

CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

DHW BIBLE CLASS

LESSON 14A

JOSHUA

CHAPTER 20-21

Joshua 21:44-45 – *“And the LORD gave them rest round about, according to all that he swore unto their fathers: and there stood not a man of all their enemies before them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand. There failed not ought of any good thing which the LORD had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass.”*

INTRODUCTION

The allotment of the Land to the twelve tribes was completed. There was still much Land to be conquered. These were the little mop up operations that the individual tribes would have to clean-up. But generally speaking, the possession of the Land was virtually undertaken by the children of Israel. God had already told them that they would completely conquer the land gradually.¹ But one

¹ Deuteronomy 7:22 And the LORD thy God will put out those nations before thee by little

tribe had not yet been addressed in terms of the distribution of the Land — the tribe of Levi. It was decreed by God that the Levites would not be given a land inheritance. Instead they were given a special gift and privilege, and that was, to serve in the various ministries of the Tabernacle. The LORD God was their inheritance. The giving of portions of the Land by the twelve tribes to the Levites for them to dwell in forms part of the closing arguments of the book of Joshua.

Six of the cities given to the Levites were called “cities of refuge”. The distribution of these cities of refuge is given in chapter 20. However, forty-two other cities and their suburbs were given to the Levites; that brings the total to forty-eight cities and their suburbs. The details of these forty-eight cities and their suburbs are featured in chapter 21.

There are many lessons to be learned in this present study of the book. Our knowledge of God is further increased in this study. The sanctity of life and the issue of capital punishment are dealt with when considering the cities of refuge.

The following outline provides an easier hold of the three chapters:

- a) The Setting Up of the Cities of Refuge (20:1-9);

and little: thou mayest not consume them at once, lest the beasts of the field increase upon thee.

- b) The Provision of Cities and Suburbs to the Levites (21:1-42);
- c) God's Faithfulness to His Covenant-Promise (21:43-45).

COMMENTARY

The Setting Up of the Cities of Refuge – 20:1-9

The LORD commanded Joshua to set up the Cities of Refuge. This commandment had earlier been given by the LORD to Moses when the children of Israel took possession of the Promised Land.² The purpose for these cities of refuge was for a person, who killed another person accidentally or unintentionally, to seek asylum in these cities, and be protected from the “avenger of blood”, who would probably be a kinsman of the victim (20:3).³ When the guilty person fled to such a city, upon entering the gate, he should present his case before the elders of the city.

² Numbers 35:11 Then ye shall appoint you cities to be cities of refuge for you; that the slayer may flee thither, which killeth any person at unawares.

³ Deuteronomy 19:5 As when a man goeth into the wood with his neighbour to hew wood, and his hand fetcheth a stroke with the axe to cut down the tree, and the head slippeth from the helve, and lighteth upon his neighbour, that he die; he shall flee unto one of those cities, and live: 6 Lest the avenger of the blood pursue the slayer, while his heart is hot, and overtake him, because the way is long, and slay him; whereas he *was* not worthy of death, inasmuch as he hated him not in time past.

The elders after hearing his case would then allow him to stay. He would not be delivered to the “avenger of blood” who pursued after him to the city because of his claim that he was guilty only of manslaughter not amounting to premeditated murder (20:4-5).

However, this protection was only provisional until such time when a trial could be held. He would stand trial before “the congregation for judgement” (trial by jury) and if found guilty of culpable homicide not amounting to murder, he would be allowed to live within the walls of the city. He would then serve his sentence until the death of the high priest, when he would be set free and safe to return to his own home and city (20:6). At any time before the death of the high priest, if he should leave the city and be discovered by the “avenger of blood” and be killed, the avenger would not be guilty of murder.⁴ In the case of a person found guilty of premeditated murder, he would be sentenced to death. No mercy would

⁴ Numbers 35:26 But if the slayer shall at any time come without the border of the city of his refuge, whither he was fled; 27 And the revenger of blood find him without the borders of the city of his refuge, and the revenger of blood kill the slayer; he shall not be guilty of blood: 28 Because he should have remained in the city of his refuge until the death of the high priest: but after the death of the high priest the slayer shall return into the land of his possession.

be given at all so that the whole Land would be purged and cleansed of defilement (godless corruption).⁵

It is apparent that early legal justice relating to murder was based on the principle set forth here in Scripture. A person guilty of premeditated murder is sentenced to death. Trial by jury was probably derived from Scripture too. Capital punishment is ordained by God, who knows the nature of man better than we know. Capital punishment should therefore be upheld by every country to serve as a deterrent against crime in the land. But capital punishment for murder had been repealed to life sentence with even the possibility of parole in many countries. The life of a human being, who is created in the image of God, is precious in the sight

⁵ Numbers 35:31 Moreover ye shall take no satisfaction for the life of a murderer, which *is* guilty of death: but he shall be surely put to death. 32 And ye shall take no satisfaction for him that is fled to the city of his refuge, that he should come again to dwell in the land, until the death of the priest. 33 So ye shall not pollute the land wherein ye *are*: for blood it defileth the land: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it. 34 Defile not therefore the land which ye shall inhabit, wherein I dwell: for I the LORD dwell among the children of Israel.

Deuteronomy 19:11 But if any man hate his neighbour, and lie in wait for him, and rise up against him, and smite him mortally that he die, and fleeth into one of these cities: 12 Then the elders of his city shall send and fetch him thence, and deliver him into the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die. 13 Thine eye shall not pity him, but thou shalt put away *the guilt of* innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with thee.

of God. A person, who hates another and takes the life of the other, does not have the right to live, and should forfeit his life to live among others. That is God's Law and it should never be compromised. On the other hand, God is both righteous and merciful. A person guilty of manslaughter is allowed to live and to serve his punishment, which is appropriate to his crime.⁶

Six cities of refuge were established. Three cities on the western side, namely, Kedesh in the north; Shechem, central; and Hebron, south; and three on the eastern side, namely, Bezer in the south; Ramoth, central; and Golan, north (20:7-8). Observe that these cities were appropriately spread throughout the length and breadth of the Land. They were easily accessible to the manslayer. They were centrally located within the territories of the various tribes. Moreover, they were situated on a hill and roads were built so that they could easily be seen and accessible by the manslayer in his flight for his life to any of these cities.

There must be no doubt to the innocence of the manslayer. A careful

⁶ A common argument that taking the life of the murderer does not raise the dead victim is senseless and not the point. The point is that society at large should be protected from such criminal corruption, and this serve as a deterrent.

search must be made to ensure that there was no animosity between the manslayer and his victim. The Land must not be defiled by any deaths. All deaths must be carefully investigated and dealt with according to holy Scriptures.

The Provision of Cities and Suburbs to the Levites – 21:1-42

In Shiloh, the chief elders of the Levites came to the tripartite council—Eleazar the priest, Joshua, the son of Nun, and the heads of the twelve tribes—to ask by faith the cities and their suburbs which the LORD had promised them through Moses (21:1, 2).⁷ Earlier the Levites have been mentioned repeatedly in reference to the Land inheritance given to the other tribes that they received no such inheritance. The LORD God is their inheritance ((13:14, 33; 14:3; 18:7). The Levites were specially chosen by the LORD to serve Him in the Tabernacle because of their spontaneous loyalty and faithfulness to the LORD at the foot of Mount Sinai (Exodus 32:26).⁸ In addition,

⁷ Numbers 35:1 And the LORD spake unto Moses in the plains of Moab by Jordan *near* Jericho, saying, 2 Command the children of Israel, that they give unto the Levites of the inheritance of their possession cities to dwell in; and ye shall give *also* unto the Levites suburbs for the cities round about them. 3 And the cities shall they have to dwell in; and the suburbs of them shall be for their cattle, and for their goods, and for all their beasts.

⁸ Deuteronomy 21:5 And the priests the sons of Levi shall come near; for them the LORD

Phinehas, a Levite, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, was zealous of the LORD God in the plains of Moab (Numbers 25). And the children of Israel gave to the Levites cities and the suburbs out of their Land inheritance at the commandment of the LORD (21:3). Everything asked in accordance with the Word of God will be given. Although they ministered to the LORD in the Tabernacle, they still needed the basic necessities of living like all the rest of Israel.

Interestingly, in the summary (21:4-8), there is an orderly sequence in the allocation of the cities and suburbs for the Levites. The three sons of Levi were Kohath, Gershon, and Merari (Genesis 46:11). Aaron, the priest, and his children who were Kohathites, are mentioned first; and their lot of thirteen cities was given by the tribes of Judah, Simeon and Benjamin. Then the rest of the Kohathites, whose lot of ten cities was given by the tribes of Ephraim, Dan and the half tribe of Manasseh. The Gershonites are mentioned next. They had thirteen cities which were given by the tribes of Issachar, Asher, Naphtali and the half tribe of Manasseh in Bashan (on the eastern side). They were followed by the Merarites. They

thy God hath chosen to minister unto him, and to bless in the name of the LORD; and by their word shall every controversy and every stroke be *tried*:

had twelve cities which were contributed by the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Zebulun. This sequence is followed in the next section (21:9-40). Altogether, the Levites were given forty-eight cities with their suburbs. Out of these forty-eight, six were cities of refuge.

These forty-eight cities of the Levites were dispersed evenly throughout the land (21:42)—a fulfilment of Jacob's curse on Levi along with Simeon for their senseless murder of the Shechemites (Genesis 49:5-7).⁹ In the case of Levi, God overruled to preserve the tribal identity and made them a blessing to the children of Israel. The responsibilities and duties of the Levites were to serve the LORD. They served to keep the Tabernacle and to administer the various kinds of offerings which the people brought to the LORD. `

Another important responsibility was to give instruction to the children of Israel in the Law of the LORD, and to maintain the knowledge of His Word among the people. So, they not only ensured the proper worship of the

LORD God in accordance with His Word, but also taught the people the Word of God. It was estimated that the families of the children of Israel did not live more than ten miles radius from a city in which Levites had their residence. In other words, every Israelite was close to a man well-versed in the Law of Moses. There was someone who could give advice and counsel on the many problems of religion, family and political life. It was therefore necessary that the children of Israel obey the Word of God in all areas of life. This would ensure their continued prosperity and their privileges would not be forfeited.

God's Faithfulness to His Covenant-Promise – 21:43-45

The end portion of chapter twenty-one, comprising verses forty-three to forty-five deserves special meditation. The passage concerns the LORD God. Each verse has a reference to the LORD God—*the LORD gave unto Israel all the land which He swore*, (v.43a); *the LORD gave them rest round about* (v.44a); and *there failed not ought of any good thing which the LORD had spoken* (45a). The inspired writer specially commented these to emphasize the LORD'S faithfulness and fidelity. The LORD kept His part of the everlasting covenant-promise He made with Abraham and his descendants. The

⁹ Genesis 49:5 Simeon and Levi *are* brethren; instruments of cruelty *are in* their habitations. 6 O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honour, be not thou united: for in their anger they slew a man, and in their selfwill they digged down a wall. 7 Cursed *be* their anger, for *it was* fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel: I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.

children of Israel conquered the armies of the enemies who were greater in number and who were more superior. They conquered and possessed the land. If it had not been for the help and power of the LORD, Israel would have been defeated. The LORD also gave rest and peace in the Land. They could settle in the Land and prosper when they loved and obeyed the LORD, who would not withhold any good thing from them!

God's faithfulness and fidelity of His Word to the children of Israel mean that His Word to all others is also true and unchangeable. His promise of the gift of salvation to all those who confess and repent of their sins, and believe and receive Jesus Christ, His Son, who died for their sins, and rose from the dead, shall have all their sins forgiven and cleansed, and even the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, is true and real! What God had done for Israel, He would do for us and others too, if they obey Him. Hallelujah, Praise the LORD!

PRACTICAL VALUE

There are good practical lessons which can be learned from this study. The life of the Levites is a parable for us all. They had no land inheritance. The LORD was their

inheritance and they rejoiced in it. Their life was a life of service to the LORD. They were described as "sojourners."¹⁰ Similarly, as Christians we also are sojourners on earth, and we look forward to a home and a country made by God.

Our life on earth is to love, obey and serve God. Our inheritance and possessions which we have accumulated cannot be with us and are useless in that home and country. Our inheritance and blessings are eternal which are far better than earthly gains. The sooner we realize these truths, our life will become a greater joy.

The Cities of Refuge were like prisons of today. Men who committed murder were not allowed to find refuge. They were cast out and left to the mercy of the avenger. Those who killed accidentally must prove their innocence. If they cannot do so, they would not be allowed to remain in the Cities of Refuge. The lesson for us today is that church discipline must be carried out with the utmost care. If there is sin in the local church, the sins must be dealt with together with

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 18:6 And if a Levite come from any of thy gates out of all Israel, where he sojourned, and come with all the desire of his mind unto the place which the LORD shall choose;

the sinner. Defilement in the church will dishonour God.

The Levites functioned like the fulltime workers of our day. They must not be encumbered by secular work and allow their time for prayer and the study of God’s Word to diminish. Their bodily needs will be looked after by the LORD’s people. Whatever is given to them, they must receive them as if from the LORD. Therefore they must not complain or murmur or even bargain or talk about their remunerations. To do so would make them hirelings and render them unfit for fulltime ministry. Their task is most honourable as they are called by the LORD just as the Levites were called. They cannot turn the ministry into a profession or job seeking filthy lucre as their reward when it must always be seen as a calling. AMEN

THURSDAY: Joshua 22:9-20; Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:1-4.

FRIDAY: Joshua 22:21-34; Proverbs 2:1-17.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you reply when someone argues that the commandment in Exodus 20:13 should have been translated to “Thou shalt not murder” rather than “Thou shalt not kill”?

2. How do you reply those who say that capital punishment is barbaric? “Proponents of capital punishment have a low view of life.” Do you agree with this statement?

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

MONDAY: Joshua 20:1-9; John 12:31-33. Leviticus 24:15-22.

TUESDAY: Joshua 21:1-45; 1 Corinthians 9:1-14; Romans 11:33-36.

WEDNESDAY: Joshua 22:1-8; Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1-6.

3. The tribes were required to give from their inheritance a certain portion for the use of those who were set apart for God's service. In what ways does this principle apply today?

4. What aroused the western tribes to anger? Was their anger justified? What lesson can we draw from this episode?

5. From chapter 20, what are the principles that relate well to the penal system in our society today?

6. What do Joshua 21:43-45 tell us about God?
