

manslaughter/ refugee, you forfeited the city's protection if you ever left.

Glory to God for His Grace

We see God's grace. The refugee could leave the city only on pain of death, but his sentence ended at the death of the High Priest. The death of the High priest was such a tragedy that all lesser considerations were to be set aside. The death of the high priest was a call to national mourning. His death also signaled the release of all refugees, which is a cause for celebration. **Our Great High Priest is Jesus Christ.** His death on the cross was a cause for mourning, but it also signaled the release of prisoners—sinners like you and me. In ancient Israel the death of the High priest *set aside* the claim of the avenger of blood. Christ's death for your forgiveness ought to make you glad to honor requests for forgiveness from those who wrong you. In a sense, the death of the High Priest prefigures the propitiating death of Christ, our great High priest (Hebrews 9:23-28). While the High Priest's death “satisfied” the claim of the avenger of blood in the immediate temporal realm, the death of Christ satisfies the wrath of God eternally and permanently releases the believer from the consequences of his sin. This is what Paul means in Romans 8:33,34.

Picturing Salvation

Israel placed significance to the names of people and place. The names of the cities of refugee are examples of this. *Kadesh* means “holy” or “set apart”; *Shechem* means “shoulder,” implying strength or security; *Hebron* means “fellowship” signifying undeserving sinners having fellowship with God; *Bezer* means “a fortified place” calling to mind the protection offered by the city of refuge. Compare Nahum 1:7 “stronghold” spelled *bezer*. *Ramoth* means “height” or “exaltation” pointing toward the exalted status of Christ and our exaltation with Him: Romans 8:17. Finally, *Golan* means “exultation” or “joy,” symbolizing the joy found in the forgiveness of sins when we abandon ourselves to Christ for our salvation.

Sinner's Options

The one guilty of manslaughter in Israel had three choices. Option #1: make excuses: “It was an accident; you shouldn't be so upset.” “I'll go to the city of refuge later, now is not convenient. “I'm going to hope he'll forget.” Option #2 I know I need to flee, but any city will do if I'm sorry. Option #3 Go to the nearest city of refuge for shelter on God's terms, not his own terms. Sinners should know that being sorry is not enough. We must flee to Christ and cast ourselves completely on Him.

THE CITIES OF REFUGE: Joshua 20:1-9

Most of this lesson is taken from Paul W. Downey's Book: *A Life of Conquest* p.267-275

Numbers of lessons emerge from wars. For instance, one of the unexpected lessons in the United States war in Iraq, during the Bush administration was just how difficult rebuilding a political system can be. Did not many of us expect our military to sweep through Iraq, remove Saddam Hussein, and say to the Iraqis, “There you go—you have your country back. We expect you to have it up and running before long.”? It hasn't worked anything like that.

The immediate response of the Iraqis to the collapse of Saddam Hussein's corrupt kingdom was not an organized establishment of a new and better system of civil law, but rather celebrating in the streets that quickly turned to looting. It required strong military presence to prevent disintegration into anarchy. **Lesson learned? Removing a corrupt regime is much easier than replacing it with a better system of civil law.**

For Joshua and Israel, the task of establishing a righteous nation in Canaan was massive. The *conquest* of Canaan was comparatively easy. *Distribution* and *placement* of tribes had been accomplished. “From that point on, *administration* would be a significant challenge. Israel had a wonderful advantage over modern Iraq. They had the law of God to guide them in their religious and civil lives, and they had Joshua, a God-appointed leader equipped to establish a pattern for enforcing civil law.”

Where there are people there are crimes.

Guidelines regarding retribution: (*lex talionis*) set limits for punishments, “eye for an eye” and *only* an eye, “tooth for a tooth” and *only* a tooth, “limb for limb” and *only* a limb—etc...

Particular penalties for specific crimes: “those penalties included payment of money as fines or compensation or being sold into slavery until the criminal had worked off his debt. A criminal might also be sent into exile or even executed by stoning, depending on the nature of the crime.

Capital crimes having the death sentence: murder, rape, adultery abusing the Sabbath,...and others. There were no professional executioners: in some cases the law required the most immediate surviving victim of the crime to be the executioner. This was generally the person who brought charges against the one who committed the crime. The executioner was called “**the avenger of blood.**” Joshua 20:1-9

Administering Justice

This enforcement of Israel's law was to be carried out on the basis of two underlying principles: 1. **The guilty are not to be cleared**
2. **The innocent are not to be punished.**

A Means for Protecting the Innocent

The cities of refuge were established in order to handle the most difficult and weighty legal cases, murder/manslaughter. A person guilty of taking the life of another “unawares” or “unwittingly” (Joshua 20:3) was to hurry to any of these cities and report to officials there. It is assumed that the person fleeing to the city and reporting had in fact caused someone's death, otherwise the stipulations of the city of refuge would not apply.

The cities had no central courthouse. The fugitive was to report to the gate of the city and tell the elders his version of what happened. He was promised their protection until his case was heard; the avenger of blood would also appear before the elders to offer his version of the events. To convict a person of murder required the testimony of two or three witnesses. These witnesses were not necessarily eye-witnesses to the crime.

They were *character* witnesses to the attitude of the one who had killed a person. They were to testify to whether the accused murderer “hated him...before-time”: Joshua 20:5. A fugitive who was guilty of having taken the life **of a man he hated** was presumed to be guilty of intentional murder. The connection between hatred and murder wasn't *introduced* in the New Testament: I John 3:15. It was *foundational* to the very definition of murder in the Old Testament law.

A Means for Punishing the Guilty

The penalty for murder was death. God established the death penalty for murder on the basis of man's being created in God's image--”Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in *the image of God* made he man:” Genesis 9:6. Murder is a crime ultimately directed against God. After the flood man was given orders to protect human life by executing the murderer.

The fact that this legal mandate of Genesis 9:6 predates the Mosaic Law and is independent of it is important. Capital punishment for murder *wasn't limited to the Israelite culture*—it is binding on *all humanity*. This wasn't a Jewish regulation on the same level as being forbidden to eat pork. Murder

assumes the evil, selfish *motive* of the killer. That is why taking a life in self-defense isn't a crime. It is also why taking a life accidentally isn't *murder*. By contrast, executing a murderer is right, and the executioners of the murderer are justified in their action. When we refuse to execute the murderer, we disobey the direct command of God and we actually deny and devalue the sanctity of human life. The sacrificial system of Israel did not prescribe an atoning sacrificial offering for a murderer.

This does not mean that God cannot or will not forgive a murderer. We know that He can, and we know that He does according to His own sovereign prerogative. What the issue is in the cities of refuge is distinguishing between those sins that could be resolved so that the sinner could be restored to fellowship in the community and a sin that permitted no restoration to fellowship.

Murder trials could be held in any of six cities designated “cities of refuge.” The purpose of the trial was to be sure that a murderer wasn't allowed to live, and that a person who took a life unintentionally would be spared. **An underlying legal principle was that the accused was considered innocent until proven guilty**—sound familiar? Other cultures that predated Moses had developed legal codes, but unique to the Mosaic Law was the command to *examine the motive*. **Jonah 3:9 USA?**

Glorifying God for Our Access to Him

By providing a haven for those guilty of unintentional manslaughter, the cities of refuge served as an illustration of God's character. We see ***God's accessibility***. The cities, by God's direction, were placed throughout the land in order to be accessible to everyone: Numbers 35:13-15; Deuteronomy 19:2,3. The fugitive was to be allowed to enter the city and enjoy its protection on the basis of his own testimony at the gate, pending the outcome of the formal investigation and trial.

Human Responsibility Matters Much

Even in the case of unintentional manslaughter there was a measure of responsibility for the carelessness that caused the loss of life. You wouldn't be guilty of murder—he was friend or neighbor, not a man you hated. You are still responsible for failing to properly maintain your ax to avoid such an accident. You wouldn't be executed for murder, but your freedom would be restricted. You would have to leave your home and family to live in the city of refuge. Apparently your family could join you there, but how difficult would it be for all to relocate? Once you were admitted to the city as a

