



### **Deuteronomy 4:41-43**

#### ***A Place of Refuge***

41 Then Moses set apart three cities on this side of the Jordan, toward the rising of the sun,  
 42 that the manslayer might flee there, who kills his neighbor unintentionally, without having hated him in time past, and that by fleeing to one of these cities he might live:  
 43 Bezer in the wilderness on the plateau for the Reubenites, Ramoth in Gilead for the Gadites, and Golan in Bashan for the Manassites.

A lot of people have commented on how odd it is to find these verses here in between Moses discourse on the importance of obeying the law and his introduction to the Moral law. But it really makes sense, the Lord wants us to see that Moses himself was zealous to see that the commandments of the Lord were carried out, Moses not only talked the talk, he walked the walk as any true leader of God's people does.

One of the advantages of the commandments that the Lord was giving his people, was how much better they were than the Laws of the surrounding nations and it was hoped that this fact would be evident to those nations and a witness to them. If they observed the laws of the Lord their nation would become well known as righteous and wise. As Moses had previously said in verses 5 and 6 of this chapter:

***5 "Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess.***

***6 "Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.***

Now one of the many ways that the Law of the Lord was superior to the Laws of the surrounding peoples was in its provisions for these cities of refuge. There is no evidence, for instance, that any other nation in or around Canaan had any provision like this, for providing protection for those who had accidentally killed another man without malice aforethought.

Back in Numbers 35 the Lord had commanded that when the people began to conquer the land that the Lord was giving them, six of the cities of the tribe of Levi would be set apart as cities of refuge, three on the east bank of the Jordan and three on the West bank, so that wherever someone lived in Israel, it was but half days journey to one of these cities. Thus if they accidentally killed someone they might flee there and find refuge from the avenger of blood – the *goel dam* or redeemer of blood. This was the nearest male relative of the person who was slain who had a responsibility to vindicate his murdered relative by bringing his killer to justice.

God had instituted this policy to safeguard the sanctity of human life. In Genesis 9:5 immediately after the flood, God had said to Noah – *“Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.”*

God wants us to understand how precious human life is. People are made in his image, the alone in all creation have been given an immortal soul, this spark of divine life that never dies. They alone have been created for communion with their creator. As wonderful as the other parts of creation are, as beautiful as eagles and dolphins are, none of them has the ability to pray, or to receive and understand God's self-revelation, and Jesus did not come into the world as a dolphin or an eagle to redeem them. He took on human flesh that he might die for his people, not the animals or even the fallen angels. So when we murder another person, we are destroying the only thing in creation created in the image of God. So the Lord had commanded, when an animal kills a person, that animal is to be put to death, and when a person murders a person, the murderer's life is forfeit. This follows what was known as the *Lex Talionis*, or law of retribution. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in the case of murder, a life for a life. This was a proportionate response that stressed retributive justice not vendetta, you didn't put a man's entire tribe to death for something he alone had done. Rather he alone bore the penalty for his crime. Now that was a considerable improvement over the way justice was administered in other nations and even over some of our laws today that allow murderers to escape justice.

But just as wrong as allowing a murderer to go free, would be putting someone who hadn't intended to kill someone to death. For instance, in Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19 God gave a whole list of circumstances in which someone who killed another person wasn't guilty of murder. If for instance I shove someone without intending to harm them and they fall and die, or if I throw a stone not seeing someone and they are struck and die, or if we are chopping wood and the axe-head flies off and hits them and they die, this is manslaughter and in these cases I must flee to the city of refuge, and there await judgment by the Levites. If they decided that I was guilty, I was expelled from the city and the avenger was free to execute the sentence. If they were to decide I am innocent of murder, then I must wait in that city until the death of the current high priest, which made atonement for the shedding of blood, and then I might be free to leave. However, if I left the city of refuge before that time and the avenger of blood found me he was allowed to put me to death.

Now that the way might be clear to these cities, the Levites were told in Deut. 19:3 to clear roads so that people might not be obstructed in their flight and overtaken without a chance to be tried.

Now let me make three applications of this section:

- 1) **The first is an obvious and literal application** – as a people and a nation we should be zealous to see that justice is done and neither allow the murderer to go free or the man who unintentionally kills to be put to death. Numbers 36 spells out the need for a trial in the case of what might be a murder and the necessity for evidence and even the testimony of two or more witnesses. No ransom was to be taken, and no bribes accepted to keep a murderer alive. The murdered person, who can no longer speak for himself or defend their rights, should be vindicated, and the murderer should be put to death. Throughout the west we have turned our back on this have created a legal system that more often than not does not put the murderer to death. Additionally, because we no longer see man as created in the image of God but rather a random creation of time and chance, momentarily animate chemicals our impression of the

sanctity of life is declining. As a result we have a system where those guilty of murder are allowed to live, while those who are innocent are put to death merely because they are in the womb, or elderly, or severely handicapped. For them there is no city refuge to flee to.

Proverbs 14:34 Righteousness exalts a nation, But sin is a reproach to any people.

- 2) Brothers and sisters, you and I are in desperate need of a city of refuge as well. The law of God is to us like the avenger of blood, we are all guilty of breaking it and our only refuge from the penalty of the law is to be found in Jesus Christ, it is absolutely necessary that therefore we flee to him immediately as our refuge from the wages of sin.

If we do not do that, if we do not begin the journey to heaven you will surely perish.

But there are many who are just outside, who are playing with the things of God without trusting him as Spurgeon warned:

**It will be an awful thing to die just outside the gate of life. Almost saved, but altogether lost! This is the most terrible of positions. A man just outside Noah's ark would have been drowned. A manslayer close to the wall of the city of refuge, but yet outside of it, would be slain. The man who is within a yard of Christ, and yet has not trusted Him, will be just as surely lost.**

*Heb. 12:22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels,  
23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect,  
24 to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.  
25 See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven*

Brothers and Sisters it is up to you and me therefore like the levites to make a road in the wilderness to Christ the city of refuge. To clear away all the obstructions, etc.

**The dispensation of the Gospel may be compared to the cities of refuge in Israel. It was a privilege and honor to the nation in general that they had such sanctuaries of Divine appointment, but the real value of them was known and felt by only a few. Those alone who found themselves in that case for which they were provided could rightly prize them. Thus it is with the Gospel of Christ: it is the highest privilege and honor of which a professing nation can boast, but it can be truly understood and esteemed by none except weary and heavy laden souls, who have felt their misery by nature, are tired of the drudgery of sin, and have seen the broken Law pursuing them like the avenger of blood of old. This is the only consideration which keeps them from sinking into abject despair, in that God has graciously provided a remedy by the Gospel and that Christ bids them "Come unto Me, and I will give you rest." - AW PINK**