these same assurances by faith. God's covenant relationship with us will not be violated or canceled. God's power and wisdom are just as available to us to give us victory over whatever foe we face. And finally, God's promises can be trusted no matter what the circumstances may be. The covenant of God, the power of God, and the promise of God are the spiritual resources we can depend on as we claim our inheritance in Jesus Christ.

We at PBC are determined to grow more and more into a church that reflects the heart of God: a worshipping church, a nurturing church, a witnessing church. Do you want to come along?

JOSHUA-THE ADVENTURE AND VICTORY OF FAITH

Catalog No. 4472

Joshua 21:1-45

Nineteenth Message

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September 22, 1996

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