

### The Cities of Refuge

#### Joshua 20

Joshua 20 - *"The LORD also spoke to Joshua, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'Appoint for yourselves cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, <sup>3</sup> that the slayer who kills a person accidentally or unintentionally may flee there; and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood. <sup>4</sup> And when he flees to one of those cities, and stands at the entrance of the gate of the city, and declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city as one of them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them. <sup>5</sup> Then if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not deliver the slayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unintentionally, but did not hate him beforehand. <sup>6</sup> And he shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the slayer may return and come to his own city and his own house, to the city from which he fled."*

<sup>7</sup> *So they appointed Kedesh in Galilee, in the mountains of Naphtali, Shechem in the mountains of Ephraim, and Kirjath Arba (which is Hebron) in the mountains of Judah. <sup>8</sup> And on the other side of the Jordan, by Jericho eastward, they assigned Bezer in the wilderness on the plain, from the tribe of Reuben, Ramoth in Gilead, from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan, from the tribe of Manasseh. <sup>9</sup> These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel and for the stranger who dwelt among them, that whoever killed a person accidentally might flee there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stood before the congregation."*

#### Background Notes

When a person was killed in Old Testament days before the Law was given, a close relative of the slain person took on the responsibility of taking revenge for the death. This practice of "blood revenge" is still carried out by some Bedouin tribes in the Middle East today.

When God gave the Law, He arranged for six "cities of refuge" (Numbers 35). These cities became havens of refuge for people who had killed someone unintentionally or accidentally. In Deuteronomy 19:4-5 we have an example of an accidental killing, when the guilty person could flee to a city of refuge: *"And this is the case of the manslayer who flees there, that he may live: Whoever kills his neighbor unintentionally, not having hated him in time past— <sup>5</sup> as when a man goes to the woods with his neighbor to cut timber, and his hand swings a stroke with the ax to cut down the tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies—he shall flee to one of these cities and live..."*

The person who had killed someone accidentally could run to a city of refuge and escape from being killed in revenge by the dead person's relative, who was called the "avenger of blood." The man who had killed was safe in the city of refuge

until his trial, as we see in Joshua 20:6 - *“And he shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the slayer may return and come to his own city and his own house, to the city from which he fled.”*

If the man was proved guilty of murder, then he received the death penalty – a life for a life. There was no refuge for a murderer -- that is, no refuge for someone who had deliberately plotted and premeditated a killing. Because of God’s high view of life, a person who **intentionally** took another person’s life was worthy of death. The sanctity of life was upheld by capital punishment – both then and today.

But in the case of manslaughter, that is, an accidental or unintentional death, the person who had killed someone was safe -- as long as he stayed in the city of refuge. He had to stay in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest, and then he could return home to his own house and city (v6). Why until the death of the high priest? If you were in that situation, you’d better hope that the high priest was old, or you could be away from home for a pretty long time! In fact, you might die before the high priest died! Why this stipulation? Why “until the death of the high priest”?

I think there are several reasons why God had this feature as part of His Law. #1 - a lengthy time would certainly give time for the anger and the emotion of the case to dissipate and subside. For example, if you had lived in those days, and your child was accidentally run over by a runaway horse and cart, it might be quite a while before your urge to take revenge on the stupid driver subsided. #2 - knowing that you could lose your freedom for a long time if you were involved in an accidental death would certainly cause you to be more careful. This law would probably help you to remember to check and make sure your axe head was firmly attached to the handle! #3 - even though the death was accidental, the fact that the high priest must die before the case was fully resolved would certainly emphasize that all loss of life is very serious in God’s sight.

I think that’s what’s in view in Numbers 35:31-34 - *“Moreover you shall take no ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death. <sup>32</sup> And you shall take no ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to dwell in the land before the death of the priest. <sup>33</sup> So you shall not pollute the land where you are; for blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it. <sup>34</sup> Therefore do not defile the land which you inhabit, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the LORD dwell among the children of Israel.”*

It sounds almost as if the high priest died in the place of the one who had shed blood unintentionally! This emphasizes the value of life. In addition, it may be a picture of Jesus Christ, who had to die for all our sin -- even for wrongs that we’ve committed unintentionally.

## Doctrinal / Teaching Points

### 1. Christ, the true City of Refuge, provides security from wrath.

Hebrews 6:18 says, *“that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.”* In this verse the author of Hebrews drew upon the cities of refuge as an illustration of the refuge we can find in Christ. Refuge from what? Obviously, refuge from the wrath of God! God is holy and we are sinners. We have broken God’s Law, and Law of God is the “avenger of blood.” Do you see the picture?

Jesus Christ, the true city of refuge provides security from God’s wrath. Hebrews 2:17 says, *“Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”* Are you familiar with the word “propitiation”? Propitiation means “that which satisfies the wrath of the holy God against sin.” The Lord Jesus made propitiation for our sins, and now we are free and secure from the wrath of God. The death of the high priest before the manslayer could go free is a significant part of the spiritual picture here.

What a picture we have here of the gospel! In this spiritual picture that the Lord has given, it’s very significant that God in His mercy has put all mankind on the grounds of “manslaughter” rather than willful and deliberate “murder.” Remember that the Lord said from the cross, *“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”* And do you remember what the apostle Paul said to the philosopher at Athens – Acts 17:30 *“these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent...”*

In the case of the Old Testament cities of refuge, the willful murderer was put to death, and only those who were guilty of accidental death could find refuge and freedom. But in Christ, the true city of refuge, all sins can be forgiven - the willful, intentional sins and the unintentional sins! All a person has to do is to flee to the Lord Jesus Christ, and take advantage of the refuge to be found in Him.

If you’re not a Christian, you are outside the city of refuge, and you are under the wrath of God. It’s only a matter of time before you will be judged for your sins. John 3:36 says, *“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”* Why not flee to the city of refuge and trust in Christ today? Then you can be secure from the wrath of God. How secure? Hebrews 6:18-20 says, *“that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever...”* That’s pretty secure! Our anchor is tied to Christ Himself, and He has entered the very presence of God as our High Priest forever! Christ, the true city of refuge provides security from wrath.

## **2. Christ, the true City of Refuge, is readily accessible.**

The six cities of refuge were located so that no one lived more than thirty miles away from one of the cities. Three cities were on the east side of the Jordan River, and three were on the west side. The cities of refuge were readily accessible to everyone, including aliens or foreigners living in Israel.

What a picture of the gospel! Jesus Christ is the way of salvation, and He's readily accessible to anyone. Whoever will, may come to Him! Romans 10:13 - *"For whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."* John 3:16 - *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."* In the last chapter in the Bible, Revelation 22:17- *"And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely."* As the Old Testament cities of refuge were readily accessible to anyone, so Christ, the true city of refuge, is readily accessible to everyone.

### **Practical Application**

#### **Let's be clear refuge signs for the unbeliever.**

Jewish tradition says that all roads to the cities of refuge had to be kept in good repair and clearly marked. Road signs in large letters pointed to the cities of refuge. No person guilty of manslaughter could say that they got lost or couldn't find the city of refuge. No way! All the crossroads had clearly marked signs pointing to the cities of refuge.

There's an application here for us. We should be like those signs, pointing unbelievers to Christ, the true city of refuge. During times of crisis, people look for refuge, and believers can point them to Christ. When things are going well, your neighbors or fellow students don't want to hear about Christ – there's no need when there's no crisis. But when times of crisis come, they look for refuge. Not too long ago, I counseled a young woman who had been raped. She was in a crisis situation, and I was able to point her to Christ. I don't think that she would have been the least bit interested if it she had not been in a crisis situation.

Do your unbelieving friends and neighbors know that they can turn to you in times of crisis? Are you a clear "City of Refuge" sign that can point them to Christ? Let's be clear refuge signs for the unbeliever!