

“Cities of Refuge”

Joshua 20

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“1 The LORD also spake unto Joshua, saying,
2 Speak to the children of Israel, saying, Appoint out for you cities of refuge, whereof I spake unto you by the hand of Moses:
3 That the slayer that killeth any person unawares and unwittingly may flee thither: and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood.
4 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, they shall take him into the city unto them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them.
5 And if the avenger of blood pursue after him, then they shall not deliver the slayer up into his hand; because he smote his neighbour unwittingly, and hated him not beforetime.
6 And he shall dwell in that city, until he stand before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the high priest that shall be in those days: then shall the slayer return, and come unto his own city, and unto his own house, unto the city from whence he fled.
7 And they appointed Kedesh in Galilee in mount Naphtali, and Shechem in mount Ephraim, and Kirjatharba, which is Hebron, in the mountain of Judah.
8 And on the other side Jordan by Jericho eastward, they assigned Bezer in the wilderness upon the plain out of the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead out of the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan out of the tribe of Manasseh.
9 These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel, and for the stranger that sojourneth among them, that whosoever killeth any person at unawares might flee thither, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood, until he stood before the congregation.”
(Joshua 20:1-9 AV)

Life very often is not predictable. Bad things happen to good people through no fault of their own. Even under the Mosaic law, which was designed to show the world the extent and horror of man’s sin, God made provisions to show that He is a merciful and gracious God. Israel was to be a light to the nations, revealing the God who is the refuge for man, and that there would be rest in God for man’s sins.

The conquest of the land was complete. “43 And the LORD gave unto Israel all the land which he sware to give unto their fathers; and they possessed it, and dwelt therein. 44 And the LORD gave them rest round about, according to all that he sware unto their fathers: and there stood not

a man of all their enemies before them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand. 45 There failed not ought of any good thing which the LORD had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass.” (Joshua 21:43-45 AV)

Although it is true that Israel did not take possession of all of the land, for they failed to drive out all of the heathen, yet this was not God’s fault, for we must realize that there is a difference between what God gives to us and our slothfulness in taking possession of it. The military power of the Canaanites was broken, and it was only the disobedience of Israel that kept them from completely enjoying the possession that God gave them; but we will return to this theme at a later time. It is sufficient to say that our unfaithfulness does not negate the faithfulness of God.

There are several things to say about the cities of refuge.

I. They were appointed by the grace of God. They were important enough so that God directly reminded Joshua and the elders of Israel to establish them. They were decreed by the law of Moses, but Israel had not appointed them until after God had reminded them that they were to be done. They were for a refuge for anyone who was responsible for the death of another through no willful act, either by accident or without his knowledge.

A. Innocent life is very precious in the mind of god and the taking of human life is a very serious thing and is not to be shrugged off. A person who was responsible for the accidental death or even death without his knowledge or intent would have his life fundamentally changed. Therefore, it would not be taken lightly, for there would be a price to pay. Illustration: unsolved murders required a sacrifice from the city. Encourage them to find the culprit.

B. Avenger of blood: from the covenant God made with Noah: He who sheds man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed. Many things in the law were because of the hardness of men’s heart, and were abolished when Christ came and Christian civilization was established. We do not permit private revenge because Christ forbade it, but we have established courts to decide innocence or guilt, but society was very primitive then and God allowed for the passions of men who would seek revenge for the loss of a family member, according to primitive custom. But this custom continued until just a few centuries ago, and blood feuds sometimes lasted for many hundreds of years. For instance, the Guelphs and the Gibbelline conflict in Europe involved much of Europe and began during the papacy of Gregory VII and the Empire of Henry IV of Germany. Supporters of the church were the Guelphs and the supporters of state were the Gibbelines and they duked it out for about five hundred years or so. In America we had the Hatfields and the McCoys of fame. The cities of refuge were for the purpose of bringing man’s passions under control and bringing discipline to the nation of Israel. A person inadvertently taking the life of another could flee to one of the cities of refuge and live in the town safely until the death of the high priest, and then he could return to his inheritance, giving time for the passions to cool and for an inquiry to be made as to his innocence or guilt. If he were guilty of malice aforethought, or first degree murder, there would be no refuge. “You shall pluck him from mine altar”: God had said, in that case. Needless to say, human life would not be treated lightly, for a person’s life would be fundamentally changed whether he was innocent or guilty There were six cities

appointed, three on each side of the Jordan River.

C. The cities appointed were also of the inheritance of the tribe of Levi. There is an interesting history here. There are so many beautiful interconnected things in the Scriptures that enrich our lives if we will take the care to know them.

1. Levi and Simeon, two sons of Jacob, were offended with the city of Shechem because the prince of Shechem wanted to marry their sister and had sexual relations with her, what we might call statutory rape. As a result, Simeon and Levi had taken their swords and had treacherously killed every man in Shechem in revenge for this shame on their sister, for the three had the same mother.

2. Jacob condemned them for this act of revenge, showing even then that revenge is contrary to God's will for us; and on his deathbed, Jacob cursed their anger and said that they would be divided and scattered in Israel. This was fulfilled when Simeon was not given his own territory but his inheritance was scattered in the inheritance of Judah as recounted in Joshua 19.

3. But something else needs to be said about Levi, the other avenger of the rape of Dinah. On that awful day in the wilderness, when Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, and Aaron listened to the voice of the people and made a golden calf for them to worship, it was the tribe of Levi who turned away the wrath of God from Israel. God spoke to Moses that Israel had defiled themselves and Moses came down from the mount with the tables of stone in his hands, but he threw them to the ground and broke them, perhaps fearing that all of Israel would be destroyed if he had come into the camp with the evidence of their transgression in his hands. He said, "Who is on the Lord's side?" and the sons of Levi stepped forth and with their swords killed the idolaters, so that 3000 perished on the day the law was given. The reward to Levi on that day was that they were appointed to be the priests of God in Israel.

4. So both the curse of Jacob and the blessing of Moses were fulfilled in the dispersal of the Levites in Israel—their curse was turned into a blessing, for the Lord was their inheritance and they received cities throughout the land that they might be teachers and advocates for the people throughout Israel.

5. It was among these cities that the cities of refuge were chosen. What a wonderful mix of themes here: The condemnation of the revenge of Levi and Simeon; the wrath of God for the breaking of the covenant; the mercy of God in appointing cities of refuge to transgressors in Israel.

II. Although primitive by our standards, yet this was very progressive for thousands of years ago. We take so many things for granted in our modern day, the benefits and blessing of Christianity.

A. These cities were on high ground, and served as a beacon to the whole nation: God is merciful and a refuge to the oppressed and those in danger. Flee for refuge if you have blood on your hands.

B. It showed that even under the law, God was gracious and merciful, providing a way for the innocent to escape from the anger of men.

C. There is a direct allusion to these cities in Hebrews:

“17 Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: 18 That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: 19 Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; 20 Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.” (Hebrews 6:17-20 AV)

Jesus is our city of refuge. He is our refuge and the Lord said in these places and many others like them: “O LORD, my strength, and my fortress, and my refuge in the day of affliction, the Gentiles shall come unto thee from the ends of the earth, and shall say, Surely our fathers have inherited lies, vanity, and things wherein there is no profit.” (Jeremiah 16:19 AV)

“For thou hast been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall.” (Isaiah 25:4 AV)

“In the fear of the LORD is strong confidence: and his children shall have a place of refuge.” (Proverbs 14:26 AV)

“I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul.” (Psalms 142:4 AV)

D. Jesus expressed this idea clearly in “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28 AV)

III. This is not an outdated idea. Just as there were cities of refuge in ancient Israel, so there must be refuge in the modern world, to express the rest that is in God.

A. Our communities ought to be a refuge. A city should be a place of safety, and it will be so if the walls are secure. A city without walls was not secure but open to the ravages of wild beasts, lawless men, and enemies of all kinds.

1. Laws and their energetic enforcement are the walls of modern cities. Those who seek to pull down the walls turn the cities into places of

lawlessness and tyranny. In the cities and communities the power of government must be strong but limited. Government power must be harsh, as proverbs says, “A wise king scattereth the wicked, and bringeth the wheel over them.” (Proverbs 20:26 AV)

2. Laws, by their very nature, discriminate between those who obey and those who do not obey. This discrimination must be according to character and behavior, but there is the rub, if we do not have a definition of good character and good behavior.

3. Every citizen should work hard in the community to help ensure that good and fair laws are passed to provide an atmosphere where the good and innocent and diligent and faithful and rewarded.

4. It is true that mercy should be built into the system, but not to turn the cities of refuge into dens of iniquity. The cities of refuge did not provide a harbor for the wicked, but for the innocent.

B. The church is to be such a refuge. In the HC concerning the Sabbath day:

Q103: What does God require in the fourth Commandment?

A103: In the first place, God wills that the ministry of the Gospel and schools be maintained,[1] and that I, especially on the day of rest, diligently attend church [2] to learn the Word of God,[3] to use the holy sacraments,[4] to call publicly upon the Lord,[5] and to give Christian alms.[6] In the second place, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, allow the Lord to work in me by His Spirit, and thus begin in this life the everlasting sabbath.[7]

Church ought to be a refuge, not a place to beat up on each other, to find fault, to advance our own agenda, but a Sabbath, a drawing apart to find our refuge in the Lord. “20 Come, my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast. 21 For, behold, the LORD cometh out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity: the earth also shall disclose her blood, and shall no more cover her slain.” (Isaiah 26:20-21 AV)

C. The home ought to be a refuge. Ruth found rest in the house of her husband Boaz. What beautiful thought, that God has a refuge for men and women in the earth. It is called the family.

1. The home ought to be a place of safety. Proverbs says that the heart of a husband should “safely trust” in his wife. There should be delight and joy in our hearts when we think of our spouse. A cruel husband and an unruly wife turn the home into a dungeon or a battlefield, contrary to its intent. A refuge, a place of safety from the tempests and storms of the world.

2. From the health and safety of the home, men and women can venture

into the world to carry blessings with them and a witness of the grace of God. But their lives must be anchored in the safety and security of the home. Both husband and wife are responsible for this. Hence, Proverbs says that a wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her hands.

“Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer. 2 From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I. 3 For thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy.” (Psalms 61:1-3 AV)

Beloved, unless you have such a shelter and refuge in the true and living God, you will be overcome by the world. You will be swept away by the tempest and storms of life, but God is a true refuge for the soul. The devil walks around as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. He can be resisted successfully only in the Lord as the apostle tells us.

“Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him” (Psalms 37:7 AV)

“Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. 7 And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6-7 AV)

Thomas Raffles in 1833 captured this message in his great hymn: “Thou Art My Hiding Place, O Lord”

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Thou art my hiding place, O Lord,
In thee I put my trust;
Encouraged by thy holy Word,
A feeble child of dust:
I have no argument beside,
I urge no other plea;
And 'tis enough my Saviour died,
My Saviour died for me.

When storms of fierce temptation beat,
And furious foes assail,
My refuge is the mercy-seat,
My hope within the veil.
From strife of tongues and bitter words
My spirit flies to thee:
Joy to my heart the thought affords,
My Saviour died for me.

'Mid trials heavy to be borne,
When mortal strength is vain,

A heart with grief and anguish torn,
A body racked with pain,
Ah! what could give the sufferer rest,
Bid ev'ry murmur flee,
But this, the witness in my breast
That Jesus died for me.

And when thine awful voice commands
This body to decay,
And life, in its last lingering sands,
Is ebbing fast away,
Then, though it be in accents weak,
And faint and tremblingly,
O give me strength in death to speak,
My Saviour died for me.

Amen and Amen. May God bless you.