

Provision of Land for the Levites; The Cities of Refuge

Numbers 35

Numbers 35 - *“On the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho, the LORD said to Moses, ² “Command the Israelites to give the Levites towns to live in from the inheritance the Israelites will possess. And give them pasturelands around the towns. ³ Then they will have towns to live in and pasturelands for the cattle they own and all their other animals.*

⁴ *“The pasturelands around the towns that you give the Levites will extend a thousand cubits from the town wall.*

⁵ *Outside the town, measure two thousand cubits on the east side, two thousand on the south side, two thousand on the west and two thousand on the north, with the town in the center. They will have this area as pastureland for the towns.*

⁶ *“Six of the towns you give the Levites will be cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone may flee. In addition, give them forty-two other towns. ⁷ In all you must give the Levites forty-eight towns, together with their pasturelands. ⁸ The towns you give the Levites from the land the Israelites possess are to be given in proportion to the inheritance of each tribe: Take many towns from a tribe that has many, but few from one that has few.”*

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 anyone accused of murder may not die before they stand 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 and for foreigners residing among them, so that anyone who has killed another accidentally can flee there.*

¹⁶ *“If anyone strikes someone a fatal blow with an iron object, that person is a murderer; the murderer is to be put to death. ¹⁷ Or if anyone is holding a stone and strikes someone a fatal blow with it, that person is a murderer; the murderer is to be put to death. ¹⁸ Or if anyone is holding a wooden object and strikes someone a fatal blow with it, that person is a murderer; the murderer is to be put to death. ¹⁹ The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death; when the avenger comes upon the murderer, the avenger shall put the murderer to death. ²⁰ If anyone with malice aforethought shoves another or throws something at them intentionally so that they die ²¹ or if out of enmity one person hits another with their fist so that the other dies, that person is to be put to death; that person is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when they meet.*

²² *“But if without enmity someone suddenly pushes another or throws something at them unintentionally ²³ or, without seeing them, drops on them a stone heavy enough to kill them, and they die, then since that other person was not an*

enemy and no harm was intended, ²⁴ the assembly must judge between the accused and the avenger of blood according to these regulations. ²⁵ The assembly must protect the one accused of murder from the avenger of blood and send the accused back to the city of refuge to which they fled. The accused 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 they fled ²⁷ and the avenger of blood finds them outside the city, the avenger of blood may kill the accused without being guilty of murder. ²⁸ The accused must stay in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest; only after the death of the high priest may they return to their own property.

²⁹ “This is to have the force of law for you throughout the generations to come, wherever you live. ³⁰ “Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness. ³¹ “Do not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer, who deserves to die. They are to be put to death. ³² “Do not accept a ransom for anyone who has fled to a city of refuge and so allow them to go back and live on their own land before the death of the high priest. ³³ “Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. ³⁴ Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the LORD, dwell among the Israelites.”

Background Notes

Numbers 34 gave the boundaries of the Land that Israel was to immediately possess after they crossed the Jordan River, and it gave directions for how they were to divide up the land into tribal territories. However, tribe of Levi didn't receive any tribal territory. Although they were not given a tribal territory, the Levites were given cities and the pastureland around these cities.

In Deuteronomy 6 the Lord told His people that He would provide cities and houses for them when they entered the Land. So Israel didn't destroy the cities when they conquered the Land. They took them over and lived in them. Only three cities were burned at the time of the conquest: Jericho, Ai and Hazor.

In Numbers 35, the tribes were told that when the conquest of the Land was complete, they were to give 48 of these cities for the Levites to live in, including the surrounding pasture land for their flocks. Six of these Levitical cities were designated as “Cities of Refuge.” These cities were to be havens of refuge for anyone who unintentionally or accidentally killed someone.

Doctrinal Points

1. God provided “cities of rest” for the Levites.

When Israel was in the wilderness, the Levites camped around the Tabernacle. However, when Israel entered the Promised Land the Levites received cities to live in. The Levites worked in siffts, because all the Levites were not needed

to serve at the Tabernacle at the same time. They worked hard when they were on duty, but when they weren't on duty they could go home to their families and rest.

However, when they were at home in their cities, the Levites still had work to do for the Lord. In addition to their duties as God's servants at the Tabernacle (and later at the Temple), the Levites were to keep the people informed of God's Laws. In fact, the Levites became the official interpreters and scribes of God's Law. Speaking of the Levites, Deuteronomy 33:10 says, *"They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your law. They shall put incense before You, and a whole burnt sacrifice on Your altar."*

The cities of the Levites are listed by name in Joshua 21. The larger tribes gave more cities to the Levites than the smaller tribes. The cities were scattered throughout the land of Israel, and this meant that just about everyone in Israel was within 10 miles of a Levitical city. So answers were readily available when questions about the Law and the Word of God came up, because there would always be some Levites at home in their cities, resting up from their duties at the House of the Lord. Thus no one could use the excuse of ignorance of God's Law!

The Levitical cities scattered throughout Israel illustrate the fact that individual Christians and evangelical churches should be strategically scattered as salt and light throughout our land and throughout the world (Matthew 5:13-14). We have the Word of God, and we have the answers to people's questions about God. We are to be readily available to share God's Word so that no one can plead the excuse of ignorance. Let's be like the Levitical cities that were scattered throughout the land. Let's be ready and able to share the Word of God!

2. God provided "cities of refuge" for the people.

Six of the Levitical cities were called "cities of refuge." They are listed by name in Joshua 20. The cities of refuge were strategically placed on both sides of the Jordan River: three cities on the east and three cities on the west. A person who accidentally killed someone would have had no problem fleeing to one of these cities. The cities of refuge were not to be havens for murderers, but places of refuge for someone involved in unintentional manslaughter. These people could stay in a city of refuge until the courts decided whether the killing was intentional or not. Deuteronomy 19 gives an example of an unintentional death: an ax-head flying off the handle and accidentally killing a man.

The "avenger of blood" was the next of kin to the person who died. In that culture, the avenger of blood was responsible to ensure that capital punishment was carried out for the death of his relative.

As long as the death was not intentional, the "slayer" was safe in the city of refuge, but he or she could not go free from the city of refuge until the high priest who was then in office died. So if you were in the "slayer" category, you'd better hope that the high priest was old, or you'd be away from home for a long time! Why was this part of God's Law? The fact that the "slayer" had to stay in the city of refuge for a required period would certainly allow time for the anger and emotion over the death to subside. And this law would certainly tend to make people more careful when they were out swinging axes or hunting!

The fact that the high priest had to die before the slayer could go free **may** be part of the spiritual picture here. The penalty for our sins - even our unintentional sins - had to be paid by the death of Christ, our High Priest. Hebrews 6:18 reveals that "we who have fled to Him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us."

A spiritual picture of God's dealings with His people Israel may also be portrayed in the cities of refuge. From the cross, the Lord Jesus prayed, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" And in his sermon to the Jews in Acts 3:17 Peter said, "*...I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers.*" So in that sense, at the present time, God regards the nation of Israel as a "slayer," but not as a murderer. In a certain sense, Israel is preserved in a "city of refuge" at the present time. They're waiting to return to their homeland in safety and freedom -- and that time will come when our Lord returns to this earth to set up His glorious Kingdom.

Just as the inauguration of a new high priest freed the manslayer, freedom will come to the restored nation of Israel when our Lord's present position as High Priest transitions to His future position of reigning as King and Priest! These spiritual truths are part of the spiritual picture in the cities of refuge. God provided cities of refuge for the people.

Practical Application

Can you point a person to the true City of Refuge?

In ancient Israel, the way to a city of refuge was clearly marked. The road signs were written in large letters. It was easy to show a person how to get to a city of refuge.

In the same way, the Bible clearly shows the way to Christ, the true Refuge for our souls. The question is - Can you point a person to Jesus Christ, the true City of Refuge? If someone asked you to show the way of salvation from the Bible, could you do it? Do you know the verses and their references? Can you point a person to the true City of Refuge?