

Message #34

Joshua 20:1-9

One of the great theologians, Willie Nelson, once sang a song that said, "Give me land lots of land and don't fence me in." He was looking for a freedom from all the problems of the world and according to that song if he had a horse and could ride anywhere he wanted, he would find that freedom.

We all need a place of refuge. We all need a place where we can flee when we are troubled or pressured. That is certainly a Biblical principle. Where do we flee when we have blown it? Where do you run and to whom do you run when you have sinned? Where is our refuge and who is our refuge? Our refuge of course is found in the Lord.

There is a tourist attraction in the Hawaiian Islands on the Kona coast of the Big Island. The attraction is called "the city of refuge." This city was used before Christianity ever came to Hawaii. When the tribes were killing each other and offering human sacrifices, this city was established as a place where those who did the killing could find refuge.

The idea for having a city of refuge comes from the Bible. There are five main passages that deal with this subject:

- 1) Exodus 21:13 - God will appoint a place where one may flee;
- 2) Numbers 35:6, 9-28 - six cities of refuge (3 on east side of Jordan and 3 on west side);
- 3) Deuteronomy 4:41-43 - one may flee to city if murder was unintentional with no malice;
- 4) Deuteronomy 19:1-3 - refuge cities exist when settled in land and roads built to get to cities;
- 5) Joshua 20:1-9 - Joshua is responsible to actually establish the cities of refuge.

One of the first ordinances given by God to Moses and Israel after the famous ten commandments was that of future cities of refuge (Ex. 21:13-14). These cities provided safe-havens for those who killed someone unintentionally. As we will see from Hebrews 6:18, we will be able to make a remarkable N.T. application to this very unique portion of God's Word.

Now the main point here in Joshua is this:

ONCE ISRAEL WAS IN THE LAND, GOD ESTABLISHED CITIES OF REFUGE AS A HAVEN FOR THOSE WHO COMMITTED UNINTENTIONAL MANSLAUGHTER.

Before this study has concluded, you will realize that every person in this world has committed unintentional manslaughter in the killing of Jesus Christ. Every person in this world needs to flee to faith in Jesus Christ as the only place of refuge. Those who do will be saved. Those who don't will be condemned.

Now there are five observations we want to make from this text:

OBSERVATION #1 – The cities of refuge are established by a direct decree of God. **20:1-2**

The establishing of these cities was not something dreamed up by Joshua. This idea was found in the Word of God revealed to Moses and now God was directing Joshua regarding these cities. In **verse 2**, God told Joshua to speak to the Sons of Israel that they might designate the “cities of refuge.”

God had initially given this instruction to Moses. In Deuteronomy 19:2-3, God told Moses that when Israel was in the land they were to designate three cities in the land in three different regions and classify those cities as “cities of refuge.” As we pointed out we learn from Numbers 35:14-15 that three cities were to exist in the land and three were to exist on the other side of the Jordan. This was the decree of God.

Having a place where a sinner could flee is not an invention of man; it is something that comes directly from God. It is amazing that so often God is cursed because He is a Judge, but what is often overlooked is that He is also a God of grace. He should be praised because He provides a place of refuge for sinners.

In every dispensation God tempers justice with mercy and righteousness with Grace.

OBSERVATION #2- The purpose of the cities of refuge is stated by God. **20:3**

Clear back in the book of Genesis, God set forth a principle and that is “whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood will be shed” (Gen. 9:6).

In the O.T. there was a sharp distinction made between premeditated murder and accidental manslaughter. If one man killed another man, it was either premeditated murder or accidental manslaughter. If one committed a premeditated murder, he was to be put to death (Num. 35:16-21). If one committed accidental manslaughter, he was to flee to one of these cities of refuge and could live (Num. 35:22-28).

Now the “avenger of blood” was usually the nearest relative of the individual who had been killed (Lev. 25:25). When someone was killed, the nearest relative would track the murderer down to execute justice. That nearest relative had no way of knowing whether or not the murder was accidental or intentional. Therefore the cities of refuge became an important place. If he caught the murderer before he got to the city, he could assume the murder was intentional. If he didn’t, he could assume it was unintentional.

It is interesting that according to Jewish tradition, the road that led to these cities was kept in perfect shape and the crossroads were well marked with signs which read “Refuge! Refuge!” This was in perfect conformity to Deuteronomy 19:3. It is also said that runners were stationed along some of these roads to help guide the fugitive to safety.

Now there is a great application we may make of all of this. God places various people in various places and positions to point one to the place of refuge, Jesus Christ. Our refuge is Jesus Christ (Heb. 6:18-19). Along life's path there will be many signs and many people who will point to Him.

OBSERVATION #3 – The process of getting to and entering into a city of refuge was established by God. **20:4-6**

Now one did not just show up at one of these cities and make up some story and everyone in the city said well just come in and let's live happily ever after. There was a process involved in this. There was a specific order that was to be followed. There were certain steps that were to be taken:

Step #1 - The one who committed the murder must himself flee to one of these cities. **20:4a**

It was the responsibility of the individual who had killed the person to himself run to one of these cities. It was not the job or responsibility of the elders to lure him there. He was to take off and go there himself. He must leave all and flee to this place. He needed to leave job, house, wife and children to be saved.

There is a great application for sinners. Don't let anything prevent you from fleeing by faith to Jesus Christ. Don't let job, house, wife or children prevent you. You flee to Him and you are saved.

Step #2 - The one who committed the murder must stand at the entrance of the city. **20:4b**

The point here is that one did not just sneak into this city. He was required to stand at the entrance of the city publicly for all to see.

Step #3 - The one who committed the murder was to state his case to the elders. **20:4c**

Elders were to carefully listen to the facts of the case and make a determination. This person was accountable to the leadership of this city. The person needed to state the fact and the elders needed to make a determination based on those facts.

It is the same way in the church. The elders determine judgment matters in the church. In order for a person to be saved, one must state the facts to God. In order for a believer to be cleansed, one must state the facts to God. This principle is still operative.

Step #4 - The one who committed the murder was to be authorized by the elders. **20:4c**

The elders were responsible to confirm or deny membership in that society.

Step #5 - The one who committed the murder is protected from the avenger by the elders. **20:5**

Now if the avenger of blood showed up at one of these cities of refuge and if the elders concluded that it was not a premeditated murder and there was no premeditated hatred, then those elders were not to turn the murderer over to the avenger. The elders had the power to grant asylum in the city or not grant it. It was their decision.

Step #6 - The one who committed the murder may be freed from the city of refuge. **20:6**

In order for that to happen, there were two prerequisites that must be met:

(Prerequisite #1) - One must stand before the congregation for judgment. **20:6a**

We assume this was an assembly of people and would include people from the murderers' place of murder. He was to live in the city of refuge until the people connected to the case could try him and acquit him.

(Prerequisite #2) - One must wait until the high priest died. **20:6b**

A change in priestly administration served to grant a statute of limitations ending the fugitive's exile. Once the death had occurred, we are free.

There is tremendous meaning here for us. Jesus Christ is our refuge. He is the new High Priest who laid down His own life and when we flee to Him, we are forever set free from our sin.

All of us are guilty of murder. It was our sin that murdered Jesus Christ. Although we did not premeditate to kill Jesus Christ, we are all guilty and we all need to flee to the place of refuge which is by faith in Him.

God sees the whole world as guilty of killing His Son. It is our responsibility to flee to the place of refuge who is none other than Jesus Christ. Flee to Him by faith and you shall be saved.

OBSERVATION #4 – The actual places that were designated to be cities of refuge. **20:7-8**

Only three cities were designated cities of refuge on the west side of the Jordan:

- 1) Kedesh - Holiness
- 2) Shechem - Strength
- 3) Kiriath-arba (Hebron) - communion.

Three cities were designated on the east side of the Jordan:

- 1) Bezer - Fortification
- 2) Ramoth - Exaltation
- 3) Golan - joy

William Newell said all of these things—holiness, strength, communion, fortification, exaltation and joy—are found in Jesus Christ.

Now these were the specific places that one had to go for refuge. No other cities were designated as places of refuge. One had to go to God's appointed place to find refuge. You could not just go any city of your choosing.

There is only One place where one may go to be set free from sin and it is to Jesus Christ. In God's program there is no other name given under heaven whereby men may be saved. If you want a safe haven from sin, one must flee to Him.

OBSERVATION #5 – The application for the people who need the cities of refuge. **20:9**

Now **verse 9** is important because it tells us who may use these cities:

- 1) Sons of Israel.
- 2) Strangers who lived in the land.
- 3) Anyone who killed someone unintentionally.

Now who is it who needs Jesus Christ? Everyone! All are guilty of manslaughter. Our sin killed Jesus Christ and His nearest relative, God the Father, is angry about it.

In fact, He will pour out His wrath on all who have done this. But there is a place of refuge. He has provided this one and only place of refuge and it is His Son. Come to Him, believe on Him, flee to Him and you are saved forever.