

This morning we sang from Psalm 49 that no man can ransom another.

Tonight we see something of what that meant in OT history.

Chapters 14-19 provide an account of the western portion of the inheritance,
centered around Israel’s worship at Shiloh.

But as chapter 13 provided an introduction, with reference to the eastern inheritance,
as given by Moses,
so also chapters 20-21 speak of a couple of other items that Moses had commanded.

The cities of Refuge and the Levitical cities.

Levi is scattered among the other 12 inheritances

(or thirteen, if you count the two halves of Manasseh!)

God does this in order to remind Israel that they are one people.

And also that the inheritance of the land is pointing them
to the inheritance of God himself!

1. Cities of Refuge (chapter 20)

Moses Said . . . (20:1-6)

20 Then the LORD said to Joshua, ² “Say to the people of Israel, ‘Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, ³ that the manslayer who strikes any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there. They shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood. ⁴ He shall flee to one of these cities and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and explain his case to the elders of that city. Then they shall take him into the city and give him a place, and he shall remain with them. ⁵ And if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not give up the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unknowingly, and did not hate him in the past. ⁶ And he shall remain in that city until he has stood before the congregation for judgment, until the death of him who is high priest at the time. Then the manslayer may return to his own town and his own home, to the town from which he fled.’”

The cities of refuge are described in detail in Numbers 35:9-34

Even as far back as Exodus 21:13 God had promised that he would appoint
safe havens for those wrongly accused of murder.

Whether Israelites, or strangers, or sojourners,

“anyone who kills any person without intent may flee there” (Num 35:15)

In those days, there was no police force.

Avenging murder was a family matter.

If someone killed your brother, it was *your job* to bring the murderer to justice.

And, in such a situation, you can imagine how difficult it might be
to convince the brother that it was an accident!

This was the purpose of the cities of refuge.

If someone claimed it was an accident he could flee to the city of refuge,

where he would be able to make his case.
Once he has obtained refuge,
he would be brought to the congregation of his home city
who was to hear the case,
and judge between the accuser and the accused.

If they determine that it was an accidental death,
then “the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge
to which he had fled,
and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest
who was anointed with the holy oil.” (Num 35:25)

What’s going on here?

Israel has taken possession of the land.

As we have seen repeatedly in the book of Joshua,

Joshua is the one who causes Israel to inherit the land.

The book of Deuteronomy had made clear that the Law could never bring you into the land.

Moses – the lawgiver – died outside of the land.

Moses only saw the land from a distance!

Joshua causes Israel to inherit!

The law was given not as the way to inherit the land –
but the way to live in the land.

And if you think about it – that is very much the way the NT speaks as well.

You cannot win favor with God by law-keeping.

The law cannot cause you to inherit eternal life.

Only Jesus – the greater Joshua – causes us to inherit eternal life!

The law is useless when it comes to the way to inherit!

But the law is very *useful* in showing us how to live in our inheritance.

So let’s think about that in relation to the cities of refuge.

The point for Israel is that even manslaughter has consequences.

Blood stains the land.

Even if it was an accident!

The blood of another human being was on his hands.

Therefore he must stay in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest.

Why?

Because only blood can remove the stain of blood – see Numbers 35:33 –

“You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land,

and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it,

except by the blood of the one who shed it.” (Num 35:33)

There is only one exception.

The death of the high priest becomes the death of the manslayer.

The high priest, who bears the sins of Israel upon himself every year,
when he goes into the holy of Holies with the blood of the sacrifice,
is the sin-bearer of Israel.

And while the manslayer is not guilty of murder,
nonetheless he (inadvertently) has destroyed the image of God.
The only way for him to avoid death is for another to die in his place.

And there is only one who can do that!

And so when the high priest dies,
the manslayer is fully acquitted,
and may return to his home.

You will note that while it has some similarities to imprisonment,
it is not based on a rational reward system.

If the high priest dies the next month,
then he only spends a month in the city of refuge,
but if the high priest lives another 20 years,
then he spends 20 years in the city of refuge.

The punishment of the manslayer is connected very explicitly to the OT sacrificial system.
It is only through the death of the high priest
that the accidental shedding of innocent blood can be atoned for.

But of course, we must remember that if the manslayer got caught along the way—
if he failed to make it to the city of refuge before his victim’s kinsman showed up—
then it was permissible to put him to death.

No bargain was allowed to made—
either for a murderer, or for allowing the manslayer to return to his own city,
“For blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land
for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it.”
(Num 35:33)

And the reason for this is because “I the LORD dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.”
I once said that it is because God dwells with his people
that Israel is to have such strict statutes.

But that misses more than half the point.

Yes, because God dwells with his people, his people need to honor his image!

The nations around them have images in their temples.
There is no image in God's tabernacle.

Or, more precisely, the image enters the holy of holies once a year!
When the high priest enters the holy of holies,
there is an image of God in the sanctuary!!

But if all you say is that God's presence requires strict justice,
you miss the very point of that justice!

Why does God say that "no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it,
except by the blood of the one who shed it"?

Because yes, the wages of sin is death.

But in the case of an accident – in the case of manslaughter,
there was no *sin*.

Think about it this way –

if you are driving down the road safely and carefully,
and someone swerves to avoid a deer,
and you wind up hitting them –
what did you do wrong?

What sin did you commit?

None.

But you were the unwitting cause of the death of that person!

And your life will never be the same again.

The principles of Numbers 35 and Joshua 20 reflect this.

But also, they provide a way out.

Because only the death of the high priest can cover the shedding of blood.

At the death of the high priest, your "bloodguilt" is removed.

You can go home.

And all of this is because God dwells in the midst of his people –

but his purpose is to dwell *in* his people.

His purpose is to unite them to himself!

And that can only happen when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us –

when the death of the high priest will become a once-for-all death

that removes our bloodguilt and restore us –

so that we can go home – to our true and heavenly city.

Jesus is the Image of God.

He is the Eternal Son of God – who was the Image of the Father –
before all ages!

And he joined himself to our humanity –
becoming a high priest after the order of Melchizedek –
so that there might be a death that would deal once-for-all
for all our sins – all our accidents – all our miseries.

Throughout history church buildings have been viewed as “cities of refuge.”

A place where an accused man could flee in order to get a hearing.
They do not provide a permanent safe haven–
if they are guilty, then they will be handed over to justice,
but it provides the innocent with the chance to be heard.

That is quite fitting.

It’s also worth reflecting on how these principles could help modern society.

The OT laws were designed for a very different society than ours –
and they have a lot of “ceremonial” principles that were prefiguring Christ.
But there are basic principles of justice which are useful for all generations.

We call that the “general equity” of the OT civil law.

Equity is an important concept for thinking about OT law.

The Mosaic statutes are not binding on other nations.
America is not required by God to establish “cities of refuge.”

But the equity – the principle of what is right and fair –
is important for all nations to embrace.

One principle is that the one who commits *murder* deserves death.
The second principle is that the one who accidentally kills someone
does *not* deserve death – but even the accidental taking of life
is not a neutral thing.

If I kill someone accidentally – I should not think that I can just go on with life as usual!
But there needs to be some way to make that determination fairly.

Our legal system makes a clear distinction between murder and manslaughter –
but we have cheapened life –
some lives mean more than others.

Right now everyone points fingers and says that *those people* don’t care about *these lives*.

And if you judge according to the word of God,
the problem is that – as a society –
we do not treat human beings as the image of God.

So it’s not surprising that everyone sees part of the problem!
Because the problem is that we do not value human beings

as the image of God!

There's a popular misconception out there that says that
if you value human beings as the image of God,
then you must be against the death penalty.
The problem with that view is that it misses the point of what murder is.

If you murder someone, then your life is forfeit.
The one who kills a murderer is not actually committing murder.
God said that
"Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image." Gen 9:6

After all, think about what our text tonight shows us!
If you killed someone *unintentionally* –
your life is also forfeit.
You have struck down the image of God.
That is simply not okay!

Your life will never be the same again.

But in the case of the manslayer,
the death of the high priest is substituted for his own death.

God is teaching his people the principle of substitutionary atonement.
The high priest dies in your place.

The high priest's death is counted as your own!

The Cities (20:7-9)

⁷ So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. ⁸ And beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, they appointed Bezer in the wilderness on the tableland, from the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead, from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan, from the tribe of Manasseh. ⁹ These were the cities designated for all the people of Israel and for the stranger sojourning among them, that anyone who killed a person without intent could flee there, so that he might not die by the hand of the avenger of blood, till he stood before the congregation.

Verses 7-9 then describe the cities of refuge.

Kedesh in Galilee
Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim
Kiriath-arba (Hebron) in the hill country of Judah
Bezer in Reuben
Ramoth-Gilead in Gad

Golan in Manasseh

These last three had already been appointed by Moses in Deuteronomy 4.

Once the 2 ½ tribes had received their inheritance,
the need for cities of refuge would follow.

Each of these cities would be given to the Levites.

And then chapter 21 deals with the apportionment of the Levitical cities.

2. Cities of the Levites (chapter 21)

Moses Said . . . (21:1-3)

21 Then the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites came to Eleazar the priest and to Joshua the son of Nun and to the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the people of Israel. ² And they said to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, "The LORD commanded through Moses that we be given cities to dwell in, along with their pasturelands for our livestock." ³ So by command of the LORD the people of Israel gave to the Levites the following cities and pasturelands out of their inheritance.

Again, it starts with a focus on what Moses said.

And this also reminds us of Numbers 35 (verses 1-8).

Moses commanded Israel to give the Levites cities with their pastureland
all throughout Israel.

The six cities of refuge were to belong to the Levites,
along with 42 other cities.

They were to be divided out from the other 12 tribes in proportion to their inheritance.

Overview (21:4-8)

⁴ *The lot came out for the clans of the Kohathites. So those Levites who were descendants of Aaron the priest received by lot from the tribes of Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin, thirteen cities.*

⁵ *And the rest of the Kohathites received by lot from the clans of the tribe of Ephraim, from the tribe of Dan and the half-tribe of Manasseh, ten cities.*

⁶ *The Gershonites received by lot from the clans of the tribe of Issachar, from the tribe of Asher, from the tribe of Naphtali, and from the half-tribe of Manasseh in Bashan, thirteen cities.*

⁷ *The Merarites according to their clans received from the tribe of Reuben, the tribe of Gad, and the tribe of Zebulun, twelve cities.*

⁸ *These cities and their pasturelands the people of Israel gave by lot to the Levites, as the LORD had commanded through Moses.*

Verses 4-8 give us the overview of these Levitical cities by clan:

13 cities for the Aaronic Kohathites from Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin in the south

10 cities for the non-Aaronic Kohathites from Ephraim, Dan, and west Manasseh

13 cities for the Gershonites from Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, and east Manasseh

12 cities for the Merarites from Reuben, Gad and Zebulun

Once again we see the faithfulness of this generation.

As the LORD had said through Moses, so they do.

Then in the rest of the chapter we get the detailed account of the cities:

The Cities (21:9-42)

⁹ Out of the tribe of the people of Judah and the tribe of the people of Simeon they gave the following cities mentioned by name, ¹⁰ which went to the descendants of Aaron, one of the clans of the Kohathites who belonged to the people of Levi; since the lot fell to them first. ¹¹ They gave them Kiriath-arba (Arba being the father of Anak), that is Hebron, in the hill country of Judah, along with the pasturelands around it. ¹² But the fields of the city and its villages had been given to Caleb the son of Jephunneh as his possession.

¹³ And to the descendants of Aaron the priest they gave Hebron, the city of refuge for the manslayer, with its pasturelands, Libnah with its pasturelands, ¹⁴ Jattir with its pasturelands, Eshtemoa with its pasturelands, ¹⁵ Holon with its pasturelands, Debir with its pasturelands, ¹⁶ Ain with its pasturelands, Juttah with its pasturelands, Beth-shemesh with its pasturelands—nine cities out of these two tribes; ¹⁷ then out of the tribe of Benjamin, Gibeon with its pasturelands, Geba with its pasturelands, ¹⁸ Anathoth with its pasturelands, and Almon with its pasturelands—four cities. ¹⁹ The cities of the descendants of Aaron, the priests, were in all thirteen cities with their pasturelands.

The Kohathites of the family of Aaron are given cities in Judah/Simeon/Benjamin (9-19)

Hebron (9-12) was the region already given to Caleb,
but now since the lot falls to the Levites,
they are given the city itself.

This was the city of refuge for the southern region west of the Jordan
The priestly families, then, will be centered in the heart of the land
—the place where Abraham offered Isaac
(Mount Moriah—the region surrounding Jerusalem)

²⁰ As to the rest of the Kohathites belonging to the Kohathite clans of the Levites, the cities allotted to them were out of the tribe of Ephraim. ²¹ To them were given Shechem, the city of refuge for the manslayer, with its pasturelands in the hill country of Ephraim, Gezer with its pasturelands, ²² Kibzaim with its pasturelands, Beth-horon with its pasturelands—four cities; ²³ and out of the tribe of Dan, Elteke with its pasturelands, Gibbethon with its pasturelands, ²⁴ Aijalon with its pasturelands, Gath-rimmon with its pasturelands—four cities; ²⁵ and out of the half-tribe of Manasseh, Taanach with its pasturelands, and Gath-rimmon with its pasturelands—two cities. ²⁶ The cities of the clans of the rest of the Kohathites were ten in all with their pasturelands.

²⁷ And to the Gershonites, one of the clans of the Levites, were given out of the half-tribe of Manasseh, Golan in Bashan with its pasturelands, the city of refuge for the manslayer, and Beeshterah with its pasturelands—two cities; ²⁸ and out of the tribe of Issachar, Kishion with its pasturelands, Daberath with its pasturelands, ²⁹ Jarmuth with its pasturelands, En-gannim with its pasturelands—four cities; ³⁰ and out of the tribe of Asher, Mishal with its pasturelands, Abdon with its pasturelands, ³¹ Helkath with its pasturelands, and Rehob with its pasturelands—four cities; ³² and out of the tribe of Naphtali, Kedesh in Galilee with its pasturelands, the city of refuge for the manslayer, Hammoth-dor with its pasturelands, and Kartan with its pasturelands—three cities. ³³ The cities of the several clans of the Gershonites were in all thirteen cities with their pasturelands.

³⁴ And to the rest of the Levites, the Merarite clans, were given out of the tribe of Zebulun, Jokneam with its pasturelands, Kartah with its pasturelands, ³⁵ Dimnah with its pasturelands, Nahalal with its pasturelands—four cities; ³⁶ and out of the tribe of Reuben, Bezer with its pasturelands, Jahaz with its pasturelands, ³⁷ Kedemoth with its pasturelands, and Mephaath with its pasturelands—four cities; ³⁸ and out of the tribe of Gad, Ramoth in Gilead with its pasturelands, the city of refuge for the manslayer, Mahanaim with its pasturelands, ³⁹ Heshbon with its pasturelands, Jazer with its pasturelands—four cities in all. ⁴⁰ As for the cities of the several Merarite clans, that is, the remainder of the clans of the Levites, those allotted to them were in all twelve cities.

⁴¹ The cities of the Levites in the midst of the possession of the people of Israel were in all forty-eight cities with their pasturelands. ⁴² These cities each had its pasturelands around it. So it was with all these cities.

Then the rest of the Kohathites receive cities in Ephraim, Manasseh and Dan (21:20-26)
Shechem in Ephraim is the city of refuge for the central region west of the Jordan.

The Gershonites have cities in Manasseh, Issachar, Asher, and Naphtali (21:27-33)
Golan in Bashan (east Manasseh) is the northern city of refuge in the east
Kedesh in Galilee (Naphtali) is the northern city of refuge in the west

The Merarites receive cities in Zebulun, Reuben, and Gad (21:34-40)
Bezer (Reuben) southern city of refuge in the east
Ramoth Gilead (Gad) central city of refuge in the east

Conclusion (21:41-42)

There are 48 levitical cities.

The Levites are scattered throughout Israel,
as a perpetual reminder that Israel's inheritance is God himself.
The land is pointing them to their true hope.

A church building is not our inheritance.
The building is not "the church."

This wooden structure made with human hands,
is but a place where we anticipate the true inheritance.
And that is what Israel was to understand.
The land was a place for them to see in a glass darkly the glory of their true inheritance.

Our passage concludes reminding us of God's great faithfulness to Israel:

The LORD's Faithfulness (21:43-45)

⁴³ Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. ⁴⁴ And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. ⁴⁵ Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

As we've seen, you have to be careful not to overread the text.

When it says that not one of all their enemies had withstood them –
that is simply true!

When they bothered to go fight, God gave them the victory!

But as we saw – seven of the tribes didn't do very much to go take possession!

But God accomplished the promises that he had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Joshua has caused Israel to inherit the land!

And in the same way, our Lord Jesus has caused us to inherit eternal life.

He has been faithful to his promises – and he will continue to do it.