

"Put Away the Guilt of Innocent Blood"

When it's pouring buckets and you race from your car to your home with no umbrella, when you finally get into your house, it's a refuge. When you are skiing, and a big snow storm starts and you get into the warm ski lodge, it's a refuge. When you are in an earthquake, and you get under that strong sturdy table, it's a refuge.

When a strange man is following you and you run into the police station, it's a refuge. If you are a soldier stuck behind enemy lines and a helicopter finally arrives to take you home, then that's a refuge. You get the idea. We all know the idea of a refuge. We all have needed different refuges in our life. And when the threat is the most real, the most dangerous, that's when you need and want a refuge more than ever.

Today we look at a passage about three cities of refuge that would be established in Israel. We talked briefly about the cities of refuge in Israel earlier in chapter 4. That's where we saw Moses establish three cities of refuge in the land east of the Jordan River. This passage goes into much more detail and it requires the people to establish three more cities once they get into the Promised Land west of the Jordan.

We'll today we're going to think in some detail about the purpose and application of these cities of refuge. Let's begin by thinking about the purpose of these cities of refuge. Essentially these cities provided protection and due process for the person who unintentionally killed someone. The law distinguished between unintentionally killing someone and premeditated murder. You can think of some analogy in our own civil laws that distinguish between manslaughter and various degrees of murder. Well, in Israel, the person who murdered would receive the death penalty. But this passage shows that the person who unintentionally killed someone didn't deserve the death penalty. Back then, however, if you killed someone, unintentional or not, the avenger of blood was supposed to go after you and make sure justice was served. We see this avenger of blood mentioned in verse 6.

This word avenger in verse 6 is actually the literal word for kinsman-redeemer. If you're familiar with the book of Ruth, that's the same word used to describe Boaz in the book of Ruth. Obviously Boaz wasn't doing any avenging of blood in that situation. But Boaz was a close relative who would rise up and look to make things right in the family. Similarly, the avenger of blood was a close relative that was responsible back then for rising up and making sure justice was served when a close relative was killed. Now they weren't just supposed to take the law into their own hands. They were to work within the judicial system described here. This process is described in greater detail in Numbers 35. But basically Numbers 35 confirms that the avenger of blood was to work within the system. They would bring the accusations against the person, presumably bringing witnesses as well. If the person was found guilty of intentional murder, then the avenger of blood would be the first to execute the punishment of death. They'd get to flip the switch, so to speak. That's what you see described in verse 12, for example.

But of course verse 6 acknowledges that this may not always be easy to do for the avenger. Giving due process to someone who you think murdered your closest of relatives might not be something you are too concerned about at the heat of the moment. And so the law provided these cities of refuge. They helped provide due process. They also provided a place of ongoing refuge for the person who had unintentionally killed someone.

Basically, if you unintentionally killed someone, you could flee to one of these cities. Once you got to these cities you would be protected from the avenger of blood, at least until a proper trial could happen. In that regard, these cities of refuge, really are only a refuge for the innocent. If after your trial you were found guilty of intentionally murdering someone, you would get the death sentence. You see the principle in verse 13. "Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall put away the guilt of innocent blood from Israel. These cities did not ultimately provide refuge for the intentional murderer. There was no protection for them. They'd be extradited from the city of refuge, tried, and killed.

The real refuge of these cities was for the one who unintentionally killed someone. You see one example of an unintentional death in verse 5. Numbers 35 gives some other examples as well. The examples in Numbers 35 especially bring out how you could unintentionally kill someone due to your own negligence. That's a death that could have been avoided on your part, but it wasn't intentional. This person could find protection from the avenger of blood in these cities. They wouldn't be allowed to be put to death. The principle is found in verse 10: "Lest innocent blood be shed." The person is innocent of intentional murder, and so it would be wrong for the avenger to put him to death.

However, this did not mean that the person was without any fault or punishment. Though the city of refuge protected him, it was at the same time also a sort of exile or prison for him. Numbers 35 says that the person would have to remain in this city of refuge until the death of the high priest. That could very well be a very long time, or maybe the rest of your life. Though you didn't intend to kill the person, there was still a sense of responsibility for your actions. In fact, Numbers 35 says that if you don't stay in the city of refuge, then you'd be fair game for the avenger to put you to death. It says in Numbers 35 that no one was to take a bribe or ransom from the person in order to let them get out early. No, they had to wait until the death of the high priest. The high priest's death would serve as a sort of atonement for the sin of the person who killed someone unintentionally. You weren't allowed to return to your inheritance in the Promised Land until the high priest's death. Think of the spiritual picture there in that situation; we'll reflect more on that at the end of our sermon. So this city of refuge would spare your life in one sense, but it certainly was still a form of punishment and reproach.

So that's a summary of how the cities of refuge worked. Now, I already mentioned that the more detailed legislation was given about this in Numbers 35. That means that this passage is not just a repeat of that earlier legislation. If it was, it would have limited value just to give a shorter repetition of what was already stated. But here Moses gives them some pointed exhortation in all of this. What Moses is calling the people to do is to make sure that they facilitate this justice and protection once they get into the Promised Land. You see the unique emphasis in this passage is how Moses is describing the need to provide quick access to these cities. Already three cities had been setup east of the Jordan. Now when they cross

over the Jordan Moses is emphasizing that they need to setup three more; that's verse 2. He then goes on to say that if the size of the nation grows geographically, then they are to setup yet three more cities; that's verse 9.

The point is that these cities need to be easy to get to. The three that existed east of the Jordan would work for the people living over there, but not for the people living on the other side of the Jordan. And if the size of the nation grew in terms of land, then these three new cities wouldn't be enough either. Instead you see this point brought out in verse 3. "You shall prepare roads for yourself and divide into three parts the territory of your land... that the manslayer may flee there." You see, this is the really the unique contribution of this passage in terms of the cities of refuge. This is something new that Moses is giving the people in this passage. They had to make sure that cities were easy to get to. He's explaining that the purpose of these cities is to provide protection and due process. And yet he's telling them that the cities won't accomplish that goal if they are too hard to get to.

So they need to be evenly spaced out in Israel. They need to build roads so that people can get to them. For example, they shouldn't all be right next to each other in the north part of the land, otherwise people from the south part won't be able to get to them. As a side note, I'm demonstrating here a principle for interpreting parallel passages in Scripture; look for the differences in each passage and ask how that contributes to the unique purpose of the passage. Here I'm pointing out how this passage compares with the earlier Numbers 35 passage on cities of refuge. This passage shows a unique emphasis to make sure that the cities are strategically chosen and setup for easy access now that the people are about to settle down in the Land.

So this shows the real exhortation of this passage. The nation of Israel needed to really facilitate this justice and protection. It wasn't enough just to have the cities. They needed to make them accessible, lest innocent blood be shed. The nation really needed to be concerned to protect the innocent, to provide due process, to encourage sober adjudication not raging vengeance. All of these are principles of justice that Moses is commending to the people.

Of course on the other end of justice, this passage also reminds the people that justice had to be served for those guilty of intentional murder. It describes this system of extradition and capital punishment in that case. The command in verse 13 to not pity him may sound harsh, but it's keeping with justice. Just look at verse 21 later in this chapter. A similar statement is given there that sets up the general equity of the situation. It says, "Your eye shall not pity; but life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." That's the strict justice that Israel's system and process was to enforce.

So, how do we apply a passage like this to us today? Well, this passage describes part of the civil laws of Israel. I've made the case in the past that Israel's civil laws expired when the nation of Israel ceased to exist. God has not required in our civil government or our church to reinstitute all the civil laws from Israel. However, we can certainly learn various principles from them in keeping with general equity and justice. That's certainly the case with this passage.

For example, we can see the importance in this passage of having preventative measures in place in our society. Things that will look to safeguard the innocent. Things that will look to ensure due process. If our justice system today has so much red tape or is so complex that it becomes almost impossible to seek justice when you're wronged, then that wouldn't be keeping with this passage. If our system of government makes it easy for people to take the law into their own hands in blind passion, then again, we'd want to make improvements. If people don't know the due process that's afforded them, so that they can work within it, then that's something we need to remedy. Maybe that's a good case for reading people their rights when they are arrested. I'm not going to propose specific laws or processes in this sermon. I'll leave that to the politicians. But certainly the principle in this passage that a nation ought to be proactive in protecting the innocent and providing due process is something that the politicians ought to bear in mind. It's something we should bear in mind as we vote and campaign for others as well.

Another principle of justice that you find in this passage, and especially in verse 21 which I had read, is that the punishment should fit the crime. This passage makes it clear that it's just for a murderer to have his life taken away: a life for a life. And yet it's also this passage that applies wisdom to the case of the unintentional murder. This passage says it would not be keeping with justice and general equity to take the life of that person in that situation. And yet there is still a consequence for that person's negligence that led to the death. So again, the principle we see here is that the crime should fit the punishment. Thus, our own government makes distinction between manslaughter and murder as we mentioned. Now, some might hear the principle of a life for a life and a hand for a hand and think that's so strict and exacting. But it actually is a principle to try to limit the punishment. We see that here; they weren't allowed to put to death the person who unintentionally killed someone. Verse 10 says that'd be shedding innocent blood. So, our own governments need this principle: that the punishment must fit the crime; it must not be too severe for the crime.

A third principle of justice that we see here is that the victims have a role in finding justice. Here the victim who was killed of course, so he or she would have no opportunity for that. Instead the avenger of blood, the kinsman-redeemer, had that opportunity. But that makes sense. It's something we see even in our own cases of capital punishment somewhat; that the victims family members are able to witness the execution of the murderer. That's not exactly the same as what we see here, but it is certainly a similar principle. Now that practice might seem gruesome to some, but I'm sure it helps many find a sense of closure and justice in the whole situation. Of course the distinction being made here in this passage is that the avenger takes a part in the judicial process, but not in terms of deciding guilt. That's outside the scope of the avenger's role. There's wisdom in allowing the victims and close family member to be involved in the system of bringing a criminal to justice. And yet there's also wisdom in having those not biased in the situation be the judges over whether or not someone is guilty.

So those are several principles of justice that we get out of this passage. They can be helpful for civil governments, and can also have benefit for church courts. But I'd like to turn to especially apply this passage in relationship to Christ and the gospel. You see, if you think about the benefits of these cities of refuge in the Old Testament you realize that they are good news for some. They are good news for the person who

unintentionally killed someone. But what about the person who did intentionally murder someone? What refuge did they have? What if they recognized their evil and truly were sorry for it and wanted somehow to make things right; what refuge did they have? Well, clearly these cities of refuge offered them no hope. Their only way to make things right would be their death.

The New Testament records one such case. Unfortunately, he did not find a refuge for his crime and tasted only of death. I'm thinking of Judas Iscariot. Listen to Matthew 27:3-5

Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? see to it yourself." And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself.

Judas confessed his sin. He even tried to make things right by returning the money. But these things provided no refuge. He knew he betrayed innocent blood. When he was told to see to the matter himself, he did the only thing he knew was just; he put himself to death. Sadly, Judas found no place of refuge. There was no city of refuge for the intentional murderer in the old covenant.

And yet with the coming of Jesus Christ, we now see clearly that there is a refuge. There's a refuge for unintentional killers and even for intentional murderers. There is a place to flee. This is true for those who kill. It's true for all sorts of sins; for both intentional sins and unintentional sins. Sinners of all sorts can now find a refuge. This refuge is in Jesus Christ. This passage shows a need that intentional murderers had. They needed the hope of a refuge. This is the hope that all guilty and condemned sinners have. They needed the hope of a refuge. And that's something the Bible says describes each of us. Apart from Jesus we are guilty sinners in need of a refuge. Jesus is that refuge. If we flee to him by faith, we will be in this refuge.

Of course the way Jesus can be this refuge is the cross. Verse 13 said, "Put away the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, so that it may be well with you." The guilt of sin must be dealt with. Justice won't be served unless it is. In the end, on the Great Day of Judgment, God will give every sinner the due process of a trial. There we know that any who have not taken refuge in Christ will be condemned to eternal death and damnation. But we can take refuge in Christ ahead of time because God has already become the avenger of blood through the cross. If we have taken refuge in Christ, then our sins were already punished on the cross. The punishment that was due upon us was instead placed on Jesus. On the cross, he put away our guilt. He now stands as the only refuge for sinners.

And yet as we again think about this passage, we are reminded again how great our refuge in Christ is. In this passage the cities of refuge were still a form of punishment. They separated the person from their God-given inheritance in the land until the death of the high priest. They weren't allowed to enjoy the benefits of their inheritance in the Promised Land. They couldn't enjoy their inheritance until that high priest died. But that's not the case with our God-given inheritance. When we become a Christian we instantly receive a heavenly inheritance. We instantly receive

the Holy Spirit into our lives as a deposit of that inheritance. When we flee to our refuge in Christ, we instantly receive this inheritance. Why? Because, our high priest has already died. Christ, our Great High Priest, has already died; he's already atoned for our sins, and of course he has also risen again. And so we flee to our refuge, but it's not an exile or an asylum for us. We flee to Christ who is our refuge *and* the giver of our inheritance.

Do you see how this passage points us to Christ? These cities were earthly refuges but they only benefited some people and they themselves were still a form of exile and punishment. In the New Covenant the real refuge from God has been revealed. Jesus Christ is the great refuge for all sinners.

God was concerned back then that the roads be established to make it easy for people to get to these cities of refuge. The distance to get to the cities couldn't be too far. He wanted it to be easy for the people to get to these cities of refuge. Well, in the new covenant God has provided a speedy way to his refuge for sin. Jesus tells us the road to God's ultimate refuge. Jesus said, "I am the way." My friends, we must all flee to Christ. Hebrews 6:18 describes Christians as those who have fled for refuge. We flee to the refuge of Christ by placing our faith and trust in him.

If you lived in these Old Testament days and unintentionally killed someone, you had to flee quickly. You would be in trouble. You had to get to one of these cities of refuge as quickly as you can. If you ignored the situation and didn't flee, you'd be put to death by the avenger of blood. How foolish it would be for you to not flee in those circumstances. How foolish it would be for you to ignore the only refuge you had!

Well, how much more true is that for us today! How foolish it would be to ignore this refuge in Jesus! God has given humanity the greatest refuge. And yet he calls sinners to flee to this refuge through faith; by trusting their lives to Christ. We need to acknowledge our sins, yes like Judas. We should look to right the wrongs that we've done, yes, even like Judas did by returning the money. And yet that is not enough. That won't give you a true refuge. You then need to trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness that he has secured for you on the cross.

This road is quick. God hasn't placed any obstacles in your way. The road is the simple one of placing your faith in Christ. It would be foolish not to flee to him when the refuge is made available to you. This is my call to each of us today. If you haven't already, then flee to Christ. Find your refuge in him and be saved.

When the rain is pouring down on you, you just can't wait to get inside. When the scorching sun is beating down on you, you can't wait to get inside into an air-conditioned building. We all know how wonderful a refuge is. Don't be a fool. Don't miss out on the refuge of Jesus Christ. Flee to him by faith.

As Christians, let's tell others about this road to the real refuge. Let's make sure we don't setup any extra obstacles. God says it's a road of faith expressed through repentance. It's a road of trusting in Christ. Let's not add extra obstacles. Let's help speed the way for people to find Christ.

And as we live for Christ, keep in mind that great refuge pictured in Revelation 21. That picture of a mighty fortress to protect the saints in

eternity. And so may we have boldness and confidence in the Lord as we live our life. May we live each day firm in the refuge of Christ, and under the shadow of his wings. Amen.

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