

Lessons from Jacob's Blessing of Levi

By Jerry Collins

"Simeon and Levi are brothers; Their swords are implements of violence. Let my soul not enter into their council; Let not my glory be united with their assembly; Because in their anger they slew men, and in their self-will they lamed oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; And their wrath, for it is cruel. I will disperse them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel" (Genesis 49:5-7).

- The swords, anger, and wrath that characterized Levi meant the tribe would be divided and scattered throughout Israel. Simeon was later swallowed up within the tribe of Judah, but Levi eventually received an honorable dispersion as the priestly tribe. How is it that the prophecy which proved to be a curse for the tribe of Simeon actually turned into a blessing for the Levites? Levi's exploits in Exodus 32 may give the answer. Exodus 32:15-30—*Moses saw that the people were out of control—for Aaron had let them get out of control ...Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered together to him. He said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Every man of you put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor.'"* So the sons of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day.
- After personally destroying the calf, Moses decided that radical spiritual surgery had to be performed on the people. The zeal of Levi had earlier resulted in the death of the Shechemites—a deed deplored by Jacob. Now through their obedience to Moses, the Levites demonstrated their zeal in a righteous cause. As a result, they were awarded the special place as the priestly tribe throughout Jewish history.
- While later reflecting upon this incident, Moses reminded the people, *the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to serve Him and to bless in His name until this day* (Deuteronomy 10:8). This is when God placed Levi in their new role.
- Deuteronomy 33 recorded the blessing of Moses on the tribes before his death. The blessing also noted of Levi, *who said of his father and his mother, 'I did not consider them'; And he did not acknowledge his brothers* (v. 9). This statement no doubt alluded to the Levites' destruction of their own fellow tribesmen following the golden calf incident. Moses said of Levi at that time, *'they observed Your word, and kept Your covenant'* (Deuteronomy 33:9). As a result, God not only found a special place of service for Levi and his posterity, He also ensured their spiritual presence among the people.
- The prophet Malachi reiterated this favor upon Levi at the end of Old Testament history. *"Then you will know that I have sent this commandment to you, that My covenant may continue with Levi," says the Lord of hosts. "My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him as an object of reverence; so he revered Me and stood in awe of My name"* (Malachi 2:4-5). In this case, *my covenant* referred to the priestly covenant through Aaron and his grandson Phinehas (Exodus 6:16-20; Numbers 25:10-13; Jeremiah 33:21-22).

An Application—It is appropriate to have zeal for the Lord, His will, and His Word. We should eagerly desire and contend for righteousness. Romans 12:10-11 says, *be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence* (zeal). Christ gave Himself for us...*to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds* (Titus 2:14). Be eager to study the Bible. Be dedicated to loving God with all your heart. Be passionate about living with an eternal perspective. Be devoted to making disciples of Jesus Christ. Levi was still scattered but now would be available to God for the nation.

PT—Certainly, Simeon and Levi were zealous, but their zeal had not been channeled into godly paths. Zeal in itself is not sufficient, even for ministry on behalf of the Lord. Paul testified about his Jewish kinsmen, *for I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge* (Romans 12:2). Even Paul encountered an unproductive zeal in his own life *as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless* (Philippians 3:6). Just as Levi redirected his zeal into godly channels, Paul, too, redirected his zeal into service for the Messiah, whom he had been previously zealous to oppose. The point is to focus our zeal on God's program and purposes, not our own selfish plans.

- According to Numbers 35:6-7, Levi's allotment included *the six cities of refuge, which you shall give for the manslayer to flee to; and in addition to them you shall give forty-two cities. All the cities which you shall give to the Levites shall be forty-eight cities, together with their pasture lands*. As spiritual leaders of the nation at large, the Levites were trans-tribal, not bound by any borders or boundaries. It was clear they did not own these cities or the grazing land surrounding them. The cities and the surrounding countryside would provide for the tribe of Levi, but they were to focus on the spiritual influence they were to have amongst the people.