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**LEVITICAL MINISTRY**

**Part 1**

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## THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THE LEVITES

*Reading: Ex. 32:25,26; Num. 8:9-13; 1 Chron. 15:2,12-15; Mal. 2:4,5; 3:1-3; Rev. 1:2,5,6,9.*

A thoughtful reading of the above passages shows clearly that a common thought and basis underlines them all: the Old Testament links in the chain of the history and ministry of the Levites in relation to the Lord's testimony — “none but the Levites ought to carry the ark of the testimony.” Those passages carry us over into the New Testament, and, right at the end, we find ourselves once more in the presence of this central object of God's mind and interest, “the testimony of Jesus”. It is significant and something to be noted, that from Revelation 1 we pass straight on into chapters 2 and 3, in which we find reference to the ‘overcomers’. In the message to each church the issue, in every case, is “to him that overcometh”. It is this matter of service that is of peculiar importance and value to the Lord — the bearing of His testimony right through the Scriptures. It is that which is called the service of God. If we want to know what the Levites really are, in representation and spiritual significance, that is made quite clear to us in the first three chapters of Revelation.

### **“The Testimony of Jesus”**

That the churches were brought into being by God for “the testimony of Jesus” is beyond dispute. Wherever they are, they are meant to be the vessels of that testimony. But here, in these first chapters of the Revelation, we find the churches in general (for these are representative churches of the whole dispensation) failing in the matter of that testimony. Perhaps we have not been sufficiently impressed with the fact that this book opens with the emphasis on the testimony of Jesus. Really, the introduction to the whole book is that very phrase. John tells us, and very clearly, that he was where he was “for the testimony of Jesus”; and that means that what he saw and what he set down in Patmos related to the testimony of Jesus also. He says that quite definitely and emphatically.

That phrase strikes the keynote for this book on its first page, and runs all the way through it. You can only understand the book of the Revelation as a whole if you see that everything there is centred in that which is called “the testimony of Jesus”. That explains and accounts for everything. Then, when that is laid down as the foundation of and the introduction to the whole book, we find that the first movement of the Spirit — “I was in the Spirit” — is to the churches, which, as we have said, were brought into being expressly for the testimony of Jesus.

That is why the Levites came into being. Their whole history, all the way through, related to the testimony and was represented typically in the Old Testament by the ark of the covenant or the ark of the testimony. The spiritual meaning is the same in both testaments. They came into being as a people, right at the very centre of the Lord’s people, in relation to the Lord’s testimony. The essential service of the Lord is just that; it is the bearing, maintaining and carrying forward of the testimony of Jesus in the history of this world. The Levites came in for that very purpose; their existence and their history are explained by that.

As I have said, if we want to know what the Levites represent in this dispensation, in our own day, we shall find that they are presented to us in those who ‘overcome’. If it is true that God’s purpose for the churches was that they should be vessels of the testimony of Jesus wherever they were, then we find that, when the churches are approached, the final word in every case is: “To him that overcometh”. It is unmistakably clear that it is in such people, those who *overcome*, that we see the Levitical principle, service and purpose carried forward. They are the people who are put in trust with the testimony; that is clear in both Old and New Testaments. They are the people who, from first to last, react against all departure from what is called “the testimony of Jesus”. They are the people in whom is represented God’s full thought concerning His church. These statements can all be supported and backed up by the Word of God.

Whenever a crisis was reached in the onward march of God in eternal history, or whenever God was going to take a new step, He called for the Levites to come to the fore, and to sanctify themselves. They are the people of the crisis, and of the crises, all the way through. We could say that when the Levites were out of their place, and out of their condition, the Lord was at a loss and a disadvantage. The Lord was unable to go on until the Levites came back into their place and sanctified themselves. That, I think, will be clear if we look again at one or two of the incidents of which we have read.

## Two Old Testament crises

We have no difficulty in recognizing that a very serious crisis was reached there at Sinai. Moses was in the mount, and, as we have read, the people “broke loose”; and then there comes that very impressive parenthetic, or explanatory sentence, “For Aaron had let them loose for a derision among their enemies.” We can see through that. There is one thing that the enemy and all the hosts of enemies in the heavenlies, are set upon; it is to make the church a derision in this universe, so that the universe can sneer at it, and say, ‘That is your church, is it?!’ When they had broken loose, and everything in that onward march of the people of God, from Egypt to the Land, was brought to a standstill, the crisis turned upon the Levites. There could be no movement forward; everything was in suspense until the Levites came forward and took up this issue of a “derision among their enemies”. They took responsibility to answer that challenge, to deal with that thing and get it out of the way, so that the people of God could go on. The prospect opened up through the Levites.

We pass over all the intervening centuries to the time of David. Another crisis in the onward movement of God has been reached; the testimony is to be brought to Jerusalem. You know of David’s unfortunate, impulsive action; his forgetfulness using a cart for carrying the testimony, creating a link with this world, and opening the door to death, and everything again is brought to a standstill. “And the ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-Edom ... three months” (2 Sam. 6:11) — always waiting! We read, “David was displeased ... David was afraid of the Lord that day” (2 Sam. 6:8,9). The Lord’s dealings with us can sometimes bring about a controversy between us and the Lord. Very often we take the whole thing personally and are disaffected towards the Lord; but until we get through that, nothing is going to happen. The Lord does not do things without a reason. He does not stop everything and bring in judgment and discipline without a very good reason.

However David, being the man he was, with a heart for God, got over his offendedness with the Lord, and searched the matter out; he had a right kind of exercise about it all, and found his answer in the Word. That is the place where you will always find it, in the Word; somewhere it is there, clear and straight, the answer to all our difficulties and problems and controversies. As David was exercised before the Lord, thoughtfully searching through the Word, he came right on it; he found it in Numbers 7:6-9, and he said: “None ought to carry the ark of God but the Levites.”

And so, when the Levites were sanctified, had come into their place and resumed their work, things could go on.

### **A law of forward movement**

These two instances are sufficient to illustrate the principle that every forward movement, every fresh advance in this great purpose of God, is bound up with the Levitical principle and people. You will not dispute this, I am sure, on the matter of the churches in the Revelation. Was there a crisis? The Lord was saying in effect, quite definitely and positively: ‘I cannot go on any further with you; indeed, I shall have to remove your lampstand out of its place. We just cannot go on. We have come to a crisis; we have come to a standstill; we can go no further. If there is to be any future, it will be with those who take up the Levitical principle of holiness, of sanctification, amongst My people. With them the future rests.’ “To him that overcometh will I ... will I ... will I ...”; you see the ‘towardness’ of the Lord which is there. And I believe we are right in saying that the ones referred to in those chapters as those who overcome are the people who, spiritually and actually, step right into the place, meaning and service of the Levites.

So let us make it quite clear before we go any further, that while in the old dispensation the Levites were a tribe, a people by themselves, in a sense a separate community, they only embodied, as did all other things in the old dispensation, a spiritual truth which belongs to all the dispensations, and which is the law of all God’s movement forward to His end. Today, the ‘Levites’ are not a separate class, a separate people, an association, an institution, a fellowship, or anything like that; today the Levites are those people of God who, in a spiritual way, do what the Levites of the Old Testament did. They are the people who are the embodiment of all that thought and purpose of God, whose hearts are given to that, and who are prepared to react against everything that threatens or assails it.

Usually it is a matter of corruption, as we find in both the Old and the New Testaments. In the Old Testament we find constantly that the Levites had to sanctify themselves. In the book of Ezra, for instance, we read how the Levites had to sanctify themselves for this service of the Lord. It is impressive and significant, again, that John the Baptist was said to “go before the face of the Lord” (Luke 1:17a), and that the result of his ministry would be to “make ready for the Lord a people prepared for Him”

(v.17c). That is the principle of the Levite. The Old Testament and the New Testament meet in John the Baptist. The prophecy of Malachi, “My messenger sent before My face to prepare My way before Me” (Mal. 3:1), has, on the authority of our Lord Himself, its fulfillment in John the Baptist. “This is Elijah, if you will receive it” (Matt.11:14); going before the face of the Lord; preparing the way of the Lord; and the securing of a people prepared for the Lord; this is Levitical ministry.

And then what? “Jesus ... when he began to teach, was about thirty years of age” (Luke 3:23). He is thus, so to speak, precipitated on to the platform, on to the stage. This was the year of age of the Levite beginning his ministry. You see how we can gather around this, from all directions and in all connections, evidence to make it clear that the Lord’s testimony, the onward movement of God, the reaching of His full end, rests with a people who embody all that is meant by the Levites.

*The* thing which the Levites at all times represent is a people sanctified for the Lord, set apart for the Lord, wholly the Lord’s. When the general mass of those who are the Lord’s people are not like that, the Lord cannot go on until He has secured such a people in the midst of them. He must have that which represents His mind; He is not going on unless He has something that answers to His mind, even though it be in the midst of His own people. That is where He will go on. He demands to have a people who are set apart for Himself.

### **Jealousy for the Lord’s rights**

That opens up a very instructive line of teaching, running right through the Scriptures. It introduces us to that whole course of God’s reactions, God reacting to situations through the Levite, by this principle of the Levite. They first came in, as we have read in Exodus 32. We know what had happened. Moses had gone up into the mount, and was away too long for the people’s patience; and, as it is put, they ‘broke loose’; they cast off restraint. Evidently under the counsel and instruction of Aaron, they made that calf. A *golden* calf! Of what? Of the gold that was to be for the sanctuary, in which God was to have the whole place. There broke in that day the evil powers, which said, in effect: ‘God shall not have that place; we will have it; and we will take the very gold that is intended for God and make it the basis and instrument of *our* worship.’ We cannot fail to see that this was all part of that age-long breaking in from the evil world, of the powers of evil, against God’s throne, against God having

everything — at cost, if needs be; to draw away and take from God that which was rightfully His.

It was the Levites who took the stand over that. Whether they understood all that it meant or not, we do not know; but, in effect, the Levites said: ‘No, we will not permit that anything shall be taken from the Lord. The Lord is to have His rights in fulness; we stand for that at any cost.’ It proved, indeed, to be a very costly thing. They had the command of Moses to take the sword against their own kin — yes, in their own families, amongst their own brethren and children. It was a very costly thing, but they did it! They evidently saw the seriousness of this breaking in of evil, of evil forces, this touch of corruption — for that is what it was — and what it implied. It was spiritual fornication. They saw something of the meaning of it; and that day all the sons of Levi said, No — positively and utterly.

God made His covenant that day with Levi (cf. Deut. 10:8). Later He took the tribe of Levi, and set them apart as ministers of the sanctuary (Num. 1:50-53; 3:5-13; etc.), to be in close touch with Himself in relation to all His purpose in His people.

But then the enemy said: ‘Very well; the Levites draw this upon themselves. Then the Levites must be the focal point of our attention and of our activity!’ After this, it is one constant history of the Levites being corrupted, defiled, and put out of their place, to arrest the whole movement of God. Every time God wanted to go further He had to call the Levites into a new place of sanctification, of holiness unto the Lord. But whenever that was done, then God could go on; there could be a movement forward.

Material and data providing evidence on this Levitical principle could be piled up still further, but perhaps this is enough to begin with. This is a people in the midst of God’s people, who, whatever the cost, and with an utterness for God, stand for His rights, and the fulness of His purpose and thought concerning His people. They are not a distinct cult, but they are a spiritual people amongst the Lord’s people, who are marked out, and marked off, by this, that they are not going to allow themselves to be touched with the corruption that is in this world at the hand of the defiler.

### **The refining fires of discipline**

Those chapters of Malachi’s prophecies are terrible chapters, are they not? God is saying to the whole nation: “Ye are cursed with the curse” (Mal. 3:9); He is showing His fiery judgment, touching their lives in the

family, and in the fields, and everywhere. There are terrible things in that book. But notice that the focal point of all those prophecies is the Levite, and they head up to this: “The messenger of the covenant ... will come suddenly to his temple. And the Lord whom ye seek ... will sit as a refiner of silver, and purify the sons of Levi” (Mal. 3:1,3). And with that, so far as our Bible is concerned, we pass out of the Old Testament into the New; and the Great Levite comes — the Lord Jesus.

In Him we see the whole principle of the Levites, the whole meaning of their history, summed up. He is the full-orbed Levite. The corrupter assails, the tempter attacks, to draw away this Levite from His steadfastness: “If thou be the Son of God ...”. But this Levite prevails! To the last cost, to the very last cost, He overcomes; and He says to us, as He said to those around Him, “Fear not; I have overcome the world.” The Great Levite is the Great Overcomer; and He says now to the churches, “To him that overcomes ...”. The testimony of Jesus is that He overcame, and that testimony is deposited with the churches.

I trust that you are seeing more than I am saying. The details of this matter are far too many to cover in any one time. What does it amount to? Sooner or later, this whole question of God’s going on to His end in fulness will arise, and then it will be a matter of our spiritual condition as to whether He can go on with us; whether He has that which is necessary to Himself for His going on in the midst of His people. It is a simple matter of observation, from past and present history, that not all who are the Lord’s people are after this kind; not all who are the Lord’s are in the spiritual sense Levites. They are intended to be; the Lord would have them to be; but the fact is that, for various reasons, some of which are mentioned in the letters to the churches, they are not. The main reason is what the Lord calls ‘defilement’, ‘corruption’; that is a very large word, covering a lot of ground, embracing many things. But what the Lord requires is a sanctified people, prepared for Him; a people who are really separated unto the Lord.

### **Need for holiness**

The Lord’s disciplines are all in that direction. You may not like it put this way, but sooner or later you will come to it: it is a terrible thing for the Lord not to discipline us. No greater loss could be suffered by us than that, if the Lord’s eyes of flame see something wrong, He should fail to deal with it. That would be a terrible thing, both for Him, for His church, and

for spiritual history. He must take action, and sooner or later He will. You may think that this is a very solemn word, but this is with me a deep and heavy burden. The Lord wants to go on; He wants to carry His testimony further; He wants to do a new thing; He wants to bring His people on. In order to do so, He must have that which is represented by the Levites; He must have a people in the midst of His people, who really do embody the fulness of His thought, and that people must be *a holy people*.

“He shall sit as a refiner”, as a refiner of gold and silver. These are strong words! The picture has often been used, in connection with these words, of the refiner of gold and silver heating the crucible, and repeatedly looking in until he can see his own face reflected in the metal; that is, until the dross is consumed. And then he says: ‘It is all right; it is finished!’ Is not that just what the Lord would do? What are the fires for? What are the judgments for? So that He may see His own face, “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”, in our hearts (2 Cor. 4:6)!

The Lord has a purpose in such a word as this. While solemn, perhaps challenging, it is a word that is linked with prospect. The Lord is a Lord who wants to go on, who ever wants to reach new regions to attain His full end. He wants to do something new, and ever new, amongst His people. In order to do it He must have a people in the midst of His people, who, on the one side, answer to Him concerning his desire; and, on the other side, answer the enemy, to deprive him of his desire. As the enemy would corrupt and pollute, as he would cause this loss to the Lord, Levi says, ‘No, never; whatever it costs, never!’

We may talk like this about service for the Lord: ‘Oh, we will go where the Lord wants us; we will suffer whatever is involved in serving the Lord in any part of the world!’ We talk like that. But let us bring it into this realm: there is a cost involved of holiness, of sanctification. And it is in holiness, in sanctification, that service consists; not in works, not in travelling about, not in meetings, but in holiness of life. That is the core and heart of service to the Lord. Sooner or later He will bring us to that. We may go on for some time, but we shall come to a terrible crisis, if the Lord sees that which is not holy.

But again, it is a positive, not a negative word. The Lord would say to us that He wants to go on; He wants to move; He wants to do things, because He is like that. Yet it is so clear, even the Lord can be held up by the Levites. Whenever the next step is to be taken, the Levites must come into their condition, and into their position, before the Lord.

The Lord make us true Levites, to be able to serve Him truly!

## ASSOCIATION WITH GOD IN HIS WORK

*“From the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same My name shall be great among the nations; and in every place incense shall be offered unto My name, and a pure offering: for My name shall be great among the nations, saith the Lord of hosts ...”.*

*“And ye shall know that I have sent this commandment unto you, that My covenant may be with Levi, saith the Lord of hosts. My covenant was with him of life and peace; and I gave them to him that he might fear; and he feared Me, and stood in awe of My name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and turned many away from iniquity. For the priest’s lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts ...”.*

*“Behold, I send My messenger, and he shall prepare the way before Me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, whom ye desire, behold, He cometh, saith the Lord of hosts. But who can abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner’s fire, and like fullers’ soap: and he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and He shall purify the sons of Levi, and refine them as gold and silver; and they shall offer unto the Lord offerings in righteousness” (Malachi 1:11, 2:4-7; 3:1-3).*

We need constantly to remind ourselves that, whatever God has done, however He has expressed Himself from time to time in the history of this world, all the different forms and modes of expression are only means of conveying abiding, eternal, spiritual realities. And that is very true of the Levites. When we speak about Levites, we naturally think of an Old Testament order and system of priestly ministry; but let us realize all the time that we are in the presence of great, divine, spiritual realities, which belong to us and to our time as truly as ever they belonged to any people of God. This spiritual law of the Levite is something that comes right into the present day, into this very hour.

Let us then clarify our minds on the point that when we speak of priests and Levites, we are dealing with a spiritual conception, and not with a formal, ecclesiastical system. In our dispensation, the latter does not obtain; but the dispensation is governed by spiritual conceptions.

When we try to get to the very heart of this matter, asking ourselves what the innermost and deepest meaning of Levitical ministry is, I think the answer is: *association with God* in His work. That is a very simple way of putting it, but it is extremely deep and searching.

### **The holiness of God**

We have to bring up before ourselves all that the Word of God reveals as to the nature of God. And if we were to put the nature of God into one word, surely we would have to say ‘holiness.’ You might say love; but His love is governed by His holiness; it is qualified by His holiness; it is holy love. Whatever other words you may use to describe or define the nature of God such as truth, or many other things, they are but the expression of this innermost reality — His holiness. An association with *God!* That is a tremendous thing to contemplate.

In this book of Malachi’s prophecies, it is the holiness of God which is dominant throughout. The basic charge that the Lord had against the people then, was that they had lost the sense of His holiness. So much was this so, that, when they were charged with certain most conspicuously wrong things, they could not see it! They had lost the sense of God’s holiness. So then He brings them to the point, and says: ‘You offer on My altar the blind, the lame, the blemished ...!’; and He continues: ‘Go and offer them to your governor, and see what he will say! Do you dare to offer Me a blind sheep, a lame ox, a blemished animal? Who do you think I am? What sort of a person do you think I am? See what your governor would say! But am I not greater than your governor? And yet you do it to Me!’

The Lord has startling ways of bringing people face to face with reality. I am using this illustration for the sake of getting at this great matter of association with God. Just think of it — the Levites were called into association with God! That was God’s covenant with Levi of life and peace, to come right into touch with such a God as He is, to come right into touch with His things, to come before Him...and live! It would be impossible to live in His presence; but “life and *peace*” — in touch with such as He is, in peace! There would be war unto death if there were not a

right foundation and basis! “My covenant was with Levi, of life and peace”; ‘I brought him into association with Me in My work.’

I am trying, very imperfectly and falteringly, to impress you with the greatness of this vocation. As I said previously, this is not a special cult or denomination, or class of people; this is what the church as a whole is called into. But when the church as a whole fails the Lord in this matter, He looks inside to find those who will not fail Him. That has happened again and again, and that is the history of the Levites.

### **Levitical mediation**

What happened with the Levites? Well, first of all, we remember how they came into view with the Lord at all. It was at the time of the making of the golden calf, the ‘breaking loose’ of the nation. The sons of Levi separated themselves from that corruption and pollution, stood right outside it; and then, at great cost to their own souls, their families and friends, took the sword against this breaking in of evil powers. That is how they came into view first of all. Later, the Lord took the tribe of Levi in the place of the firstborn sons in Israel. The firstborn son in every household functioned as the official priest of the household. When Israel defaulted as a nation, and there was not that which the Lord required in priesthood, in the whole nation, He separated the tribe of Levi on the basis of the half shekel of silver, and made the tribe of Levi representative of all the nation, as the “church of the firstborn ones” (Heb. 12:23). That is to say, in the Levites, all the families of Israel were represented; but represented in holiness, in satisfaction to the Lord. They are a people in the midst of the people, giving God His satisfaction, for He must have it. We are familiar with that principle. There is much more in the history of the Levites, but that is enough for us to get at the meaning.

This law of the Levite is the law of the innermost association with God in a priestly way, for the work of God. When we say that, we mean mediation, intercession; standing between God and His people, to bring them together; to mediate from God what He wants His people to have; to bring His people into touch with God and His resources. It is a spiritual thing. And, in that sense, we are all called to be priests, to be Levites.

Let me give an example. In a certain country in Europe, there is a work going on at the present day, growing and expanding, which bears all the marks of a real movement of God. This was prayed into being for ten years by five sisters, not by any means young, certainly not very

influential; poor in the things of this world. Not till after ten lonely, patient years, with much heartbreak and disappointment, sometimes coming to the place of wondering whether there ever could be anything for the Lord, did the thing break. I call that Levitical ministry! It was hidden; the world knew nothing about it, but God knew all about it. You may be a lonely soul in some place; you may be one of a lonely little group, or of a larger group, in some place; but whether alone, or in larger or greater companies, this is what you and I are called to — to be God’s Levites in this day: to stand, not only between Him and the world, but between Him and His own needs in, and purpose for, His people. That is the vocation of spiritual Levites.

### **“My Name shall be great among the nations”**

If you need impressing as to the importance of that to the Lord, as not something that is, so to speak, ‘optional’, ‘extra’, or ‘take it or leave it’, let me remind you again of the first chapter of Malachi. In my Bible I have got lines drawn across the pages, and those lines link things up. We read in chapter 1: “My name shall be great among the nations; and in every place incense shall be offered unto My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations” (v.11). From there I have a line running across to Levi; first, to the covenant made with Levi, and then from there to the purifying of the sons of Levi. I believe that is a right kind of link. If His name is really going to be great among the nations, He needs a Levitical body after this kind. He needs a people within His people. That is not His appointment originally; He would have all His people to be on this basis — to be as “the church of the firstborn”. But if the whole is not like this, as we have said so often, He looks inside for those who will serve Him in this way.

However His purpose is: “My name great among the nations”. Let us put it round the other way: if the Levites are corrupt, and defiled, and out of their place, the name of the Lord is dishonoured among the nations. If the Lord has not got this kind of thing that He needs — this ministry by such a people — then the nations suffer loss, and the name of the Lord suffers loss. And so, in order that the reproach to the name of the Lord should be removed, and that His name should be great among the nations, He must purify the sons of Levi.

We began with the thought of *association with God*. Let us take that to ourselves individually. I think of nothing more searching for myself

than to have association with God. Of course, it will depend upon my idea of God. But if I have any right conception of God, of His infinite holiness, and I am allowed to come near Him and be associated with Him, that is a tremendous thing! We should think it a high honour and responsibility if we were allowed to have association with some people in this world. But we are called unto association with God for His work. He will do His work through us!

How greatly we need a new conception on the one side, of the holiness and greatness of God, of the *awfulness* of God and, on the other side, of the infinite mercy and grace of God, that He should call us into association with Himself. What an honour, what a privilege that He should do His work through us! We have not got a right conception of God's work. We take it into our defiled hands; we project ourselves into it; spread ourselves over it; try to become something in it; strut about as though we were something. Isaiah saw His holiness; he heard the seraphim calling, "Holy, holy, holy ..." and he cried, "Woe is me, for I am undone." This we need to recover, and then to realize that He calls us into that association, and for the purpose of Himself fulfilling His work through us.

### **Walking in the light**

At this point I want to pause and add something in parenthesis. When we speak on this matter of holiness and sin and unrighteousness, and perhaps begin to feel something about it and ourselves, it is possible for us to call to our rescue — wrongly — certain Scriptures such as: "There is therefore ... no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). We can wrongly take the covering of such Scriptures, and hide behind them. There is a difference. "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid"! (Rom. 6:1,2). Do you see the point? Oh yes, we shall always be very imperfect; there will always be much to be done in us to the end; the cleansing, sanctifying and saving work has to go right on. And "if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another" (that is, Himself and ourselves), "and the blood of Jesus ... goes on cleansing us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

But there is such a thing as not walking in the light, and excusing it by saying: 'Yes, I know I am very imperfect and I know I am a sinner, but in Christ there is no condemnation.' Well, we cannot get away with that. Those people in the seven churches in the Revelation, when their wrongs were mentioned to them, 'Thou hast there this and that, which things I

hate', might have said: 'But there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ'; 'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.' No, that won't do! If we are going really to be in association with God for His work, the refining fires have got to do their work; the sons of Levi must be purified. We must be a purified people; we must be walking in holiness. With all the value of the precious blood cleansing, and the Holy Spirit sanctifying, we must be 'walking in the light'. We must correspond to the Lord for association.

### **The true service of God**

What takes pre-eminent place here is the effect in *service*. Israel was called out of Egypt to *serve* the Lord. "Let My son go, that he may serve Me" (Ex. 4:23). The whole idea of God in sonship is service; it is practical; it is to do His work; it is to minister to Him — and that, in the midst of the nations. Israel was called out from Egypt to *serve* the Lord on the basis of sonship. When the whole nation showed its weakness, its defilement, its divided heart, half towards the land, (and that very largely for their own gain), and the other half in Egypt, (and that for their own convenience and comfort), when all that was dragged out into the light, the Levites were taken by God as the people of an undivided heart.

That was the test. Moses said: 'Gird every man his sword on his side, and go in and out, and slay your own brother, your own family, and your own friend!' No man of a divided heart could undertake that! A man's heart must be whole to be able to do a thing like that. They were really put to the test about this, in a practical and terrible way; and they stood up to it, they went through with it. They, therefore, right in the midst of the nation, represent the principle of the undivided heart, the heart that is wholly for the Lord. That is essential to association with the Lord; that is essential to, not what man calls the service of God or the work of God, but what *God* calls His service.

And, mark you, it is solemnly true that, sooner or later, if we are honest with God, if we really mean business with God, we shall be brought up against this. We may have gone on for a long time — doing a lot of things for the Lord, and a lot of work for the Lord — with things that the Lord did not agree with in our lives. But sooner or later the Lord will say: 'We have gone far enough with this!' And at that time either all our life work is coming to an end, or there is going to be something new, something more. It will be the crisis of our testimony and the crisis of our work. That is

what Levi represents; he represents God looking on the heart.

What I am seeking to emphasize is not the process, but the outcome. The Lord would do a new thing, a mightier thing, a thing for His glory; He has purpose in view — something more. And, as I see it, this Levite principle is just that; how God will go on, how God will do more and do greater things, and reach His end. It rests with “him that overcometh”. That is the Levite of our time. The Levites stood for, and stand for, what is most precious to God and that is *holiness of life*.

You cannot dispute or challenge that. All through this book of Malachi the Lord says of these blemished, lame and blind offerings: ‘Away with them! I have no delight or pleasure in your offerings at all; take them away. These blemished things give Me no pleasure; there is no preciousness in those to Me.’ What is most precious to the Lord is something unblemished, a thing that is whole before the Lord. God is jealous; He is a very jealous God. In one sense God is the only Person who has the right to be jealous. Our jealousy is all wrong, is it not? But God’s jealousy is a holy and a pure jealousy; and He has a right to be jealous; He is jealous for His Name, and jealous therefore for His holiness.

## **Jesus Christ the Great Levite**

All this, you see, explains the Lord Jesus. It explains His coming into this world; it explains His life while He was here; it explains His cross; it all explains Him. We said earlier that He is the Great Levite. He began His ministry at the age of thirty, as the Levites began theirs.

Here we come to the whole matter of sonship again: sonship leading to service that will satisfy God. Here is One who is in the closest association with God. Now, we are foreordained to be conformed to the image of God’s Son. Christ is our example; Christ really governs everything in life and work. ‘Ye are in the presence of One whose heart is not divided; whose heart is wholly and utterly for God; whose association with God is complete and absolute by His own choice.’ We are not thinking now of His identification with God in Godhead. We are thinking of Him as the Levite, the Man, the representative amongst the Lord’s people; the One in real association with God, fulfilling the purpose and doing the work of God. “We must work the works of Him that sent Me, while it is day” (John 9:4). Here is the perfect Levite.

In order that we may work the works of God we must be conformed to the image of God’s Son; we must come into Christ-likeness. And that

opens up the whole Bible again because, from beginning to end, whenever God has taken a new step in the history of this world, He has always taken that step on the basis of Christ.

Did He take a step with Abel? Well, it is not difficult to see the feature of Christ that Abel represents — one who is separated to God; whose heart is undivided towards God. And so we could go on with Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, the people of Israel and so on. But God has never moved on any other ground than that of His Son. Every step that God took, He took on the basis of Christ. You and I will be outside of the movements of God if we are not moving on the line of Christ. Christ is this all-comprehending Levite, who had a heart only for God; who will prove, at any cost, that His heart is wholly for God; and who will react violently against any insinuation of the enemy that would take something from the Father. The Levites did that when they gathered themselves to Moses and obeyed the terrible command to take the sword against their own brethren. It was a violent reaction against a breaking in to take something from God. That is Christ!

Being called into fellowship with God's Son is being called into a Levitical position of absolute separation unto God; whole-heartedness for God; and reaction against everything that would take from God and dishonor His Name.

The data are too extensive, the details too many, to cover in this space. But we are faced with this. The Lord would take new steps; the Lord would go on; the Lord would lead His people on; but His way has been, at all times, to find either a man or a people of this Levitical order. When He has got that, He can do something more; He can go on. He needs that today, and He needs it everywhere. We need not all be together in one place for that; we may be scattered over the earth. But it is the principle of holiness unto the Lord; the principle of the undivided heart; the principle of a red-hot jealous reaction against any touch of corruption from the enemy. The Lord will come along that line.

He cannot do this willy-nilly. I think we have had too cheap an idea of the Lord's service, and of our relation to Him; anybody will do and anything will do, that is, generality. But no, not at all! God is jealous, jealous for His holiness and for His Name.

May He write this word in our hearts, and may He Himself explain what He means by it. So much is at stake; 'My name!' "My name shall be great among the nations"! I am sure that appeals to our hearts.

## THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF THE LEVITES

*“Behold, I send My messenger, and He shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, whom ye desire, behold, He cometh, says the Lord of hosts. But who can abide the day of His coming? And who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner’s fire, and like fullers’ soap: and He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and He shall purify the sons of Levi, and refine them as gold and silver” (Malachi 3:1-3).*

*“For the grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us, to the intent that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly and righteously and godly in this present age; looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a people for His own possession, zealous of good works” (Titus 2:11-14).*

God has always had a very clear and a very positive mind as to what He wants, and what He must have, for His satisfaction and pleasure in His people. God is not just moving forward without very clearly defined thoughts as to what He is after. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that from eternity God has moved with a definite plan and purpose before Him. We begin by recognizing that. God is not just stumbling upon things as He goes along, and then adjusting to the situation, and raising up something to meet it, something that was neither anticipated nor in the plan. God knows from the beginning. And we could quote much Scripture to prove that. He knows exactly what He wants, and just how and by what means He will reach it and realize it. “Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world” (Acts 15:18 A.V.)

### **A chosen nation**

That is where it all began. But when the race as a whole turned aside from God and His intention, God moved to take out a nation, a part of the

race, in which He would begin again to secure and recover that first purpose, intention and mind. And so He looked into the nations, and began to take out of the nations a people for His Name (Acts 15:14). Even in the old dispensation that was true; from the midst of the nations He chose one nation, in which He would realize what was ever in His heart and mind.

### ***1) Separation***

This part of the race, this chosen nation, had various features. First of all, one great law had to be strictly enforced — the law of separation, or sanctification. That part of the race had to be hallowed indeed unto God, set apart for God — a separated, sanctified people. The law of ‘spiritual separation’ was the primary, foundational law of the existence of such a people. They had to be separated, or sanctified (it is the same thing) in the first place in an inward way, in *spirit*. They had to have a consciousness born in them; their whole existence had to be constituted upon the consciousness that they *were* different. They were not ‘of a piece’ with the other nations, spiritually or morally.

That consciousness, of course, gave rise to trouble within and without; sometimes it went wrong. But you cannot fail to recognise that sense of being different. By the very work that God had done — the act of God in their calling, in their separation, in their sanctification — they knew that they were different from all other people. It was in their very consciousness. There are many things that cannot be accounted for apart from that fact. It is quite clear that, even when out of the way, and mixed up with other nations, they never lost that distinctiveness, and the consciousness of being different, and never have. It is a part of this very thing that we have to speak about. And, of course, what was true in an inward way, in the old dispensation, was made true in an outward way; that is, in their very appearance in the world, and in their conduct in the world, they were different. These were, in the old dispensation, ways of indicating spiritual things.

### ***2) Heart-purpose***

The next thing about them was that they were a people whose heart had to be wholly for the Lord. Their history on this earth, in a typical, symbolic way, was all pointing to this, that they were not a people who could have one foot in the world and one foot in the things of God. God required of them that they had both feet and every part of their heart over on His side, in relation to His things and His ends.

### **3) *Testimony***

Then, they were brought into being to be a testimony to the nations, in the midst of the nations. They were a light to the nations, to show God's mind to the nations, to let all men know what God requires, and has set Himself to have.

### **4) *Priesthood***

Further, that nation was called to be a priestly nation or people; that is, to stand between God, on the one side, and the needy peoples of the earth, on the other side, and mediate in a priestly way; to bring men into touch with God, and God into touch with men. That is the content of 'priesthood' as a spiritual thing.

### **5) *Divine authority***

Finally, they were there in the midst of the nations to show the authority of God over the earth. There is one God; He is God alone; He is over all gods and over all peoples; He is the Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth. And they were there with His authority over all creation resting upon them, and deposited with them; and they should secure for Him His rights in the nations. We can go even further; because, although this authority extended beyond the earth is only brought out in the New Testament in fulness, it is so clearly seen all the time right through the Old. It extended into the realm of spiritual intelligences, who were constantly seeking to break in and take away from God His rights in the earth.

## **The nation fails and the Levites are chosen**

This was God's great corporate act in relation to His original purpose. But then that people as a nation came short; they failed Him, disappointed Him. And so he moved again, this time *within* the nation, and we have that which has been occupying us at this time; God's movements in relation to the Levites. In the place of all the firstborn in Israel, He took the Levites. They became, within the nation, the embodiment of God's thought concerning the nation, both as to its own nature and constitution, and as to its vocation and service in the midst of the nations. They were taken to supply the Lord with what His people as a whole had failed to give Him, in which they were a disappointment to Him. God moves ever more inwardly; and so, within the compass of the nation He took one out of every family, and constituted that tribe of Levi the centre of His interests and His service.

### ***1) Representative***

Certain things come out in relation to the Levites. Firstly, of course, their representative character and position — they were not separate from Israel. While spiritually separate from the wrongs in Israel, they represented all Israel; in their very constitution, as being the tribe of the ‘firstborn ones’ in spiritual principle, they represented all the families in Israel. They stood therefore, representatively, as God’s thought concerning all His people. They were there to serve the Lord in this particular thing.

And again I would emphasize what I said in the last chapter; the necessity of our understanding what the service of God is. You and I need to be very clear about the nature of the service of God. It has become all sorts of things; it is an ‘omnibus’ thing with people today. But the essence of the service of God, as made clear by the whole Word of God, is this, that it really shall minister to the realization of the full purpose of His heart. It is the service of God, either more or less, according to how that end is served. God has had from the beginning, a full, complete, clearly-defined, rounded-off purpose and intention concerning His people, and service to God requires that we know what that is, that we come into line with that, and that that is being realized by what we do.

### ***2) Ministry at the altar***

So the Levites were taken from the midst of the nation, in order to be a concentration of the Lord’s full thought in the nation. Their ministry, though it had various aspects, was mainly to do with the Altar. Such ministry, such service, such a purpose, always brings us very closely into relation with the sufferings of Christ. Let there be no mistake about it, when you really get on the line of God’s full purpose, you are precipitated into a life in which you are going to know the “fellowship of His sufferings”; it is a part of such a ministry.

### ***3) The spearhead in battle***

Another thing was that the Levites were the spearhead in battle; they were a warring tribe. Strangely enough, even in their relation to the altar and the sacrifice we are told: “They shall go in to war the warfare in the work of the tent of meeting” (Num. 8:24). This is a remarkable phrase. If any place, or any thing, ought to be out of touch with warfare, it ought to be the sanctuary. But no — the *warfare* of the sanctuary! You can carry that further; it is not a scriptural expression, but it means this: the warfare of

the sacrifice, of the cross, of the altar. You are precipitated into peculiar conflict when you come into line with God's full purpose.

These were the Levites, and they embodied this word that we read from Titus: "That He might ... purify unto Himself a people for His own possession."

### **'Levites' in the new dispensation**

What was true in the old dispensation, being an expression of God's thought, God's mind, is ever true in spiritual principle. We may have passed from the period of the types, figures and symbols, and the outward systems embodying the principles, and come into the pure, clear, realm of spiritual reality, but we have not passed out of the age or realm of *the principle* of these things. And so we find in the New Testament that God is still moving on this line. The Levites now are a spiritual company, a heavenly people, no longer an earthly and temporal. They are a people that God must have, even though it be in the midst of His people generally; a people who really do know what God's full purpose is, and are committed to that, and nothing less, whatever the cost may be.

God is ever seeking for a people, here on the earth, in whom He can find the fullest response to what is in His own mind from eternity. He is ever seeking that, and He will never be satisfied with anything less than that. It may be that He has called into being particular companies and ministries in certain parts of the earth to serve Him thus, in a small way, as a part of something very much larger. He wants those who will serve Him in seeking to keep alive a testimony as to the fulness of His intention as to His own people. The phrase, "the fullness of Christ", is perhaps a commonplace to many of us, but that is precisely what it is: "the *full*-ness of Christ". That is the true Levitical function and ministry.

The Lord wants that where you and I are concerned, as the Lord's people. The Lord wants us to stand in that relationship to Himself; not as though we were something superior — a kind of spiritual autocracy — and certainly not a spiritual aristocracy; not looking down on anybody; not feeling or thinking that anybody else is less, or anything like that; but just as a people here, among His own people in this world, in a true heart way, representing for the Lord all that He would have in His people — an utterness for God — and giving God a position and an opportunity for showing in us all His counsel, all His will, all His purpose, all His character.

## The vital importance of holiness

It is a very holy calling. That is why we began, in our first chapters, with the strong emphasis upon holiness. This that God seeks cannot be, except by holiness of life. You see, holiness is not just a state which ends in itself. In the Bible, holiness always ends with vocation. It is vocational. It relates to God's work. For His work the word is: "Be ye clean, ye that bear the vessels of the Lord" (Is. 52:11). Sooner or later, our work will be brought up short on the point of holiness. If we are the Lord's servants, if we are joined to the Lord for His purpose and anything comes in that is unholy, the Lord may for a time do nothing. He may bear with it, or He may speak, He may exercise; but there will come a point when He will say: 'I have spoken about that; I have spoken to you about that more than once. I have waited, and been very patient. Now, we are not going any further.' And some terrible crisis will arise which will involve the whole question of our usefulness to the Lord. I have to be serious and solemn again about that; because, you see, the very governing principle of Levitical service to God is *holiness*. The whole dimension of God's House is to be "Holiness unto the Lord" (cf. Ezek. 43:12), because it is, in a spiritual sense, a priestly house, a people separated unto God in an inward way.

It is impressive, when you stop to think about it, how much there is all the way through the Bible about separation, sanctification and holiness. It runs all through the Bible from beginning to end, as it were, like a golden thread. Surely it must imply that this whole realm of things into which we are born is a corrupt, defiled, unclean realm and is contrary to the nature of God. It is the realm of the earth and the lower heavens; it has been tainted and polluted; it has been touched by an unclean hand; it is being energized by unclean spirits; it is unclean! The very heavens, in the sight of God, are not clean, the Bible says (Job 15:15<sup>b</sup>); they are shot through with uncleanness. There is a warfare against God on the part of unholiness.

It is thus quite clear that there can be no association with God, and no real work for God, except on this ground of true and practical holiness. God wants a holy people. That is the central note of these messages. God must have a holy people and then see what He will do! But it is a suffering way, because it brings us so deeply into the meaning of the cross. The cross ceases to be a mere teaching or doctrine; it becomes an almost awful reality, terrible to the flesh. We have, perhaps, too cheap a cross. We sing about it, talk about it, teach about it, think we know all about it; but the

cross is a *devastating* thing in the realm of the flesh. We shall find that sooner or later.

On the other hand, if you are in line with the cross, in tune with it, in fellowship with it, what a mighty power the cross is, objectively! When it has nothing against you, when you are on its ground, what a tremendous power it is against the evil forces in this universe, and in this world.

Surely that is the position that we would covet, on both its sides — holiness and power. Those two things always go hand in hand. We cannot know the power except by the holiness. But if we have the holiness, the power will be spontaneously released. We shall not have to ask for power if the holiness is there.

To sum up, then, this whole matter of Levites, in all dispensations. It is a spiritual thought; it is a spiritual conception. It is the embodiment, in the creation, of the holiness, and therefore of the power, of God. We have read in the prophecies of Malachi: “My name shall be great among the nations” (1:11); leading straight to this: “And He shall sit as a refiner ... and He shall purify the sons of Levi” (3:3). The two things go together; the greatness of His name among the nations and a people purified unto the Lord.

### **‘Life’ and ‘peace’**

I close by quoting again these other words: “My covenant was with Levi, My covenant of life and of peace” (2:4,5). We need to know more of that divine life — the mighty power of the risen life of the Lord Jesus. “My covenant of life ...”. We need to know victory over death both in a spiritual way and, until the Lord has finished with us here, in a physical way. Until He has finished with us, we need to know divine life even for the body. And we want to know more about that “and peace” — where God is not against us, has no controversy with us; where the conflicts between us and the Lord, and the Lord and us, are settled. His “covenant of life and peace” is with Levi. But ‘Levi’ means these two things; God’s full purpose for His people, and absolute sanctification, holiness, separation unto the Lord.

We must each ask the Lord how that applies, because it touches so many practical parts. It may come into the family life and domestic life; it may come into our business life and challenge and search out all our business methods and transactions. Yes, we have to be Levites in business as well as in the assembly of the Lord’s people — “Holy unto the Lord”.

Be careful how you are involved in the devil's system of running this world, to take from the Lord, both in your social life, and in every department of life. We are in a terrific business; no less than whether this great kingdom of darkness is going to hold its ground, or whether the Lord is going to oust it. That issue is going to be settled in the church. There is going to be "glory in the church and in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:21).

*To be continued*