

The Cities of Refuge

Joshua 20:1–9
Frank Walker, Ph.D.

After the land had been divided, two matters still needed attention: designating the cities of refuge, which took place in this evening's text, and appointing the Levitical cities, which occurs in chapter 21. Today, we'll consider just the cities of refuge.

Moses had already mentioned the cities of refuge several times in his writings. He first wrote of them in Exodus 21:12–14, immediately before the laws dealing with capital offenses. There he made it clear that, while the punishment for premeditated murder was death, a man who killed someone else accidentally could flee to a place God would appoint. Numbers 35:9–29 gives more details, including instructions to the Israelites to choose six cities from among those given to the Levites — three on each side of the Jordan. Then, in Deuteronomy 4:41–43 Moses chose the cities of refuge on the east side of the Jordan. And finally, he gave instructions for the three additional cities on the west side of the Jordan in Deuteronomy 19:1–10.

There were also times in the Old Testament when the altar of the tabernacle or temple functioned as a temporary refuge. You might remember that both Adonijah and Joab clung to the altar (1 Kgs. 1:50–53; 2:28). But even this wasn't a 'get away with murder free' card. Exodus 21:14 says, *If a man come presumptuously upon his neighbour, to slay him with guile; thou shalt take him from mine altar, that he may die.*

The Role of Cities of Refuge

Now, the first thing we need to consider tonight is how the cities of refuge worked.

Verse 1 gets us started by telling us that God appointed the system of refuge cities for his people. It wasn't Moses' idea, though the end of verse 2 says that God spoke *by the hand of Moses*. Nor was it Joshua's idea. He merely carried out the instructions that had been given to him. And it certainly didn't come from the people. God spoke it. Numbers 35, which includes detailed instructions concerning the cities of refuge, begins the same way: *And the LORD spake unto Moses (v. 9).*

The fact that God appointed cities of refuge revealed his grace. Look at the first thing he said about them in verse 2. He told Joshua to tell the children of Israel, *Appoint out for you cities of refuge.*

The Hebrew literally says “Give to yourselves the cities of refuge.” These cities were a gift that blessed all the people because anyone who needed to could flee to them for protection; and because they needed them only in cases of accidental death, no one knew beforehand that he would have to go to one of them. But this is just the beginning of the grace that God revealed through these cities. We’ll see a lot more later on.

Verse 3 explains what the cities of refuge were for. They were intended only for those who killed someone *unawares and unwittingly*. These manslaughterers didn’t plan to kill anyone. They didn’t hate or envy the people they killed. It just happened providentially, as Exodus 21:13 says, *God delivered him into his hand*. So we don’t miss the point, Numbers 35 gives a few examples. If a man hates his neighbor and purposely does something that causes his death, like pushing him, throwing something at him, or even hitting him with his hand, he’s guilty of murder, and the avenger of blood shall put him to death. But if a man does any of these things without evil intent — he didn’t hate his neighbor, wasn’t lying in wait to hurt him, and may not even have seen him — then he was to live in one of the cities of refuge until the death of the high priest. He was a manslaughterer but not a murderer. And this law, according to verse 9, applies both to the children of Israel and the stranger who sojourns among them.

But let’s not conclude from this that manslaughter is a small matter or that the person who commits it can walk away scot-free. That’s not the case. The word translated *slayer* in verse 3 is the same word that’s used in the sixth commandment: *Thou shalt not kill*. A manslaughterer has killed and therefore has some guilt, even though he did it unintentionally. Manslaughter is serious because the person who died bore the image of God. Genesis 9:6 says, *Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man*. This reminds us to be especially careful if there’s even a remote possibility that our actions may injure or kill someone else. Yes, an ax head flying off the handle and killing someone may be unplanned, but the person who uses an ax has a responsibility to make sure that it’s fit to be used, i.e., that its head is mounted securely and there are no cracks in the handle. He must also make sure no one’s behind him when he swings his ax. In modern terms, this means that we shouldn’t wave a loaded gun around in front of people.

Verse 3 covers all of this. *Unawares* means negligence, e.g., a woodsman not keeping his tools in good condition. *Unwittingly* means ignorance, i.e., not taking the time to know what’s going on around us so that we can take necessary precautions.

And further, just because someone runs to a city of refuge doesn’t necessarily mean that he’s a manslaughterer entitled to live there. They couldn’t just take his word for it. There still had to be a trial. Verse 4 says, *And when he that doth flee unto one of those cities shall stand at the entering of the gate of the city, and shall declare his cause in the ears of the elders of that city*. Thus, the elders of the cities

of refuge, and perhaps their citizens as well, were to exercise judgment. Interestingly, though, Numbers 35 seems to provide a second option, viz., returning the manslayer to his own city for trial. There Moses wrote, *And the congregation shall deliver the slayer out of the hand of the revenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to the city of his refuge, whether he was fled* (v. 25). He wouldn't need to be returned to the city of refuge that he fled to unless he was first removed from it.

Regardless of where the trial takes place, if the man who fled to a city of refuge was found guilty of murder, Deuteronomy 19:12 says that he was to be taken to his own city and executed by the avenger of blood. The people of his town would have been familiar with the crime and needed to see justice.

But who was the avenger of blood? Some commentators suggest that he was a government official of some kind, sort of a state executioner, but this isn't right. His role was actually more religious. The Hebrew literally says that he was the kinsman redeemer of blood. Kinsman redeemers had important obligations in the Old Testament, notably recovering persons and property to protect God's commitment to his people. This is all laid out in the twenty-fifth chapter of Leviticus, and we have a beautiful example of it in the book of Ruth, where Boaz and an unidentified kinsman redeemer acted on her behalf. But kinsman redeemers also had a harder responsibility: they were to carry out blood vengeance for murdered relatives. They executed God's judgment, not their own.

Jesus — Refuge, Redeemer and Priest

We've seen how the laws concerning the cities of refuge took a person's motives into account, recognizing that manslaughter and murder are two distinct crimes despite their outward similarities. And along with this, we've also seen different punishments administered. Murderers were to be executed, while manslayers had to live in safe cities until the death of the high priest.

But a more important feature of the cities of refuge is that they served as pictures of Jesus. The writer of Hebrews probably had this in mind when he wrote that we *have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us*, which is the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 6:18). And these cities give us not one picture of Jesus but three.

The first and most obvious is the cities themselves, which illustrate the fact that Jesus is our refuge. The parallel here isn't perfect and wasn't meant to be. For example, the cities of refuge were for people who accidentally killed someone, but our sins against God aren't usually unintentional. They're purposeful acts of rebellion. And further, the cities of refuge were distributed throughout the land in such a way that no person was ever more than a day's walk from one, but most people

still had to travel to get to one, each step of the way looking over his shoulders for the avenger of blood. But Jesus is always right here. We can call on him anywhere. Even so, the lessons we learn about Jesus from the cities of refuge are far more wonderful. Consider these parallels:

1. The cities of refuge were the only hope for slayers of men. If a manslayer refused to flee to one of them, he had nowhere else to go. The Old Testament made no other provision for his safety. And these cities were so important that Deuteronomy 19:3 required God's people to build roads to them. Outside sources add that the Israelites also marked them with clear signs and maintained the roads with great care. Likewise, Jesus is the only hope for sinners, and the gospel teaches unmistakably that he is the only way to the Father. Apart from him, man has no hope.
2. The doors of the cities of refuge were never locked. They couldn't be because no one knew when a manslayer may come along looking for protection. Jesus is also always available to those who come to him by faith. He never turns anyone away who comes to him in faith but sweetly invites them to share in his rest.
3. The cities of refuge weren't just for Abraham's descendants. Strangers who sojourned among the people of God could also find safety in their walls. Again, the salvation that Jesus brought to mankind lays hold of all sorts and conditions of men. People from every nation and tribe and tongue and people gather around the throne to sing praises to the Lamb.

But the cities of refuge are just one picture of Jesus in this evening's text. Another is the avenger of blood, the kinsman redeemer who executes justice against the murderer of his loved ones. Jesus is our avenger of blood. Once he described the devil as *a murderer from the beginning, who abode not in the truth* (John 8:44). Who does Satan murder? First Peter 5:8 says that he walks about like a roaring lion, *seeking whom he may devour*. He tries to murder believers by bringing false accusations against us (Rev. 13:6-8). And those who follow the devil are also murderers. The apostle John wrote, *Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him* (1 John 3:15). But Jesus avenges these murders and attempted murders. Question 52 of our catechism asks, "What comfort is it to thee, that Christ 'shall come to judge the living and the dead'? Ans. That in all my sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head, I look for the selfsame One, who before offered Himself for me to the judgment of God, and removed all curse from me, to come as Judge from heaven, who shall cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall take me with all His chosen ones to Himself into heavenly joy and glory."

And there's a third picture of Jesus in our text. Verse 6 reminds us that manslayers had to live in the cities of refuge until the death of the high priest. Why? Because the high priest represented the sacrificial system. His death symbolized the removal of God's wrath and guilt. This is why Numbers 35:12 includes a further description of him. It says that the manslayer couldn't leave the city

of refuge until the death of the high priest, *which was anointed with the holy oil*. The oil reminds us that God had consecrated the priest to serve in this role. Now, we know that Jesus is our high priest. The book of Hebrews says so without question. But this evening's text adds that the high priest would not only offer sacrifices, but that he himself had to die before sins that resulted in human death were fully satisfied. And that's what Jesus did for us. All sin results in death. Romans 6:23 says, *The wages of sin is death*. But we have a priest who died for us and took away our guilt and punishment.

From this, we learn that Jesus is our refuge, our redeemer and our only priest. When we put it all together, we can appreciate all the grace that God revealed in the cities of refuge. We just need to lay hold of our Savior by faith.

We see in all of this that life and death are in the hands of God. Psalm 68:20 says, *He that is our God is the God of salvation; and unto GOD the Lord belong the issues from death*. And David wrote in Psalm 31, *My times are in thy hand: deliver me from the hand of mine enemies, and from them that persecute me* (v. 15). These verses are talking about Jesus Christ. John wrote, *In him was life; and the life was the light of men* (John 1:4). Those who believe have life, but the wrath of God abides on those who do not.

So, let us cling to Jesus with the assurance of Proverbs 14:26 — *In the fear of the LORD is strong confidence: and his children shall have a place of refuge*. Amen.