

## Chapter 8

### ***CITIES OF REFUGE***

*Then the LORD said to Joshua: "Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed you through Moses, so that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood. When he flees to one of these cities, he is to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state his case before the elders of that city. Then they are to admit him into their city and give him a place to live with them. If the avenger of blood pursues him, they must not surrender the one accused, because he killed his neighbor unintentionally and without malice aforethought. He is to stay in that city until he has stood trial before the assembly and until the death of the high priest who is serving at that time. Then he may go back to his own home in the town from which he fled." (Joshua 20:1-6 NIV)*

- I. After the Israelites had crossed over the Jordan and conquered the land of Canaan, God instructed Joshua, in accordance with what He had already told Moses, to set aside six cities as Cities of Refuge. The Cities of Refuge were to be easily accessible places in Israel where anyone who was guilty of killing someone accidentally and unintentionally could flee for safety from the "avenger of blood" until evidence could be gathered and they could have a fair trial to determine guilt or innocence. For additional background on the Cities of Refuge see: (Numbers 35:6-34; Deuteronomy 4:41-43; Deuteronomy 19:2-13; Joshua 20:1-9)
- II. The Cities of Refuge
  - A. Because the tribe of Levi was to be the priestly tribe, they did not receive an allocation of land as the other tribes did. Instead they were given cities that were distributed more or less evenly throughout the land, within the inheritance or allocation of the other tribes. Out of the 48 Levite cities, distributed evenly throughout the land, six were to be specially designated as Cities of Refuge, places of refuge and safety for the fugitive.
    - 1. God reminded them of the commandment given to Moses many years before. There were to be places of refuge and safety among the people of God. These were to be places where people could be accepted just as they were, even if they were accused of being guilty and sinful.
    - 2. The Cities of Refuge were cities of the Levites. The Levites were the priests, the worship leaders, and the temple servants. The tribe of Levi and its priesthood were set apart to represent God to the people and to represent the people to God.
    - 3. The Cities of Refuge were to be strategically located, three on each side of the Jordan River, so that it didn't require more than a day's journey to reach one of them.
    - 4. They were to build and maintain good roads to the Cities of Refuge so that no one would be hindered from reaching a place of safety. Accessibility was essential.
  - B. When a person became guilty of or was accused of killing another, he must flee to the nearest City of Refuge for his safety until a fair trial could be held to determine guilt or

innocence. The law applied to anyone, Israelite or foreigner. (Numbers 35:15)

1. The avenger of blood was by Hebrew law a close relative of the deceased who under law had the legal right to avenge the death of a family member. The law was, "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life." It should be noted that the law of retribution was restrictive, not permissive. That is, it was to determine that punishment should be limited to fit the crime and not be a reactive "overkill."
  2. The Cities of Refuge were to be color blind and culture blind. They were to admit anyone who came seeking refuge, whether he or she was Jewish or foreign. Cities of Refuge were to be populated by a people without prejudice.
- C. He is to come to the gate (entrance) of the City of Refuge. The Cities of Refuge were walled cities with gates to determine who comes in and who goes out. The gate lets the refugee in and keeps the avenger out. The control of the gates gives security to those who are inside. (Joshua 20:4)
1. He is to present himself to the elders. The gates were under the control of the spiritual leaders of the city. These are mature people, people with wisdom and understanding. They are to listen to his plea without judging and give him a place among them.
  2. The Cities of Refuge are places where a person can be honest without fear of rejection. He can tell his story, no matter how sad or sinful it is, and will receive a fair hearing. He will receive the benefit of the doubt. The City of Refuge is a place of unconditional acceptance.
  3. He is to be accepted into the life of the city without grudging. The residents of the city are to make room for him, to find employment for him, to provide housing for him. This requires an atmosphere of openness, hospitality, and flexibility. No competition. No small thinking. No gossip.
  4. The City of Refuge is a place to dwell in peace, safety, and security. What a wonderful thing that even though one moment one might be a fugitive with no hope, the next moment he could be accepted and protected by the people of God.
- D. The other residents of the City of Refuge are to protect him against the "avenger of blood." (Joshua 20:5)
1. Being a resident of a City of Refuge carried the cost of responsibility. If you were in a City of Refuge, you had to be willing to get involved. It might require that you would have to fight to protect the fugitive.
  2. The City of Refuge has a loving atmosphere produced by a caring attitude. This is not a place where people say, "You do your thing and I'll do mine," or "Am I my brother's keeper?" This is a place where people care for and protect one another.
- E. When the time came for the accused to stand trial at the city nearest the scene of the crime, they must give him safe passage there and back. They had to be willing to risk

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their own safety for one who came to them for refuge. (Numbers 35:25)

1. He was to stand trial at the city nearest the scene of the crime. The trial did not take place in the City of Refuge. The trial took place elsewhere. The City of Refuge is not a place of judging.
2. He was to stay in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest. There are various ways to interpret this: as a life sentence, that revenge was not to be carried from one generation to the next. We might note that it is the death of our high priest, Jesus Christ, that sets us free from fear of the avenger and the sentence of death.
3. If the accused left the City of Refuge on his own he was “fair game” for the avenger of blood. This is a strong incentive to serious commitment and involvement in the life of the City of Refuge. Wherever the fugitive may have lived previously, this is home now.

III. Application:

- A. We as Christian believers and as the Church of Jesus Christ are privileged to be the City of God, chosen to be a place of refuge for all who are under a sentence of death, pursued by the “avenger of blood.” (Ephesians 2:22; 1 Peter 2:5)
- B. Jesus is our High Priest, our sinless sacrifice, our Passover Lamb. Jesus is the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. His death paid the price for our sin so that we could live. (Hebrews 7:23-27; Hebrews 8:1)
  1. The symbolism of the Passover: The blood of the sacrifice lamb was placed on the doorpost, assuring life and safety to all those within the house.
  2. The conquest of Jericho: The placement of a scarlet cord on Rahab’s window protected her and her family from destruction when the Israelites conquered the city.
  3. The Church: The blood of Jesus upon us cleanses us from sin and gives us life out of death and safety out of destruction. The church becomes a City of Refuge from the enemy of our soul, Satan the accuser.
- C. The Church as a City of Refuge is not a place of judgement or condemnation, but a place of love, acceptance, and forgiveness. The judgement takes place between you and God, not between you and the church. God has judged Jesus guilty for your sin and He has already taken your punishment. It should only be the Devil that is trying to judge you now.
- D. How do you as a Christian and as part of the church see your role towards the sinner, the fugitive? Are you a judge or protector? Can people come to you with their problems and find refuge or if they come to you will they find criticism and judgement?
  1. How do we see the role of the church? Do we see the church as a City of Refuge for the fugitive? Is the church a place of safety and security where people are accepted just as they are without criticism and judgement?

2. How do others see our church? Are we as a church clearly seen by others in the community as a place of acceptance and safety or are we seen as “holier-than-thou” and hard to approach? Have we made the church accessible to others or is it difficult for people to come and easily fit in?
- E. The world needs the church to be a City of Refuge for the person who is being pursued by the “accuser” - Satan. The church must be a City of Refuge where we can dwell together in peace and safety, secure from the avenger of blood.
- F. It is our privilege and responsibility to seek the Grace from God to create such a City of Refuge.

### **QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION**

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1. Are we willing to accept the privilege and responsibility of creating a City of Refuge? Is our church a City of Refuge?
2. Have we built roads to it? Is it easily accessible to the unchurched? Are we seen as being elitist or hard to approach? Do we make it easy or difficult for people to come into our church and feel at home?
3. Is there a gate for access and protection? Do we have strong spiritual leadership that looks after the church as a shepherd looks after his flock? Do the leaders of the church exercise godly discipline to protect the church from harm and error?
4. Are we personally threatened by newcomers? Do we fear that if new people come into the church they may “sit in our pew” or take over our place of ministry? Are we secure and confident enough in who we are in God that we make room for others?
5. Are we loving, accepting, and forgiving, or are we critical, judgmental, gossipy? Can a person tell us honestly what they are going through and how they are feeling without fear that it will become gossip and that they will be judged or criticized?