

The Cities of Refuge – Part 1

(Numbers 35; Joshua 20)

INTRODUCTION:

- I. Having a place of refuge, or a place we feel safe, protected, is very important to our lives, with most of us thinking of our homes or family, but more importantly I hope we think of **God!**
- II. The idea of God being the “refuge” for His people is very common biblical concept.
 - A. Boaz speaks of the refuge Ruth sought in God (Ruth 2:12 – “The Lord repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge.”).
 - B. The Psalms often referred to God as the refuge of His people. A sampling...
 1. Psa. 9:9 – “The LORD also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble.”
 2. Psa. 46:1-2 – “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ² Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea”
 3. Hebrews 6:18 – “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.”
 - C. There are many reasons for God being known as the refuge of His people, but I cannot help to believe one of the major reason is God’s choosing to establish the cities of refuge and what their existence taught the people.
- III. After Israel was redeemed from Egypt and was finally ready to take the Promised Land, God had them set aside six **cities of refuge** to provide safety and protection for those in trouble or danger.
 - A. There were three of these cities East and three West of the Jordan river.
 - B. Of course, this begs the questions of who was to seek protection in them and from whom or what were these cities to protect them from? Well, today we will answer these questions and more.
- IV. So, let’s begin our consideration of the Bible’s revelation concerning the cities of refuge to see what we can learn about them and how we can make application of all of this in our life today.

BODY:

1. The establishment of the cities of refuge (Num. 35):

- A. The cities of refuge were part of the allotment of cities given the Levites.
 - i. The tribe of Levi was not allotted land to farm, etc., like other tribes, but were to be cared for by God through the tithe and freewill offerings of the people (Num. 18:20-21 – “Then the Lord said to Aaron: “You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel. ²¹ “Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting.”).
 - a. God didn’t leave them homeless but gave them cities scattered throughout Israel that were to sit in the middle of 206 acres of land for their livestock to graze (**35:1-5**).
 - ii. These Levite cities were scattered throughout the land, often very far away from the Tabernacle and eventually the Temple where they were to serve. Why would God do this?
 - a. This fulfilled Jacob’s prophecy concerning Levi and Simeon and their ruthless and excessive violence against the men of the city of **Shechem** (Gen. 49:5, 7 – “Simeon and Levi are brothers; their swords are implements of violence...⁷ “Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; And their wrath, for it is cruel. I will **disperse** them in Jacob, and **scatter** them in Israel.”).
 - b. God likely spread them throughout the Land to instruct the people in His law (Deut. 33:10 – “They shall teach Your ordinances to Jacob, and Your law to Israel. They shall put incense before You, and whole burnt offerings on Your altar.”).
 - iii. Of the 48 cities given the Levites, six were designated cities of refuge (**Num. 35:6-8**).

- a. Why cities of the Levites were chosen for this is not specified. But, it may have been because the Levite's knew God's law and were God's mediators for the people, which would equip them for mediation in the legal matters of refuge as well.
 - b. It may also have been that God wanted His people to see a spiritual connection between His **priests** that inhabited these cities and the **refuge** God provided not only **in these cities**, but for all His people everywhere!
 - c. Either way, these six territorial cities were to have **good roads leading to them** so that they could be easily reached, which emphasizes how important having this refuge was to God (Deut. 19:1-3).
- B. The purposes and rules of the cities of refuge (Num. 35:9-34).
- i. These six cities were for refuge for **anyone**, Israelite, stranger, or sojourner, who accidentally, or unintentionally, took the life of another (**35:9-15**).
 - a. Their establishment shows that not at all killing is murder and deserving of the death penalty for murder (Gen. 9:6 – “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man.”).
 - b. Their establishment helped put into practice God’s **civil law** given earlier to assure justice is done in the case of one killing another (Ex. 21:12-14 – “He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. ¹³ However, if he did not lie in wait, but God delivered him into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place where he may flee. ¹⁴ “But if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor, to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die.”).
 - ii. Murderers, or those who use weapons on another who dies, whether in premeditation or in fierce anger, must be punished by death with no refuge allowed (**35:16-21**).
 - a. Murderers were not to be protected from the “avenger of blood,” who was the next of kin to the one killed that God sanctioned to avenge their kin’s death.
 - b. For, *avenger* is the same word used for one’s *next of kin* in other verses.
 - iii. The rules for determining who had killed accidentally are given as well as who was to determine if the death was an accident (**35:22-28**).
 - a. Note that the distinctions in a murderer and a manslayer were determined by the situation and its connection to the intent of the heart.
 - b. By these rules *the congregation*, or a group representing Israel, was to try each individual case, listening to the evidence to determine guilt or innocence.
 - c. Note that when the one found innocent of murder, he was returned to the refuge city where he had to remain until the death of the high priest.
 - i. So, these cities protected *and* confined, if you will, the manslayer, who had to give up use of his land and possessions and remain in this city until the high priest died.
 - ii. That the high priest’s death was required for the manslayer to leave seems to indicate that *only by the death of God’s intercessor* can one be acquitted of killing another, even when done without intent! And, that is significant.
 - d. If the manslayer left the boundaries of that city, God permitted the avenger of blood to kill him. *Safety was only guaranteed the manslayer in God’s place of refuge.*
 - iv. Trial rules for testimony from witnesses and rules concerning ransom (**35:29-32**).
 - a. Judgment *against* a manslayer could only be determined by the testimony of more than one witness! The death penalty could not be given at the word of one!
 - b. No monetary ransom was to be taken for the life of a murderer or the manslayer.
 - i. Causing the death of another cannot be paid for, or atoned for, by money.
 - ii. Only by the death of the high priest could the manslayer return home, while the murderer was to be executed.
 - v. God explained that these rules were required that the land of Israel *where God dwells among His people* would not be *polluted* and *defiled* by blood (**35:33-34**).
 - a. The context shows that this pollution and defilement would come from two things.

- i. The land would be polluted by shedding the *innocent blood* of the manslayer and by treating manslaughter as though it is a *little thing*.
- ii. It would be polluted by *murder* and *not executing the murderer*, seeing that payment for blood could only be extracted in the *blood of the murderer*.
- iii. And, in doing so one would pollute the land where God dwells, thus bringing offense not just against the one slain or his/her family, but against God Himself.
- b. Yet, despite the great price required for causing the death of another, God in His grace provided freedom for the manslayer through the death of the high priest.

2. The cities of refuge chosen by God (Josh. 20:1-9):

A. As Israel was entering the Land, they were told to designate six cities of refuge (**Joshua 20:1-6**).

- i. Those who came there and presented their case at the gate were to be **received and given a place among them** while awaiting trial and not given over to the avenger of blood.
 - a. The Levites, God's holy priests, were not to prejudge the manslayer or treat him as outcasts, etc., but to accept him and give him a place among them.
 - b. They were to protect the manslayer from the avenger of blood.

B. The cities are chosen (**Joshua 20:7-9**):

- i. **Kadesh** (Sanctuary, holy place) – a royal city (had a king – Josh. 12:22) located in Galilee of Naphtali
 - a. It became Barak's resident who with Deborah called 10,000 men of Naphtali and Zebulun and routed Sisera who was of Jabin's kingdom in Canaan (Jud. 4).
- ii. **Shechem** (strong shoulder) – located in the hill country of Ephraim. Here...
 - a. Abraham built his first altar to God after he was told his descendants would get that land (Gen. 12:6-7).
 - b. Jacob settled there, bought land, and also built an altar to the God of Israel (Gen. 33:18-20) and dug a well bearing his name at which Jesus conversed with a woman of Samaria concerning living water that truly quenches our deepest thirst (Jn. 4:5-14).
 - c. Levi and Simeon had previously killed all the males with ruthless violence because the king's son, also named Shechem, violated their sister Dinah (Gen. 34).
 - i. We mentioned how Israel later cursed their anger shown at Shechem and pronounced that for this they would be *scattered throughout Israel* (Gen. 49:6-7).
 - ii. God's plan caused Levi to become a symbol of His grace in Shechem.
 - 1) Levi, who in intense anger caused great suffering and death at Shechem, was appointed by God to live as His priests in that same city.
 - 2) In doing so the Levites that once brought death now lived there to show God's mercy and grace through their intermediary work, their teaching of His law, and by providing refuge for innocent manslayer!
 - iii. What amazing changes God's plan can bring to His people's lives and this world!
 - d. Joshua gave his second parting address and made a covenant with Israel to be faithful in following God's law (Josh. 24:1-25).
- iii. **Hebron** (fellowship, community) located in hill country of Judah
 - a. It was the favorite home of Abraham and he buried Sarah here (Gen. 23:17-20).
 - b. It was David royal residence for seven and a half years (2 Samuel 5:5) and he was here anointed as king over all Israel (2 Samuel 2:1-4, 11; 5:1-3).
 - c. It was here, just outside the city at its gates, that Joab murdered Abner for killing Joab's brother, Asahel (2 Sam. 3:27).
- iv. **Bezer** (ore of gold, strong hiding place) located on **east** side of Jordan and of the tribe of Reuben
- v. **Ramoth** (heights, high places) in Gilead of the tribe of Gad.
 - a. One of twelve places where Solomon set governors over Israel to provide food for the king's household (1 Kgs. 4:7, 13).

- b. Here Ahab, who joined Jehoshaphat in an endeavor to rescue Ramoth from the hands of the king of Syria, was mortally wounded (1 Kings 22:1-36).
- c. Here Jehu, the son of Jehoshaphat, was anointed king (2 Kgs. 9:1, 4).
- vi. **Golan** (enclosure for captives, exile, passage) located in Bashan of Manasseh

3. What we can learn from the cities of refuge:

- A. God wants His people to know His mercy and refuge are available to **everyone** (Num. 35:15 – “These six cities shall be for refuge for the sons of Israel, and for the alien and for the sojourner among them; that anyone who kills a person unintentionally may flee there.”).
 - i. Israel would have likely been inclined to limit this to only Israelites!
 - ii. Yet, God stated here and again in Joshua 20:9 that He would not limit His refuge to the Israelites alone, but to all people who would seek it among His people.
 - iii. That is a lesson we need not only to learn, but to put in practice concerning our taking the gospel to the lost.
- B. God wants his people to respect the sanctity of life, seeing all people are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27).
 - i. Contrary to modern thought, the death penalty imposed here for the *murderer* and sanctuary only for the one who *accidentally kills another* is the only way to preserve the sanctity of life.
 - ii. Those who stand against the death penalty do nothing but seek to **cheapen** our view of life!
 - iii. For, life is so precious to God that even one who *accidentally killed another* was to be exiled in a city of refuge until the death of the high priest, which may mean the rest of their life!
- C. God wants his people to live within the rule of law of the land, to live orderly within society, and not live according to self-appointed vengeance leading to sin (Rom. 13:1-7).
 - i. Unrestrained passion creates chaos and pain within any society.
 - ii. The cities of refuge and the law connected to them helped avoid *life for life* blood feuds fueled by vengeance among the families of Israel.
 - iii. For, even when *murder* was committed, God’s cities of refuge showed that His “eye for an eye” precept was not to be carried out without a fair trial with ample witnesses.
- D. God wants His people to know that all sin is against Him (Num. 35:33-34).
 - i. This is why David, *after killing Uriah*, confesses to God, “Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight—that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge” (Ps. 51:4).
 - ii. When they sinned against another in shedding innocent blood, they sinned against God, just as when we sin against our brethren, we sin against Christ (1 Cor. 8:12 – “But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.”).

CONCLUSION:

- I. As we conclude the first half of our study of these cities, I hope you will take some time to ponder the many aspects of what these cities teach us about God, about His grace, and His plan worked out for us.
- II. As you think about these cities of refuge, I want you to...
 - A. Think about how these cities and the laws connected to them relate to our salvation in the church through Christ, which we will likely talk about in a second lesson.
 - B. Think about and appreciate how important it is to God that we look to Him for refuge from trouble and more importantly from sin!
- III. Know that God wants to bestow His grace on your life, to forgive you of your sins, and to provide you refuge in Christ from our accuser, from the one who seeks to destroy us, from our adversary the Devil who prowls about like a lion seeking whom He may devour!
 - A. The question comes down to what will you do with the gospel, the good news of salvation and freedom from sin and death offered to you in Christ?
 - B. Will you come in F-R-C-B and live faithfully until the end that you might receive the crown of life and a mansion in heaven in which to live with God for eternity?