"Living Graciously in Community"

Numbers 35

In the previous chapters, the focus has been on getting into the land of Canaan – their inheritance – where the boundaries will be, and who the leaders will be that will remind God's people what He had promised them. Now we are reminded that the Levites don't receive land as an inheritance, but instead they will be scattered throughout (we'll see why shortly). Then God says in the rest of Ch. 35, here's what you are to do when you guys kill each other when you get into the land. What? Where did this come from? I'm sure many Israelites looked at one another with puzzled looks on their faces, and thought 'Moses, you're such a gloomy Gus. Why in the world would we need to hear this?' We're God's family. We all have His Words. Why would we hurt one another?

Why indeed would God's people of any age need to be reminded how to deal with each other when we've been hurt by one of us? Because we still have a sin nature and some-times we hurt each other by our own words or behaviour. As we'll see here, many times it's unintentional. A flippant word, a forgotten meeting or appointment or misunderstood expectations when we inadvertently let someone down. And also – hopefully rarely - an intentional, hurtful word meant to damage another image bearer of God.

In this chapter, I believe God was helping Israel to be proactive and think first about godly responses when we get hurt instead of the knee-jerk retaliation, perhaps even more harshly than how you were hurt. God was also preparing the community on how to balance justice and mercy, grace and forgiveness along with a warning about the consequences of our actions – intentional or unintentional. Let's ask for Holy Spirit filled wisdom to help us navigate what God was saying to Israel on how to live together, so we can apply these principles within our own communities of families and Christian family [pray].

V.1 carries on from Ch. 34. What inheritance do the Levites get? They don't get land because God told them earlier in Num. 18:20

20 The Lord said to Aaron, "You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites. 21 "I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the Tent of Meeting. 22 From now on the Israelites must not go near the Tent of Meeting, or they will bear the conse-quences of their sin and will die. 23 It is the Levites who are to do the work at the Tent of Meeting and bear the responsibility for offenses against it. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. They will receive no inheritance among the Israelites. 24 Instead, I give to the Levites as their inheritance the tithes that the Israelites present as an offering to the Lord. That is why I said concerning them: 'They will have no inheritance among the Israelites.' "

The Levites would be given houses with some land from the other tribes where they could live and have their own farms to produce crops too, but primarily the Levites were dependent on the sacrifices offered by the people as they worshipped God. Assuming the Israelites always walked with God and brought the proper sacrifices, then the Levites would be looked after. The Levites were to be scattered throughout the land – 48 cities in all - because of one of their primary roles: teaching the people the Word of God. By scattering them throughout the land God was saying

My Word Must Be Central to Your Life
(35:1-8)

Listen to some of these verses regarding the Levites responsibilities, on top of taking turns serving at the Tabernacle or later the Temple helping with the sacrifices.

Lev. 10:10 *You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean,* 11 *and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses."*

2 Chron. 17:7 *In the third year of his reign he sent his officials Ben-Hail, Obadiah, Zechariah, Nethanel and Micaiah to teach in the towns of Judah.* 8 *With them were certain Levites—Shemaiah, Nethaniah, Zebadiah, Asahel, Shemiramoth, Jehonathan, Adonijah, Tobijah and Tob-Adonijah—and the priests Elishama and Jehoram.* 9 *They taught throughout Judah, taking with them the Book of the Law of the Lord; they went around to all the towns of Judah and taught the people.*

Mal. 2:7 *"For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction—because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty.*

So God scatters them throughout the land

Where the teaching of God's Word influences their lives

There's a great example of this in Nehemiah 8 when he gathers the people into Jerusalem and has Ezra preach the Word of God and Levites are scattered throughout the crowd

explained the Law to the people while the people remained in their place. ***8*** *They read from the book, from the Law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.*

The Levites needed to have their own places to live and small farms of their own, on top of receiving from the sacrifices when they were away from home and serving at the Tabernacle or Temple. And who provided this for them? The people, as they obeyed God's Words. Similarly, when we want someone to teach us the Word of God in our churches we hire people to do that because we want the Word of God to be central to influence our lives. And

When we support our ministries, it frees them up to serve God (vv.1-8)

Michelle and I just came back from the annual Fellowship National Conference in Toronto, where we rubbed shoulders with around 400 pastors, church staff and missionaries. Part of these meetings involved financial reports where the Fellowship treasurer reports how $15 million is used for ministry. That's apart from each individual church who have budgets of their owns. Praise God His people are so generous that we have a few thousand pastors, missionaries, and church staff able to serve God here and around the world so that His Word gets out. We heard amazing stories in Canada how God is changing lives through our 500+ other churches. And that's just our denomination. There are many other evangelistic-minded denominations wanting to see God's Word shared so they support pastors, missionaries and staff around the country and world.

What's being modelled here hasn't changed the way ministry works today. God's people partnering together, supporting those who they have hired because they want God's Word to influence and guide their life.

Yet, as we study God's Word, we see that

God Prepares Us to Obey His Word Even When Hurt (35:9-29)

9 Then the Lord said to Moses: 10 "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, 11 select some towns to be your cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone accidentally may flee. 12 They will be places of refuge from the avenger, so that a person accused of murder may not die before he stands trial before the assembly.

In His sovereign wisdom, God proactively provides a system of mercy and justice for when God's people will hurt each other – even as severely as here, murder or manslaughter. Surely we won't do these things. However, let's recall Jesus' words from Matt. 5:21

21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be sub-ject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca, [which means 'brainless']*' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. 23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has some-thing against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.*

Jesus points out that anger precedes murder, so don't let your anger get so far advanced that we hurt someone deeply. We may not be guilty of murder but we certainly have been guilty of character assassination. God knows we will hurt someone. Have we ever thought like God in that:

Do we know we will hurt one another and be hurt by one another? (vv.9-10)

When they get into Canaan they were to select specific towns to be cities of refuge for those who will commit murder even accidentally, so that they are protected from vengeance by the family member of the person now deceased. None of us would think that we would hurt another believer but the truth is we have been hurt and we have hurt others. We shouldn't but when the Word is not central to influence our decisions, we react or don't think and we hurt others. When that happens

Will we treat each other mercifully? (vv.11-24)

12 They will be places of refuge from the avenger, so that a person accused of murder may not die before he stands trial before the assembly. 13 These six towns you give will be your cities of refuge. 14 Give three on this side of the Jordan and three in Canaan as cities of refuge. 15 These six towns will be a place of refuge for Israelites, aliens and any other people living among them, so that anyone who has killed another accidentally can flee there.

The cities of refuge protected the one who needed to defend his actions for the harm he caused. Was it intentional or unintentional? The Levites also acted as judges because they knew God's laws. A trial would prove his innocence or guilt. The damaged party would have to trust the system (God's Word) and not take justice in their own hand. If the hurt was unintentional then the damaged party would need to trust what God's Word ruled and agree to the ruling. "May not die" means protecting someone from taking vengeance on their own.

In Rom. 12:17 Paul commands us

[17] Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. [18] If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Earlier Paul said 'bless those who persecute us. If we're to be merciful to those who intentionally hurt us, how much more should we be merciful to those who unintentionally hurt us like here in Num. 35? We've been hurt because people who've been forgetful, callous and flippant, not realizing at the time how they've hurt us. Yet we've responded with silence, avoidance, simmering inside and possibly telling others so that people take our side. God says, show mercy. Obey my Words, respond graciously. Even better, be prepared to respond graciously when you get hurt because, we know we will be hurt and we know we will hurt others again unintentionally. And we want to be treated mercifully.

But what if they did intentionally hurt us? Here God says in vv.16-24 that if the murder was intentional then capital punishment is necessary.

[19] The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death. [20] If anyone with malice aforethought shoves another or throws something at him intentionally so that he dies [21] or if in hostility he hits him with his fist so that he dies, that person shall be put to death; he is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when he meets him.

Under God's Mosaic Law justice was to be carried out by the one who wants justice for the death of their family member. Which I can't imagine would be easy to do. Thank-fully we do have systems in place that our laws look after punishment of criminals. We trust that they will get it right but they don't always. That's when a believer has to leave these things with God who will ultimately right every wrong one day. This may have been Jesus' point when the religious leaders brought to Him, the women caught in adultery (John 8:1-10) and demanded that she be stoned according to the Law. And Jesus said, okay, you do it, whoever is without sin. But no one would. Jesus showed her mercy yet still confronted her sin when He told her to go and sin no more. God is the ultimate judge whom we have to trust will be merciful and just to those who harm us. Even here in Num. 35, we see that the person who hurt another unintentionally still suffered consequences. A good reminder to think about before we say or do something we shouldn't:

Do we know there will be consequences when we hurt one another? (vv.25-29)

[25] The assembly must protect the one accused of murder from the avenger of blood and send him back to the city of refuge to which he fled. He must stay there until the death of the high priest, who was anointed with the holy oil. [26] " 'But if the accused ever goes outside the limits of the city of refuge to which he has fled [27] and the avenger of blood finds him outside the city, the avenger of blood may kill the accused without being guilty of murder. [28] The accused must stay in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest; only after the death of the high priest may he return to his own property.
[29] " 'These are to be legal requirements for you throughout the generations to come, wherever you live.

The cities of refuge protected the one guilty of manslaughter from being killed by the avenger. Yet at the same time he can't go home. His family now has to leave home and be with him OR they don't. Either way he's separated from family or community. Which makes sense. Whenever we hurt one another, it damages relationships.

Until the death of the High Priest. When the current High Priest dies, the guilty party is freed and allowed to return home. The debt is paid in full. Why? Because God in His foreknowledge, laid the foundation for what would come for all of us, that is that

God Provides Redemption through His Anointed Mediator (35:30-34)

This is what God was modelling for the people. That redemption and payment of these sins were cleared at the death of the High Priest. He was God's anointed mediator between the people and God. Once a year the High Priest made a sacrifice on the Day of Atonement that wiped out everyone's sins for the year. When they needed a specific answer of prayer to God, the High Priest used the two special stones in His breastplate – the Urim and Thummin – to get God's yes or no when Israel needed it.

All this was preparatory for Jesus, our Great High Priest whose death is the only way we can have all our sins completely paid for and forgiven.

Heb. 7:25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.
26 Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. 27 Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.

And then in Heb. 9 in talking about the High Priest's once a year sacrifice, the author states in 9:7,

the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. 8 The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. 9 This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. 10 They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order. 11 When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. 12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.

And when we accept Jesus' sacrifice for our sins and place our faith in Him, His Spirit comes to dwell in us. We are sealed by the Spirit and not only are we human image bearers of God but now spiritual too.

Since all this in Num. 35 was God's proactive measures on how God's people deal with the hurts they cause each other, what proactive measures can we take so that we stop ourselves from hurting each other by renewing of our minds of how we think about each other? I have been reading a series of books titled the Good and Beautiful God, the Good and Beautiful Life, The Good and Beautiful Community which are based on understanding and living out the Sermon on the Mount. One exercise that the author suggests we practice, is to remind ourselves that each believer is 'one in whom Christ dwells and delights'. And as weird as this sounded, I was to verbalize this to a few believers. So a friend and I did this over a few weeks and every now and then still say to each other, 'Hello _____, one in whom Christ dwells and delights'. It sounds strange to say but what a powerful reminder that each of us has the Spirit of Jesus dwelling in us. And maybe we should think about that of each other, especially before we enter hurtful thoughts and words. None of us wants to hurt each other but we might. How-ever, if we believe that Jesus has redeemed us by His blood and that Jesus dwells in you as He does in me, why would I want to hurt someone in whom Christ dwells and delights?

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net