

What can we learn from the tribe of Levi / the Levites?

The patriarch Jacob, just before he died, gave each of his twelve sons a blessing. The twelve sons were the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the blessings contained prophetic information about the future of each tribe. In the case of the tribe of Levi, which was paired in the prophecy with the tribe of Simeon, Jacob prophesied: “Simeon and Levi are brothers—their swords are weapons of violence. Let me not enter their council, let me not join their assembly, for they have killed men in their anger and hamstrung oxen as they pleased. Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel” (Genesis 49:5-7). In addition to referring to the future of the tribe of Levi, the prophecy contains within it several lessons for all of us.

Jacob pronounced a curse upon Levi’s (and Simeon’s) anger partly due to their treacherous and violent destruction of the Shechemites (Genesis 34:24-30). Levi’s anger was evil because it was characterized by deeds of fierceness and cruelty. Righteous anger and indignation, the kind Jesus exhibited in cleansing the Temple, for example, is never characterized by cruelty. The swords of Levi, which should have been only weapons of defense, were weapons of violence, to do wrong to others, not to save themselves from wrong or to protect the innocent.

Jacob’s pronouncement, “I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel” certainly came true. The tribe of Levi was scattered through Israel. But they became, by God’s grace and through their loyalty to God (Exodus 32:26-29), the priestly tribe and residents of the cities of refuge. They never possessed their own designated region, as the other tribes did, but Levi’s priestly office was certainly a privileged one.

As Christians, we learn from the tribe of Levi that unrestrained anger is the cause of a great deal of sin. Anger leaves devastation in its wake, often with irreparable consequences. Jacob's statement "let me not enter their counsel; let me not join their assembly" is a lesson for us as well. We are not to take the counsel of angry people because they are unstable and exhibit an inability to control their passions. When anger is a defining trait, it is an indication of the lack of the spiritual gift of self-control that characterizes all believers (Galatians 5:22-23). An angry person makes a poor counselor, and, in fact, his company should be avoided, especially when the sin of anger is unconfessed and there is no attempt to deal with it in a godly manner.

Finally, the ultimate lesson in the tribe of Levi, for Christians, is that of restoration of the sinner to the privileged position of children of God. Through the high priestly intercession of Christ, who exchanged His righteousness for our sins on the cross (2 Corinthians 5:21), we become a nation of priests in our own right. "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9).