

Joshua 21:1-45

“Reversal of fortune”

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I. Intro

I picked up an old book this week on my bookshelf (its old enough to have the pages yellow). As I was thumbing through that book I realized that it was one of the first books in my Christian life which makes it around 37 years old. As I was going through the pages I came across a quote on the very last page that caught my attention, it was hand written in red ink. The quote was really a prayer from a young man 37 years ago that simple prayed “*Oh Lord I pray to You that You make me more like You, in order that You might be glorified*”. Here I am 37 years later and I don’t believe I’m any closer to the realization of that request than I was when I wrote it. That was until I realized that God has never failed to be faithful to that prayer request. He has “Reversed the Curse” that was my life prior and though He isn’t done with me yet what He has accomplished in spite of me has been nothing less than miraculous. You may be wondering just what this nostalgic walk through my life has to do with the text at hand. Well turn with me to the final sentence in this chapter as Joshua records his observation over God’s faithfulness towards His children Joshua saying, “*Not a word failed of any good thing which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.*”

II. Vs. 1-3 Scattered servants

Vs. 1-3 God told Aaron in Numbers 18:6 *“I Myself have taken your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel; they are a gift to you, given by the Lord, to do the work of the tabernacle of meeting.”* Their influence and service before the Lord and the nation was to have a preserving influence upon the nation. Israel had three special classes of people in the land:

1. Warriors: Fought to take possession of the land and protect it from the enemy who would come to attack. These were the soldiers made up of all men between a certain age and census were taken to determine how many from each tribe.
2. Priests: These were men from the tribe of Levi but descendants from Aaron whose responsibility was to ensure that worshipping God according to His Word was maintained.
3. Levites: They were servants from the tribe of Levi who served in and around the temple providing the things necessary for the people to approach the Lord.

In the realm of grace, you and I are all three of these rolled into one. In 1 Peter 2:9 Peter informs us that we are *“a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”*. In Col. 3:24 Paul says that *“from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.”* Finally, in Jude 1:3 Jude tells us that he *“found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”*

In the 13th chapter Joshua tells us in verse 14 that *“Only to the tribe of Levi he had given no inheritance; the sacrifices of the Lord God of Israel made by fire are their inheritance, as He said to them.”* Then in verse 33 Joshua said, *“But to the tribe of Levi Moses had given no inheritance; the Lord God of Israel was their inheritance, as He had said to them.”* Yet we will

be told again by Joshua in 21:41 that “*All the cities of the Levites within the possession of the children of Israel were forty-eight cities with their common-lands.*” So then the Levites were not given a specific geographic piece of land they were scattered amongst all the tribes and given 48 cities within each of the tribes to dwell in. Perhaps you aren’t aware that not all Levites were priests but all priests were Levites. Here in this chapter they come to Joshua with these words recorded for us in verse 2 “*The Lord commanded through Moses to give us cities to dwell in, with their common-lands for our livestock.*” These Levites had to wait until their brethren in the other tribes received their inheritance and began to settle there cities as it would be in 48 cities that they would make their home.

Have you ever felt like your life was hung up on others getting their act together so that you could receive what God has for you? If you have ever felt like that then you can relate to those Levites who were in the back of the line waiting for others to step forward so they could move into the promises of what God had for them. Just how did this tribe get into this predicament to begin with?

Well it all started hundreds of years earlier with their patriarch and name sake the second son born to Jacob through Leah named Levi. Levi grew up in what can only be described as an extremely dysfunctional family of competing mothers who were sisters that raced for affection from their husband Jacob through giving birth. No doubt the mess of seeing their mother wanting their father’s affection but seeing him love their aunt Rachael more played a major role in their behavior. It all came to a head in the 34th chapter of Genesis after their father’s encounter with the Lord in chapter 32 whereby his name is changed from ruled by self to Ruled by God (Israel) they are dwelling in the Land of Canaan. Now these two have a full sister named Dinah and she is new to town and wants to hang out with the local girls when the prince of the land Shechem

sees her and wants her so he takes her and rapes her. But when dad Jacob finds out about it although he is upset he doesn't really want to do much as it may affect his business dealings and safety for the rest of the family. So these two brothers take matters into their own hand by not only killing the prince but his father the king as well as every other male in the land. I mean their anger went as far as hamstringing all the oxen of the land. This led to that death bed prophecy that Jacob pronounced upon Simeon and Levi in Genesis 49:5-7 "*Simeon and Levi are brothers; instruments of cruelty are in their dwelling place. Let not my soul enter their council; let not my honor be united to their assembly; for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self-will they hamstrung an ox. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.*" As noted Simeon was given their inheritance within the boundaries of Judah thus fulfilling Jacob's prophecy but also fulfilling God's desire to bless them as they were linked with a stronger nation spiritually. Now here we see the fulfillment of Jacob's words with regards to Simeon's younger brother Levi. Here is where we gain insight into our own lives by looking at the tribe of Levi.

1. First that which the tribe of Levi saw perhaps as a delay based upon others was in reality something that was designed to remind them not to become impatient with others. That was their ancestor's problem as Levi allowed his own insecurity with his father to cause him to lash out at those that had nothing to do with the sin against his sister. Saint's listen up, God's work in blessing us goes much further than material things, it goes into the spiritual arena where he knows our frame and designs His blessings around the things that continually transform us into His image. This fact ought to cause us to be thankful of the truth that Jesus said in Matthew 7:11 "*If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!*" Our Father knows how to give us good things my friends and some times the "*good things*" He gives aren't things that we would at first glance call "good" but everything that comes into our lives is designed to draw us closer to Him and if it hasn't then the problem lies not with the Father but with what we have done with what He has given us.
2. Secondly what initially Levi may have saw as a curse upon him for his lack of patience, his ancestor's learned was a blessing to keep them close to God by serving the Lord and His people. We can trace the beginning of this tribe's transformation to something that happened during the exodus. You remember the account where the

tribes formed a golden calf idol to worship during Moses absence while he received the commandments. When Moses came down he saw that the camp was all involved in worship of the idol and even his brother Aaron hadn't stepped up to stop the idolatry. So Moses said, "*who ever is on the Lord's side come to me*" and only the tribe of Levi came forward. So here was a tribe that had taken things in their own hands now they were willing to step over and serve only the Lord. The Lord spoke through a father concerning the weakness of a son but over time transformed them into those who were steadfast in their worship of God and no were given the blessing of serving the Lord and serving His people. Hear the words of Paul in 2 Cor. 12:10 where he speaks of this personally saying, "*Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*"

III. Vs. 4-42 From Curse to blessing

Vs. 4-42 God never intended for there to be a state of Levi, He wanted to sprinkle them around all the tribes as a blessing, every tribe was to have the priestly influence and presence in their midst. God is not into isolation He is into integration as He wants you and I to influence those of the world towards the kingdom of His love. Did you notice that the Levites the priestly tribe received their cities last of all the tribes? **I believe that is a reminder that the priests are appointed to serve, not to be served, and there is something priestly about letting others go first and to be the last of all.**

In Numbers 26:62, the writer states that there were 23,000 Levites before Israel entered the land, a big crowd to distribute among forty-eight cities. The two lists of Levitical cities that we have—Joshua 21 and 1 Chronicles 6:54-81—do not always agree; but names of cities and spellings change over the years, and it's possible that from time to time new cities were selected and old ones abandoned. Each of the tribes contributed four cities, except Judah and Simeon, who together contributed nine, and Naphtali, who contributed three. The descendants of the three sons of Aaron—Kohath, Gershon and Marari—were assigned to the various cities, although other Jews also lived in them.

Since the common people didn't own copies of the Scriptures, it was important that the Levites identify with the people and explain the Law to them. These Levitical cities were so located that nobody was too far away from a man who could help them understand and apply the Law of Moses. The distribution of the cities to the Levites was based upon the fact that according to Genesis 46:11 Levi had three sons, Gershon, Kohath and Merari their names as they appear in the text mean the "*congregation of the exiled bitter people*". It is interesting to note that these three sons of Levi always stay together within their family unit, for instance the Gershonite's are always in charge of the tent of the tabernacle, when they broke camp the Gershonite's were responsible for breaking it down and carrying it to the next location. The Kohathite's were always responsible for the instruments of worship outside the Holy of Holies (only the priests handled these items). Finally, the descendants of Merari dealt with all the hardware of the temple. Each family camped around the tabernacle forming a circle around it with Aaron and Moses camping at the entrance. Here is a list of the location of those 48 cities and just where each individual family of Levite was going to call home.

I wonder how these families viewed this. Perhaps they viewed like many in the military who upon graduation check to see to which base they are going to be ***deployed***. Many of you are aware that I wrestled with this issue with regards to my calling and service before the Lord. Slowly over time I had fallen into a mind set in my service that I wanted to call the shots as to where I was going to be "deployed". But God in His great wisdom through my continual rebellion and failure brought me after 17 years to where I cried out "***Lord I no longer want employment and want deployment***". In other words, "*Lord you know what city is best for me, what people will challenge me to be more like you!*" So here I am, if you don't like me "*It's God's fault*" and I'll leave as soon you get to work and finish that which is lacking in me for this

season! All of that recent history of my life got me thinking in the realm of the differing “cites” that God places us and whether or not or stay will be blessed. You see in Hebrews 3:19 the author makes an important point with regards to our entering into the promised blessing of our victorious Christian life when he says, “*So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.*” Now think of that with regards to that first generation of Israelites who had complained against God, rebelled against God, fell into idolatry and immorality against God. Yet with all that it doesn’t say that it was those things that keep them from the presence and promise of God, no **it was unbelief!** That generation died in the wilderness because they simply didn’t believe that the God who promised the land could be trusted to keep His promise. I wonder how many of those doubted the Lord because of their own failure. You know how it sounds, “*Lord, I’m a mess I’ve failed so many times before and here before me lies all of what you have for me, I’d go for it but I know I’ll just mess it up and I don’t deserve it any way so I’ll just wonder and be miserable!*” Ah but finally there came a generation who though sharing the same fallen gene pool simply believed that God who promised was able to keep His promises in spite of our failures. They were those that again the author of Hebrews speaks of in chapter 6:12 became those who “*imitated those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*” Hey saints allow me to give a definition unbelief and belief:

- **Unbelief**: Is when we use the situation and circumstances in our life to interpret who God is. Here is how it works, we go through something and we start to use those things to change our view of who God is and what is true about Him.
- **Belief**: Is the exact opposite it is where we start with what we know to be true about God and use that to interpret are situation and circumstance. Here is how that works, we start with recalling all that we know to be true about God like, He will never leave us or forsake us.

IV. Vs. 43-45 Not a word failed

Vs. 43-45 This long section in the Book of Joshua closes with three wonderful affirmations:

1. First, God was faithful and gave Israel the land (Josh. 21:43). He kept the covenant that He made, first with Abraham (Gen. 12:7) and then with his descendants.
2. Second, God gave Israel victory over all their enemies and then gave them the rest from war (Josh. 21:44; see 1:13, 15; 11:23). What the ten unbelieving spies at Kadesh Barnea said could never happen did happen, because Joshua and the people believed God and obeyed His Word.
3. Third, God kept His promises (21:45). At the close of his life Joshua would remind the people of this (23:14); and Solomon reminded them of it when he dedicated the temple (1 Kings 8:56).

One must look in light of this at Jude's word in Jude 1:24 "*Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy*".

The wide dispersion of Levites into these 48 cities speaks to the fact that it was God's plan that the Levites' presence would provide the service and teaching necessary to lead people further into a relationship with the Lord. God turned a curse into a blessing not only for the Levites but for the whole nation. The land of Canaan where Levi and his older brother Simeon had massacred the Canaanites was now the land where the prophecy would be fulfilled but instead of it being a bummer it was a blessing. The list of Levites that became a blessing to God's people is extensive. Of course you have Moses and Aaron but you also have Phinehas who was the third High priest and served 19 years and corrected the nation's tendency towards idolatry. Eli was a Levite who lived 98 years serving as a judge of the nation for 40 years until Samuel. Ezra was a Levite who served with Nehemiah when the nation returned from captivity. Did you know that John the Baptist was a Levite as his father Zacharias served in the temple he was a descendant of Aaron? You may feel as though you have failed and are under a curse do to this but hear the words of an American author of the story of Rip Van Winkle Washington Irving said, "*It lightens the stroke to draw near to Him who handles the rod.*"