

The Significance of Levites in Relation to Heavenly Fullness

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"And they commanded the people, saying, When ye see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it." (Joshua 3:3).

First of all, it is this fragment - "the priests, the Levites, bearing it", bearing the ark - that is the key to our present consideration.

In this book of Joshua, the Levites have a large place. They are referred to quite a number of times. Indeed, at one point the whole chapter circles round them, and it is the significance of the Levites in relation to heavenly fullness that I want by the Holy Spirit's help to try to bring to you. Many of us are quite familiar with the history of the Levites, but it is necessary for us just to go over that ground hurriedly to begin with.

In this book of Joshua the Levites are presented in three ways. Firstly, as we have just seen, as bearing the ark of the covenant into the bed of the Jordan and standing there with it, with a two-thousand-cubit space between them and it and the people - a very great distance, as we saw in chapter five. Then, secondly, in Joshua 14 it is stated that the Levites were given no inheritance. That is, in the dividing up of the land, unlike the other tribes they were not apportioned a particular area, they were given no inheritance in the land. But, thirdly, in chapter 21, the chapter which circles round the Levites, you find that all the tribes had to give something of a plot, a place, to the Levites. The Levites were distributed among all the tribes, and their place and their portion was not all together in one place, but in relation to the whole country, so that you might say the Levites were just scattered all over the land, everywhere, in relation to the rest of the people. Those are the three things about the Levites, in this book, full of wonderful significance.

LEVITES REPRESENT THE HEAVENLY THOUGHT

What do they signify? Let us go back. You remember how the Levites came into being as a tribe. It was on the occasion when Israel departed, when the calf was made, and they cried, "These be thy gods, O Israel" (Ex. 32:4), and they left the Lord. And Moses came down, heard and saw, destroyed the calf, stood in the gate and cried, "Whoso is on the Lord's side, let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him. And he said unto them, Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, Put ye every man his sword upon his thigh, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbour. And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses" (Exodus 32:26-28). All earthly considerations were sacrificed to the heavenly interest, all earthly relationships severed for the heavenly thought; everything of natural sentiment and emotion, all that was of the mere soul, was slain in the interests of that which governed the very coming out of the people of God. For it was in the thought of God that they should be a heavenly people, and not thus involved in the spiritual system governing this world. In that alone the Levites are seen to represent the heavenly thought of God. A very drastic and utter thing, was it not, that they should do that.

And you remember the Lord never forgot it. Right at the end of the Old Testament, in the last book, Malachi, referring to the matter of Baal-Peor, where Phineas maintained the stand for heavenly interests originally taken on the occasion of the making of the golden calf (Num. 14), the Lord said, "My covenant was with him {Levi} of life and peace" (Malachi 2:5). 'He did not acknowledge his brethren' (Deuteronomy 33:9): that is, he did not look with sympathy even upon his own flesh when that moved away from God's high thoughts. God made His covenant with Levi. So at the very outset the Levites were selected, and separated from all the rest of Israel, as taking the place of the firstborn in Israel, and they became the tribe of the firstborn ones; and from that many of you will at once in your minds leap over to the letter to the Hebrews - "Ye are come unto... the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb. 12:22,23). Here is the heavenly thing coming in again: the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven - the Levites, the heavenly thought.

Now we said in chapter five that there was this space of two thousand cubits at the very least - for we cannot determine at this time which cubit it was of the three: the distance was over one thousand feet at the very least, and could easily have been more than three thousand feet; a great space between the ark and the people, indicating the immense distance between Christ and all others in this work of salvation, of redemption, of deliverance; - but the Levites were bearing the ark. You say, 'Is not that a contradiction? Christ stands in solitary isolation from all.' But you see the principle of the Levite. He represents the heavenly thing. This is the heavenly Christ. That is the principle of the Levites bearing the ark there. This is not just the earthly Christ, the Jesus of history, a man amongst men, though greatly better. This is the Heavenly One.

If you want that principle proved, you remember the incident in the days of David, when he consulted with the elders of Israel to bring up the ark, and made a cart to do it. He got his idea from the land of the Philistines, where he had been during the reign of Saul, and where he had seen them make a cart. They put the ark on a cart, and tragedy followed. Uzzah died before the Lord. David was very grieved with the Lord because He had made a breach that day; but, being the man he was, always adjustable to the Lord - one of the glorious things about David was his adjustability - he did not have a long controversy with the Lord, or the Lord with David. David got back to the Lord, and probably tried to argue it out - but the Lord won the argument. The Lord took him back to the Scriptures and showed him that the Levites were to bear the ark - it is not machines, not organizations, but a heavenly people, that is to carry the testimony of Jesus.

So the Levites are carrying the ark. This heavenliness of things is the principle of the Levite function, and that of course goes to the root of their not having an inheritance in the earth. They do not belong to the earth: they belong to heaven. They are not going to be rooted down here; but even so, as men representing the heavenly things, they are going to be distributed amongst all the people of God to keep the people of God in touch with heaven. The people of God are always so prone to become earthly. That has been the peril and the tragedy of the Church through the centuries, always gravitating toward this earth, becoming something here after the fashion of man, after the ideas of this world.

THE LORD'S NEED OF LEVITES AMONG HIS PEOPLE

Now we come to our point. The Lord must have those who have been through the suffering, through the Cross, through the sacrifice, through the deep work of separation; who have not compromised on any considerations of sentiment or earthly interest: those who have stood and are standing wholly, utterly, at all costs, for His full heavenly thought concerning His Son and concerning the Church. He must have them, and He must distribute them everywhere and bring them into vital relationship with His people, in order to keep those people from succumbing to that tendency earthward - from becoming world-bound.

HEADQUARTERS IN HEAVEN

And do you not see that this is exactly what happened in the New Testament? It is quite fascinating to see it. When you come into the New Testament, you have left types and figures - I expect some of you are rather tired of types and figures; you get a surfeit of that. It is a grand thing to see the actuality. When you come into Acts, you find this whole thing repeated. What has happened? You begin with the Lord Jesus placed in heaven: headquarters in heaven, every bit of government now in heaven; and then the Holy Spirit coming to make everything heavenly, to govern everything in relation to heaven. That is what we were speaking about in our last chapter: the Captain of the host of the Lord coming to take everything up in relation to heaven, and then everything moving from heaven.

It moved from heaven first of all in Jerusalem, a mighty movement from heaven, and things were happening. But note the tendency after a time (of course the story is told in a few phrases, but it covers a very considerable period). After a time Jerusalem gravitated earthward, and tended - and not only tended, but actually began - to become an earthly headquarters of the Church. It was only to be, in the Lord's command, the beginning, the commencement spot: "beginning at Jerusalem". Jerusalem was never intended to be the inclusive and final thing, but it constituted itself a kind of headquarters to govern the Church, and you will find that sort of thing developing as you go on in the book of the Acts. Look on a bit to Paul the heavenly man, and see how he repudiates Jerusalem.

However, you come to the seventh chapter of the book of the Acts, the stoning of Stephen, and that is the end of Jerusalem. From that point heaven re-asserts itself to say, 'No; no earthly centre or headquarters; headquarters is in heaven'; and at that point they are all scattered from Jerusalem. They are stirred up and thrown out of the nest and go in all directions. Wherever they go, whether it is Philip or whoever it is, they are testifying everywhere to the heavenly Lord, bringing in the heavenly side of things. Yes: everywhere these Levites are placed in relation to the whole world, to keep things in a heavenly way. So it develops like that.

You move on to chapter 9, and it is one of heaven's tremendous movements. Saul has come from Jerusalem, on his way to Damascus - and Jerusalem is his headquarters, right enough. He has authority from the High Priest, from the rulers. Jerusalem governs where he is concerned. But he discovers before he gets to the end of the journey that the government is in heaven, not in Jerusalem. The heavens are cleft; there comes a light from heaven and a voice from heaven; and that is the end of earthliness for Saul of Tarsus. From that moment he is a heavenly man - and see how, for ever afterwards, that man is moving in relation to heaven. That could bear following out in detail; but here is a mighty Levite. And so it was no more at Jerusalem, but Antioch. The Lord

has moved from Jerusalem. Antioch is a very pure spiritual thing. Jerusalem has become the centre of Christian officialdom - but there is nothing official at Antioch. What you have at Antioch, which now supplants Jerusalem, is a company of men who are fasting and praying: and heaven breaks in, and the Holy Ghost says, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 13:2). This is something in relation to heaven, you see. It is wonderful.

So we could go on giving the evidence. But what is the point? Is it not very clear that from God's standpoint, in God's mind, everything is intended to be related to heaven and governed from heaven? Heavenly fullness is His objective with His people: to make them a heavenly people and to fill with His heavenly fullness. And right at the end we see the new Jerusalem - not the old one, but the new Jerusalem - coming down from God out of heaven, in great heavenly fullness. It is something immense, is that Jerusalem - twelve thousand furlongs in every direction (Revelation 21:16). There is great fullness here. All the nations are going to derive their resource from it. The fruit of its tree of life, the waters of its river of life, are for all the nations. Its light is for all the nations. "The nations shall walk amidst the light thereof" (Rev. 21:24). This is heavenly fullness, the thing to which the Lord has been working all the time.

He is working now in you and me. I sometimes think that we are two persons, one here and one in heaven. Naturally we are here, but there is something of ourselves 'going up' all the time, when the Lord is getting in us something more of heaven. It is being stored up there. Is not that perhaps what the Lord meant, when He referred to Himself as "the Son of man, who is in heaven" (John 3:13), even while He is on earth? There is an aspect of us that is growing in heaven. Do not think of heaven as some remote planet. We are growing in that heavenly thought of things. Something of us is 'going up'.

I believe the Church is like that. The real Church is an invisible thing. You do not know, except by the Spirit, what the Church is really. You cannot say that people attending a certain place are the Church. You cannot say that people who profess certain doctrines and Christian truths are the Church. They may be or they may not be. But if you meet in the Spirit - and that is something intangible - there you have the Church. The Church is like that, and that is its heavenly character - and that is 'going up', so to speak, all the time, and it is going to come down presently in fullness out of heaven. It is being built in that way now. It is God's will that it should be like that.

But my point now is that the Lord must have that kind of representation, be it in individuals or in companies, to place alongside of all His people here to keep them in touch with heaven, to keep the heavenly things always in view. One of the functions of the Levites was to teach the Word of God - that is, to keep the Lord's people in touch with God's thought. That is functional, not official. You need not call yourself a Levite, any more than 'Reverend'. Do not take on titles, but grasp the principles. If we here on this earth are keeping people in touch with heaven, if we are linked with heavenly things, if people are built up by our presence - not by our preaching necessarily, not by our getting down and saying, 'Now you see this and this...'; no, just by our presence, by our embodiment of the heavenly life and nature and fullness - if they are coming to see God's fuller thought because we are here, we are Levites without the title and that is what the Lord must have.

It may be as individuals. The Lord has the disposing of His people. In this very book, heaven disposed of the people, of the tribes, and said, 'You shall be here, this is your place'. Sovereignly the Lord will dispose of you, and put some of you in Germany, some in Holland, some in England, some in America; and when He has disposed of your life you are there by heaven's appointment, to be a link with heaven, to keep things from settling down spiritually on to this earth level.

That, of course, is also the meaning of churches in the New Testament. That is the Divine idea - to have companies of the Lord's people, planted here and there and everywhere, as a corporate Levitical ministry, to keep heaven near, and to keep things near heaven. Oh, that every church were like that, keeping things near heaven!

Well, that is the beginning. Much more could be said. We could begin now to consider all the letters of the New Testament and to see the outworking. We would begin with Romans 12 - for here you have a Levitical principle: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. And be not fashioned according to this world". That is Levitical, the living sacrifice not conformed to this world. So we could go on through it all. But the great issue of our meditations together is this - that we have to be here in relation to heaven, under heaven's government, bringing in heavenly things. We are ministering in relation to heaven. It must be as true of us, in our measure and in our calling, as it was of Paul, that we have a heavenly vision and we are not disobedient unto it. What do we not owe to that dear man for all the sacrifice and the suffering that he knew for heavenly things! But how faithful he was to heaven, right to the end - cast into his prison, on his chain, and talking about nothing else but

the heavenly places.

Do you say your situation is too difficult to bring heaven in? Well, there are difficult situations. Daniel's was a difficult situation - his three companions were in a difficult situation; but they brought heaven in. A grand phrase in the book of Daniel is - "the heavens do rule" (4:26). And they proved it. Headquarters is in heaven: not in Babylon, not in Rome, not in Jerusalem or anywhere else, but in heaven. The Lord help us to live up to and out from heaven.

And now, at the end, we bring the specific object of these messages into view once more.

God has but one end which will bring Him complete satisfaction - the 'Fullness of Christ'. That fullness is meant to be found in a people taken out of the nations. By that people in that fullness He purposes to rule the creation in the ages to come. This will not be attained to willy-nilly, but only by infinite cost and conflict now.

All who "come out" do not "enter in" to this ultimate. Many will not go all the way, fulfil all the conditions, 'make their calling and election sure', but will enter the Kingdom to inherit in different measures; smaller or larger.

Unto the fullness of purpose, pioneers are necessary, and the way of the pioneers is a peculiar way, fraught with experiences, sufferings, perplexities, and testings, of which others know little.

But God must have His pioneers - individuals or companies; and these are they who

'WHOLLY FOLLOW THE LORD'.