

All right. Let's open our Bibles tonight to Joshua 20 as we continue.

I think we've told you several times, but it bears repeating, that this entire book only takes twenty-five years. It starts at about 1405 B.C., runs through about 1380 or so. And the focus is very much the occupation of the land as the children of Israel, after years of waiting and delaying and punishment and all - dragging their feet, finally get to enter the Land of Promise that God had given to them all the way back to Abraham, nearly five hundred years earlier. The early lessons of the preparation (early on in the book) we've gone through. When the children of Israel finally entered the land, God actually rolled the Jordan River sixteen miles upstream. Can you imagine? I mean, that was a pretty good, "How do you do?" Everyone in town went, "Well, I guess they're here," and God gave them a pretty good entrance. They reinstated the practice of circumcision, which was the covenant that God had made with Abraham. They went back to the Passover which, really, we can only find them having kept one time in the last forty years or so. And then they had these victories at Ai and Jericho, and there're very few battles that the LORD really sets before us. But what He does do is He gives to us, in chapters 10-12, the major battles; and by major I mean the battles in the middle of the country, to the north, and in the south. And God had a way of putting these major cities together and coming, collectively, to challenge the children of Israel as they came in. Those are battles that took seven and a half years. We aren't really told much about them at all, other than we are given kings that fell - thirty-one of them by name - in chapter 12; the strongholds were taken out. So much so that Joshua who, after seven and a half years, is only 93, is tired. I mean, he's tired. He can't go out and come in. He led the collective battles against the enemies of God in the land for seven and a half years. It's always a good picture to me that the LORD has given them the land, but you've got to go fight for it. You've got to stand with the LORD. You've got to stand and plant your feet. And that's true for us, too. You know, you can give in to worry, or you can just give in to faith. You can trust the Lord and believe that He's good and He's for you, or you can entertain the thoughts that He might not be for you. It's not true, but you can entertain those thoughts. And so Joshua would live another seventeen years, beyond the battle years. But being worn out, and it was a tough row to hoe, the LORD directed him to divide the land to the people in the various tribes and then

to assign each tribe their area to clean out the enemy that the LORD wanted completely destroyed. Now you read the Bible and you go, "Oh, my gosh, that seems so rough." Well, until you start reading what the Canaanites did for a living and how they went about doing life, and boy, you'd vote for them to be wiped out. The LORD waited for generations for them to come around. But, in any event, it is their lack of obedience to cleanse the land fully that would be that snake that came and bit them later on, and quite quickly at that. You leave stuff in your life that isn't really from the Lord, that you bring in from the world, and you don't deal with it, man, it can wipe you out. You can be doing so good in so many areas, and the enemy will find the weakness that he'll exploit. So, that certainly was true of them. But for now, at least to where we are through chapter 19, they're doing pretty well. They're obeying the LORD, they're going where they're told to go, and this generation knows both the LORD and His power - which isn't so true of the next generation.

So tonight we want to finish the distribution of the land, chapters 20 and 21. Then beginning next week, we are going to spend a whole week on one verse. And then, for the next three weeks after that, one chapter a week. There're some really good lessons at the end that I think bear us just slowing down because where are we going anyway? You in a hurry to get done? So we're going to just spend a few weeks learning these wonderful lessons.

But tonight we're going to look at the last tribe that really didn't have anything yet - the Levites. And you can call these two chapters "Cities of Refuge and Cities of Residence" because that is, indeed, what the Levites come to be. Now we'll learn a little bit about them tonight. But let me just say to you that the spiritual equivalent (in our generation) to the cities of refuge is the local church. It literally is the people of God planted in different communities that reach out to the communities to pass along, if you will, the Word of God and the ways of God and to represent the Lord and to counsel from His Word. There's probably no better parallel, really, than these cities that were planted throughout the land, which were filled with priests, godly men (or they were supposed to be) that would bear the LORD before the people. So that's our goal tonight - "Cities of Refuge" (chapter 20) and "Cities of Residence" (chapter 21).

One of the most defining moments in "The Wizard of Oz" (You all see this movie? It's been around a little while) was Dorothy discovered there was no way to go back to Kansas. Wasn't that the big deal? Like, "Man, I can go home." And she was

frustrated, and she was in despair. I'm not going to tell you the story now because you guys made fun of me. (Laughing) But she was finally told to close her eyes. Remember this? And click her heels together and say three times, (congregation says) "There's no place like home." That's right. So you've seen this movie. Even in this magical place where she found herself, she wanted to go home. And home wasn't all that pretty. It was dusty and flat. I'm pretty sure it was in black and white, too, wasn't it? In the movie. No color at all, right? You just go to that black-and-white Kansas.

But everyone takes, I think, pride in their home - whether it's your home town, where you're from, the city that you live in - it brings back memories. And most cities, at least certainly most of the larger cities in the world, have nicknames, and we know them. Some of them are more obscure. But if I said the "big apple," you'd say "New York." Very good. "City of angels"? "Los Angeles." Easy. "Sin city"? "Vegas." That's correct. (Laughing) The "big easy"? "New Orleans." How about the "smoke"? London. Or the "big toe"? It's Toronto. Well, see, you know some of them. Right?

Well, the children of Israel had special cities, too. They were important to them. They were proud of them. It's where they lived, it's where they grew up, it's where their memories were planted. And we've looked at them. Actually we skipped their names because we don't know how to pronounce them or where, a lot of times, they were - except geographically in areas. But these were important to them. It does interest me, and I don't know if it's bothered you before, that God gives to us in two chapters the creation of the heavens and the earth. I have a lot of questions. Two chapters. And it's over. And then I get here, and there is just chapter after chapter of land allotments and cities that don't exist and towns that I can't pronounce and borders; and yet they were home - no place like home. And it was. When Caleb came out - before they began to divide the land - Caleb cut off Joshua as he was doling out the land (as God was directing him through the casting of the lots), and before he ever let him help anybody, he said, "Hey, I want my part. Forty-five years ago, Moses promised me that I could have that town of Hebron." And it's a place that was filled with giants and had a mountain you had to climb. And Caleb was old, but he didn't care. He wanted that for his family. It was home to him; he'd been hanging onto it for the longest time. When the land was all but distributed, except for the Levites, it's Joshua, when they asked him what he wanted, that asked for a little town called Timnath Serah in the mountains of Ephraim; rocky, rural, backward place. He didn't pick a town along the

Mediterranean, which I might have picked. But, no, he wanted to go up in the hills. So, as Dorothy said, "There's no place like home." And, if nothing else, the chapters that we've gone through those big names and long ones and unpronounceable ones, look, this was home, and the LORD brought His people home. This was the land that He had prepared. This was the place He had promised for the better part of four or five hundred years. It was a place that He wanted them to stay. It's a place that Israel is back in the land today. They're not back there thriving because they're godly; they're not godly people for the most part. They're secular folks that have a religion. One day they'll meet the Lord, and they'll have all kinds of godliness, but they don't have that yet. But they are there because God is faithful to His promises.

So tonight, as we look at two different kinds of homes, we find these cities that were planted by the LORD as refuge cities. They have a specific function, as does the church. And then there were cities of residence where these Levites from the tribe of Levi would live. And both of the cities somehow related in their relationship to God by their function (as to what God has called them to do).

So let's start chapter 20:1. It says, "The LORD also spoke to Joshua, saying, 'Speak to the children of Israel,' saying: "Appoint for yourselves cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, that the slayer who kills a person accidentally or unintentionally may flee there; and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood." ' ' " If you've been with us since we started back in Genesis, the Pentateuch, these first five books that Moses wrote, established in God's Word a law of these cities that He would establish (in the land once they got there) called cities of refuge. They are mostly mentioned in Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19. They are described in verse 3 very accurately. They were a place that, if you accidentally killed someone or you didn't have the intention and you were involved in their death, you could run within the city walls, within designated boundaries, to get a fair hearing. You would arrive, and, as you arrived, you would be given a clearance, or at least a fair hearing. And it addressed something that isn't just Jewish; but the whole idea of "*goelism*" was a practice that most ancient societies practiced. And the word "*goel*" literally means that there was an obligation on the part of the next of kin to someone who had died or to somebody who had suffered loss to make that loss good, whether it meant that you lost land because you squandered your money, or you lost your freedom because you couldn't pay your debt. But it was that issue of going as a next of kin to redeem someone who had lost what they once had but certainly couldn't recover,

and if you lost them under certain conditions, they would work to gain it back; they would be surety or pay for you. In some cultures, when it came to retribution (which is what this is all about), it was obligatory. For example, if one of yours was killed, you were obligated (by social law if nothing else) to go and shed the blood of the assailant. You would go get your pint of blood. You would go make things right. You see it in gang life in the streets. "You kill one of ours, we'll kill one of yours." It's the old eye for an eye. And the law isn't just found in the annals, if you will, of the Pentateuch, where God makes it very clear how and what, but it is entrenched in ancient civilizations. We just get even. That's what we do. We protect ourselves. The problem, of course, is the minute you start to practice an eye for an eye, it doesn't take long for you to become unjust. And by unjust I mean, "You take out one of my teeth, I'm gonna knock out three of yours." Because that's kind of the way we see things going, right? We want to up the ante. We want to make sure that we get ours and then some.

In the law of God, there is (what was established) the Latin words, "*lex talionis*." But it literally means an eye for an eye, but it was the limitations by God upon an ancient people that were His, limiting, if you will, their ability to repay. So you were limited to an eye. "I want to give an eye for an eye." If you add to that the fact that this angry member of the family - whose brother, let's say, is killed - cannot possibly know all of the circumstances surrounding the death of his brother. He only knows he's dead. And in that emotionally-packed situation, you're going to go try to get even. You're not going to go fulfill the law of God. You're just going to go fulfill the law of the land. And if it happened to have been involuntary manslaughter or a complete accident or had been self-defense, add to that great emotional distress and family loyalty, and you're liable to kill an innocent man because, "That's just the way we do things around here." And so when it came to God's law, He clearly differentiates liability in terms of culture - manslaughter or not - under certain situations (Exodus 21 and 22 - good place to look). There's that whole list of capital punishment offenses that, if they can be proven and there are witnesses, the Bible doesn't back away from capital punishment as a deterrent as well as a punishment. But it is regulated - not like the world regulates but by the Spirit of God that seeks to raise up a people. So if you, for example, go back and read Numbers 35, the encouragement to someone involved in one of those issues is to run as quickly as you can to one of these cities of refuge, and you'll be protected in the city (according to the law of God) from the rash or the premature actions of the avenger, and you can stay there safely until your trial is heard; and then we're going to read, as we continue, that if you're declared innocent, you can

stay there safely until the high priest dies. You shouldn't leave until then. But when he dies, you're not only welcome to go home if you like, the avenger has no more right to deal with you, and you're free. So that was the law of God being imposed upon ancient society, if you will, and the way that they would practice. So these cities of refuge were meant to bring order and fairness and equality and equity to God's people. They were exercised in a manner where the idea of personal revenge was taken away. If you get through the Bible, you realize that the state, for example, is never asked by God to be merciful. The state is asked to be fair. Judgment of the state is impersonal. It's not designed to get themselves involved. It's to regulate and to enforce law. When it comes to you, individually, you're told to turn the other cheek and to forgive seventy times seven. You have an obligation, as one who's benefited from God's grace, to be gracious, to be forgiving, to die to self. But the law and the state aren't asked to do that. If there's a law of capital punishment, they apply it without bias because they're not supposed to be gracious or merciful; they're supposed to be representative of the law. It protects you, if you will. And it certainly was the same in this kind of situation. So if you were found innocent, they would protect you. You could stay there, and the guy can't come in, and you're good. Once the high priest dies, you're free to go home. The avenger is not allowed to touch you, or he'll be guilty. But if you go to the city of refuge, and you're found to be guilty, they'll just kill you. They'll just kill you. You'll find that there's execution for the crime.

Well verse 4 tells us, "And when he flees to one of those cities, and stands at the entrance of the gate of the city, and declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city as one of them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them. Then if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not deliver the slayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unintentionally, but did not hate him beforehand. And he shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the slayer may return and come to his own city and his own house, to the city from which he fled." So, the elders of the city (and by the way, because we are now with the Levites, as we are reading) are priests. Now we know (from not this place but from other places) that there were forty-eight cities that the Levites were given by the LORD throughout the land. Remember we said it's kind of like the church being planted in neighborhoods to provide spiritual direction? God planted them everywhere. In fact, if you get a map out, and maybe I should have brought you one, most of the cities of the Levites were in the south where all of the big population centers were. There were

less as you went north; there were less as you went east. But they were designed to be the Word and the name of the LORD, the Word of God, if you will, through these cities to the nation and to the people. There were forty-eight of them; six of them were deemed to be these cities of refuge.

In verse 7 and verse 8 we read, "So they appointed Kedesh in Galilee, in the mountains of Naphtali, Shechem in the mountains of Ephraim, and Kirjath Arba (which is Hebron) in the mountains of Judah. And on the other side of the Jordan, by Jericho eastward," (so across the Jordan again) "they assigned Bezer in the wilderness on the plain, from the tribe of Reuben, Ramoth in Gilead, from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan, from the tribe of Manasseh. These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel and for the stranger who dwelt among them, that whoever killed a person accidentally might flee there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stood before the congregation." So, six cities were deemed refuge cities - three in the land, three on the other side of the Jordan. They were spaced pretty evenly in the north and in the center of the country and in the south. They were designed that way so that there could be easy access. Those who were sitting in the gates that would hear your appeal, your case, if you will, were all Levites that, by definition, would be men that were interested in God's will, that would know the law of God, that would apply it fairly, that would be impartial in their judgment. But notice from verse 6 that these cities would afford safe haven for the innocent, a fair trial, protection under the law, and then you had to stay in the city until the high priest died - which is interesting because if you came and you laid out your case, and let's say they found you innocent, and the high priest was 35 years old, you might have to move your whole family into this town and stay there for quite some time before you were able to leave. But, in verse 7, notice on the west side of the Jordan, there's a place called Kedesh. That's in the north. Shechem is in the center of the country. Kirjath Arba (or Hebron) is in the south. Verse 8, on the east side, Bezer is in the south, Ramoth is in the middle, and the Golan is in the north. So they were strategically placed, and if you, again, can just look at them on a map, you will notice that you couldn't be anywhere in the land of Israel (as God gave it to them) where you'd be more than four hours away from a city (of refuge), or about half a day's journey. If you really had to get somewhere, it'd take you less than half a day to arrive at one of these cities so that you could find protection and oversight.

In a spiritual sense, certainly, the cities of refuge are a picture of Jesus and what He came to do. The avenger of blood is the judgment for our sin. We need a

Savior. We run to Him. He's ever-present and certainly available. And we're made free because the High Priest has died for us. In fact, the book of Hebrews is all about the High Priest being our Mediator and being the One that will intercede for us, that would be the One that would bring us in.

So you get these pictures, now, of these cities; not land. It's not like the other ones we've read where they get a big chunk of land. The Levites would just get cities kind of all scattered throughout the territories of the Jews.

A couple of interesting, I think, comparisons that you can make between Jesus, so ever-ready to save you, and these cities of refuge is that these six cities were always accessible. Of all of the cities in the land that had walls around them (and gates), everyone locked their doors at night, including the city. They would shut them at sundown. You didn't get in, you couldn't get out - unless you were a city of refuge, and then you could come twenty-four hours a day. It's the only place open 24/7. They were available to you. In fact, in Deuteronomy 19, the LORD (very clearly, through Moses) demands that all of the roads in the land leading to these cities of refuge had to be groomed and well-maintained so that no one would have trouble getting to that place of grace; and not only that but that there would be large signs pointing the way. You wouldn't get in the middle of the desert and go, "I wonder which way it is," because you're running for your life. It had to be clearly marked, easily found. In fact, the Talmud spoke about even the bridges that were built in the valleys so when there was flooding, the people could still have great success finding a place of escape. And they weren't restricted, and it was a place that was easy to find - which is kind of like Jesus. Right? He's always open. He's always available. You're in trouble tonight, you can go to Him. I think sometimes, just trying to make that comparison in my mind, we as the church make it harder for people to find the Lord than easier. I mean, everything in the law said, "Make it easy. Make it easy for them to find a place, make it easy for them to get to that place of refuge." And I think sometimes we make it hard on people. Right? We demand of them things that God doesn't. We demand, we make stipulations for His mercy, and we add works to His grace. It's almost like we hinder the people. We stand in the way of them rather than inviting them to come and find life with the Lord. So, the Old Testament said to the Jews, "Keep the roads clear. Keep the signposts up. Make it definitive where He is, and make it easy to get to that place." So the cities were accessible - number one. He was always available to them. What is that Scripture in Revelation? "And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' " Just come. "And let him who thirsts come. Whoever

desires, let him take the water of life freely" (Revelation 22:17). So they're always available.

Notice verse 9 said that the cities would be open to everyone, which is another thing that Jesus is. He's available to everyone. Notice it's not just the Jews; it's the Jews and the stranger alike that live in their midst. The city was universal in its ability to receive and to protect. So is Jesus. It doesn't matter who you are, what color you are, where you came from, who you know or don't know. It doesn't matter. You go to the Lord, and He'll receive you. Come anytime you like, and He'll receive you. "Come unto Me if you're thirsty, and drink." John says, in chapter 6, "He will never turn us away if we come." So all these beautiful pictures of the things that the Lord would do for us.

And you might add to the comparison these cities were exceptional. By that I mean it is the only place in the land that you could run and be protected. They're exceptional. They stand out. There's no place else to go. It wasn't like, "Here's a city of refuge or" There was no "or." You might say, "Well, I think I'll just go home. I like my place better." Well, you can stay home, but there's no security there. So Jesus is exceptional. He's the only way, the only truth, and the only life. You can choose another way, but you'll die. In fact, if you go to Hebrews, there's that portion in chapter 6:13 where it talks about, "For When God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself." "I swear on My own. I'm God." Verse 14, "'Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.'" But then (as you get down to verse 18 of Hebrews 6) it says there are "two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us." It's almost the description of this whole function of the city. We have run to Jesus for refuge, by His grace, by His mercy. So, you find it here as well. He's our refuge. Jesus is our refuge. What is that old song? "How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in His excellent word." Right? How firm a foundation. There's a line in that hymn that says, "The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, I will not - I will not desert to its foes, that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake!" So that's God's promise, here to His people as well. In the economy of God's government, He establishes this practice.

Now, lest I go crazy with types, types are good in the general sense in the Bible, which means that they reflect something that we can understand. The minute you

get in trouble is when you try to push types too far, and sometimes people will do that. For example - I'll just give you this to think about - the cities of refuge were helpful only for the innocent. Really, the only people that benefited were people that were innocent. If you showed up there guilty, you're done. Not a good place for you. Jesus, on the other hand, is only good for the guilty. If you're sick, you need a doctor, okay, then you can come. But the Lord said, "If you don't know you're sick, I can't do you any good." Right? Jesus is only for the guilty and not for those who think that they're innocent.

So here's God's graciousness applied in practical terms, in terms of the government in the issue of justice and the avenger, and it really does slow down personal vengeance and raises it to a level, almost, of government operation - where there's no personal involvement. You know, we go to a lot of hospital calls, we do a lot of funerals. With the Police Department, we'll get called out as chaplains (at least in Santa Ana) on some pretty grizzly and horrifying things. But you're better able to handle it if you're not emotionally involved. I mean, it's horrendous, but it's not your father, it's not your children. So it's almost there's that space of protection for you, when you go to serve. Same way when it comes to government versus personal responsibility. The government just has to be just; the individual has to be merciful and to forgive as God forgave you.

So, let the Lord avenge. Let the Lord set it right. Take it out of the hand of the individual. Limit the personal vengeance that can get very much out of hand. And it is the government's job to punish evildoers. And for you, it's just to love people and pray for them and seek to reach them. But that's the wisdom of God here in utilizing these cities of refuge. To the extent that the people used them, they were blessed. God used it to bless. It removed emotional assaults, it removed injustice, it removed personal vengeance; took it all out of the equation and laid it back upon the people that represented the LORD.

Well chapter 21, and you're going to be just fine because about forty of those verses we're not going to read, so you that are clock watchers, don't worry. Like I said, there are forty-eight cities allotted to the tribe of Levi in which they were allowed to dwell amongst the children of Israel. Most of them, as I told you, were on the west side (not on the east) where most of the folks lived. Most of them were in the south, away from the sparsity of the northern populations, if you will; and more so when you got to Jerusalem, where God would eventually (after Shiloh, which is where the tabernacle stands now) move it, that place of worship. When

David would overthrow the Jebusites in Jerusalem, in 1040 or so, then that tabernacle of worship will be moved. So another 340 years, it'll be moved to Jerusalem. So you find that God places a lot of these cities kind of in those areas; some of them you would have had to guess on your own that Jerusalem was going to be thriving and a religious center. But God knew that already, and He positions them accordingly.

In the tribes, or for the sake of these folks who have finally come home to their land, there was a tremendous benefit for them to be near a Levitical city. If you needed biblical counseling, they spent their lives learning the Bible. If you needed an interpretation of the law so it could be applied in your relationship in a social setting, you could find it there. The priests, the Bible teachers, the students of the Word of God, were all dwelling in these cities. It was a whole place you'd just go, "Help me, teach me, show me," and in that regard it really becomes a reflection, I think, of the local church ministry. Everyone that was trained for ministry in the priesthood went to Shiloh. That's where they had to go. And they would eventually then be sent out to all of these places, and they would come once a year in their course (as David would set it up later) to serve. So if you had a whole city next to you filled with men of God, and people that loved God's Word, you could have a great benefit in going there. I think that's the importance of picking a church to be involved with that's teaching the Bible.

Verse 1 says this, "Then the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites came near to Eleazar the priest," (the high priest at the time) "to Joshua the son of Nun, and to the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the children of Israel. 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.' So the children of Israel gave to the Levites from their inheritance, at the commandment of the LORD, these cities and their common-lands." Shiloh was the first capital, really, of the new land. It is where the LORD put His name. If you have your map from last week, it is in the mountains of Ephraim, pretty much in the middle of the country, maybe a little to the north. And until David would come upon the scene and make Jerusalem the capital, this was the place that they would come to worship. Every person would have to come here to worship. You weren't allowed to build your own altar, do your own thing. You had to come here because the issue was the heathen had altars everywhere because they worshipped a million gods. The Jews were ones that worshipped one God. So He was in one place. That was really the way to learn and to be taught. So they went to one place.

The Levites, according to the Word of God, were not given any land at all, but they were to be given by the various tribes and suburbs, places to live in. They were the, like I said, spiritual equivalent of the local church today, and they were there to help out. Now, from the stand of church today, the US Government does not obligate us, as Morningstar, to pay property taxes as a church. We're off the hook for property taxes. Because it all began with there was value in having a church in a community that would take care of the poor, teach the Bible, provide schooling (oftentimes). But it was that positive influence, for years, that they saw the church. If you go to the city today and ask to move into a city, you might very well find just the opposite to be true. They really don't care about your positive influence. They are interested in money. And since you're a non-profit, not paying taxes, you're at the bottom of the list when it comes to favor or to find favor. And so churches that have to move around, or need to move at all, find themselves oftentimes up against revenue, and nobody, necessarily, on a city council or a group of folks will value the work of Jesus in a community. They don't see those benefits. They just see no money. "You're sitting on land. We're not getting paid. We don't need you here. Go away." In fact we, years ago, were trying to move into another city nearby. I won't even tell you where it is. But you can guess - it's nearby. And they said to us, verbatim, "We don't want any churches in our town. We need people that pay their taxes." And we went, "Well, all right." But there's great benefit to having you and me, as Christians, in a community, sharing Jesus. None of you are breaking-and-entering. No liquor stores are being robbed. No drunk drivers are crashing into and killing folks unnecessarily. I'd like to have a lot of churches in my community. Wouldn't you? People that love Jesus. But they don't see it, and they just see you as a problem that is getting away with not paying your taxes.

Notice from verses 1 and 2 that the request came from the Levites to the leadership, and they did so obediently, believing what God had said to them earlier when Moses was still around that when they got into the land, they would be given from the tribes places that they could live and also places that they could raise their livestock around them. So that request, prompted by obedience, was what gave them forty-eight towns: forty-two of them throughout the land, six of them cities of refuge, and common-land around them. So it was really God's way of reaching out to every community with His Word. It was the LORD's hand of grace.

One of the lessons that we learn from the Levites in particular (just the tribe), if you remember back in Genesis 49, Jacob is dying, and he prophesies over his twelve

children of which, obviously, Levi was one. And he mentions Simeon and Levi (there in verses 5-7) as "instruments of cruelty are in their dwelling place," and then saying that, "I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel." So he said of these two boys (that would become tribes), "You're really not going to have your own place. You're going to be scattered. You're going to be divided. You're not going to find yourself exactly where you want." And the whole situation came out because they were in Shechem at the time when their sister, Dinah, was violated by one of the rulers in the town; and the boys, wanting to protect their sister (and the offender's family tried to make peace), said, "Well, yeah, if all the boys get circumcised like we, the Jews, do, then we could probably forgive that." And the minute these men were incapacitated by that surgery, they went in and killed everyone. And it not only put Jacob in a dangerous place with his family, but it was really a violation of the LORD's goodness, if you will, and Jacob didn't forget it. So, the prophecy bore out because Simeon - if you look at your map from last week - got stuck in Judah. They didn't get their own land; they got stuck in Judah's land because it was too much for them. They didn't have any borders. They were protected by Judah, but they were just kind of floating around, if you will; they didn't have their own place. And Levi, the priestly tribe, is also scattered. Now it started as a curse, but it turned into a blessing. Isn't that something? Their worst that they have done - and the LORD dealt with them - God then turned around into a blessing. Only God can do that. I'm not suggesting that you ever mess up really badly so God's curse can be a blessing. I'm just saying if you've messed up really badly, and you feel like God is dealing with you, God can turn even that around. You look to Him, He can make the worst of what you've done turn out for good. He can turn it around. Not suggesting that's the road that you take. But if you're on that road already, it's good to know that the Lord can turn you around. And He did.

Now, in Numbers 35 it says that the common-land around each one of these cities was 500 yards out from the border of the town. So literally in every direction around the town, 500 yards they got to keep their animals around. Just to kind of give you a feel for what that meant, all forty-eight cities of the Levites only measured fifteen square miles completely - the land, all that they had, fifteen square miles - which is about 1/10th of 1% of all of the land that, at this time, Israel was filling up. So it wasn't a huge portion; very small by comparison. But they were responsible for the spiritual well-being, I think, of the people, and to the extent that they brought God's Word forth and worshipped, things did well. And when the people turned away and the priests fled, then the nation suffered.

In the tribe of Levi, if you remember at all from our studies before, there were basically three families that formed the tree of the Levites, to which God gave responsibilities - all having to do with the transport and service, the set-up and the worship at the place of meeting with God, at the tabernacle. And He assigned these three families responsibilities; (Numbers 3, there's great detail offered about all of those things). But needless to say, these guys were responsible, in one way or another, to bring the people and God together in a way that God had authorized. One of the groups was called the Gershonites, and they were the ones that would camp (when they were moving) on the west side of the tabernacle. They were responsible for all of the soft goods. By that I mean the veils, the curtains. They had to fold them and clean them, and transport them and set them up in the next place they stopped. It stopped, really, having to be done once they settled down. There was a group from the family of the Merarites who camped to the north. They were kind of the heavy lifters. They were all the Samoan big guys, you know? They carried poles and fences and stakes. They were big dudes. Right? And then there were the Kohathites, the third family. The high priest came from there. They camped in the south. They were responsible for everything in the holy place and in the holy of holies. They were responsible for the things that really were holy, if you will, the altar of incense and the candelabra and the ark itself.

So, as you read through this (and we're not going to read all of them), notice in verse 4, it says "the lot came out for the family of the Kohathites," and then we are given the cities that the Kohathites were given in verses 9-26. I'll summarize them for you. They were given twenty-three cities by lot: thirteen in the south in Judah, where the temple would be built; ten of them in the north. In verse 6, there was the mention of the children of Gershon. The Gershonites were given thirteen cities. The Merarites, in verse 7, were given twelve.

And then, beginning in verse 9 and reading all the way to verse 40, you are given by name those forty-eight cities. If you thought I was going to read them to you, you're dead wrong. I would just mark the chapter as a reference page so when you run into these things, you can come back and understand what you're dealing with because I trust the LORD gave them to us to understand fully what He is doing. And throughout the Old Testament, you're going to read about the priests and those three families and what happened in some of these cities of refuge. So it's good for you to know, and hopefully you'll remember it that way as an overview.

Verse 41 says, "All the cities of the Levites within the possession of the children of Israel were forty-eight cities with their common-lands. Every one of these cities had its common-land surrounding it; thus were all these cities." So God had, 470 years earlier (roughly), said to Abraham, as Lot had separated from him (Genesis 13), "Look around. Every place your eyes land, north and south, east and west, this is all going to belong to you and to your descendants. And I'll make them as the dust of the earth for number, and no one will be able to number them. And you can walk through the land, and I'm going to give this to you." And really this is fulfilled here in the sense that God has established the land, the people, the places of worship, the oversight of the meeting place between Him and His people. He is with them in the land. He is at the center of their worship. And God, 470 years earlier, had said, "This will be yours," and there you go. They're all in the land. They're all in their places. It's all been allotted, if you will, and nothing is left to be given to them.

Verse 43 says, "So the LORD gave to Israel" (and notice these words) "all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it." The LORD's promise of the land. He had kept His promise. In fact, one of the things that I wrote in the margin of my Bible years ago was, "Every promise God made, He kept. Every promise they made, they broke." It's absolutely true. I don't think you can argue with that. I don't want that to be our testimony, but it usually is. God's always faithful; we are always trying. And God is good. He keeps His Word. So He gave them the land. So we're given, by the Lord, peace and rest and salvation. If we fall short of peace and rest, it's not His fault. Right? You agree? Not His fault. Because He's made it available. We just need to now hang on to it, possess it, appropriate it, and believe Him. Notice verse 44. It says, "The LORD gave them rest all around." He gave them all of the land, and He gave them rest all around. Or, literally, the enemies that were left posed no threat to them at all. The accomplishment of taking the entire land should have, at this point, been relatively easy. The problem was they didn't heed His Word, and leaving these pockets of enemies, these pockets began to grow, their influence began to grow. And it's amazing. My mother used to say to me, "I don't want you hanging around with that kid," and I'd always go, "Well, what's wrong with him?" But I knew what was wrong with him. He was the worst kid on the block. But I liked hanging out with him because he was the worst kid on the block. And my mom, "You're going to start acting just like he does," or, "You've been hanging around that kid. You're talking just like he does." And I thought - how does she know? But it's the case, right? You hang around in the world, you become like the world.

You hang around with church folks, you become, hopefully, godly and loving the Lord. So, He gave them the land (a), He gave them rest (b).

And then we read, verse 45, "Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass." That's pretty cool, right? "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My word will never pass away" (Matthew 24:35, Luke 21:33). Next week, Lord be willing, I'd like to spend the whole evening with you on that verse. I'd like to bring you a list of what God promises you. Would that be all right? So you can go home and go, "I'm hanging on to these." I think you'll come to the same conclusion. God continues to be faithful.

So this is really the end of the book in the sense that the land's been distributed, the priests have been planted, the cities have been chosen, the folks have been sent out away from the center of Shiloh (where they would return to worship). Chapter 22 just speaks about a really bad incident where the folks who wanted to live on the other side of the Jordan now leave after seven and a half years of fighting, "All right, we helped you, now we're leaving," and the terrible misunderstanding that happened between brethren because these guys decided to live far, far away from the LORD and far, far away from the people of God. And it's a problem. It's an issue. And it is there for just, I think, that one purpose. So we're going to talk, in chapter 22, specifically about how we avoid misunderstandings. Because it's a great lesson. Chapter 23 is Joshua speaking to the leadership; this is his last words and testament, if you will. And then chapter 24, he gathers the leadership along with the people and gives them his last words. And part of those last words were, "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.....as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (verse 15). But he was 110, so I think he was talking about everybody, right before he dropped dead. "Yeah, we're all gonna do it." Left it with them. So that's what we have left before we look at the book of Judges.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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