

THE CITY OF REFUGE - JOSHUA 20:1-9

When I was growing up as a teenager, fallout shelters were the in thing. Many of our mature saints will remember these times. Now for those of you who are younger, you must remember that our nation was right the middle of a cold war with the Soviet Union during those days. We were constantly being told that the nuclear weapons that our country and the Soviet Union owned could blow up this entire planet several times over. The world situation was so tenuous that everybody was nervous that during some tense moment of disagreement, some unstable world leader would push the button sending the first nuclear missile speeding towards the enemy. Early detection of that missile would require the attacked nation to retaliate, and within minutes the atmosphere would be filled with flying nuclear missiles destined to end the world as we know it. So we were actually advised by our government leaders during this turbulent decade to have a fallout shelter for refuge in case of nuclear attack. So in the 60's, almost every community, no matter how small, had a fallout shelter in case of nuclear attack. Over 200,000 American families had a personal fallout shelter built.

Now a fallout shelter was a concrete-reinforced underground room, usually under a person's house. In that fallout shelter drinking water, food, clothing, blankets, medicine supplies and anything else deemed necessary for a prolonged stay was stored. The fallout shelter brought a sense of security and wellbeing to its owner. For in case of a nuclear emergency, there would be a place of safety for the family.

Happily, these fallout shelters were never needed. And we even have a tendency today to look back upon them with a mild amusement and wonder how much protection they actually would have provided if they would have been called into use. But even today, in times of emergency, a place of safety becomes the highest priority.

God made such a provision for His people when they entered the Promised Land when He directed that cities of refuge be designated as safe houses for people in need.

A couple of months ago, we looked at the Old Testament provision for a kinsman-redeemer. One of the duties of the kinsman-redeemer was to avenge the death of a loved one whose life was taken in a violent manner by a wicked person. But this question might come into our minds - What about a person who abuses the prescribed duties of the Kinsman-Redeemer? What if a person grows to hate his neighbor and then uses the death of a close relative to falsely accuse his neighbor? What if the neighbor is completely innocent of any crime? What protection would he have against an aggressive and hostile Kinsman-Redeemer?

God's solution was the City of Refuge. And interestingly enough, these Cities of Refuge were also pictures of the Lord Jesus Christ just as the kinsman-redeemer was. Let's read about this provision that God

gave His people briefly and then look at this picture this morning. Now there are several passages that we could read - Deut. 19; Numbers 35, etc. - that outline the significance of the City of Refuge. But we will read the account in Joshua where these cities are actually set up.

Joshua 20:1-9

¹ Then the LORD said to Joshua: ² "Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed you through Moses, ³ so that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood.

⁴ "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. ⁵ If the avenger of blood pursues him, they must not surrender the one accused, because he killed his neighbor unintentionally and without malice aforethought. ⁶ 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."

⁷ So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. ⁸ On the east side of the Jordan of Jericho they designated Bezer in the desert on the plateau in the tribe of Reuben, Ramoth in Gilead in the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan in the tribe of Manasseh. ⁹ Any of the Israelites or any alien living among them who killed someone accidentally could flee to these designated cities and not be killed by the avenger of blood prior to standing trial before the assembly.

Now there was obviously a very practical reason for setting up these Cities of Refuge. They were designed to be safe houses, havens of protection from an avenging Kinsman-Redeemer. And they were strategically located for that purpose.

Remember, the nation of Israel is not that large of a place. It is roughly 120 miles long and 50-60 miles wide. These 3 cities positioned on the west side of the Jordan River insured that nobody would live more than 20-30 miles from a City of Refuge. In case of emergency, if someone was killed by accident, the person in danger was to drop everything and run for the City of Refuge. He could get there easily in 1 day. If he left immediately after the accident, he would have at least a several hour head start on the Kinsman-Redeemer who would need to hear of the accident, go to the scene of the accident and insure that his brother was really dead, and then start tracking the person who killed him. So God set up a program where an innocent person could easily get to a place for protection if he needed to.

These Cities of Refuge were Levitical cities - part of the cities given to the Levites. So there were priests who were designated as judges to hear cases of suspected murder. When the person fleeing got to

the gates of the City of Refuge, the elders sitting at that gate would meet him and hear his case. If the story sounded legitimate, they would admit the person into the protection of the City of Refuge. Now we all know that true justice cannot be served by just hearing one side of a story. So the Kinsman-Redeemer in his investigation might have another story to tell. If the person truly was innocent of wrong-doing, and the Kinsman-Redeemer recognized that fact, he would probably not pursue the matter. But if there was another side of the story, the Kinsman-Redeemer was allowed to present that to the elders. Then a trial would be held, with arguments and witnesses heard. If the person were found to be guilty, he couldn't hide behind the walls of the City of Refuge. He was sent out to suffer the justice rendered by the Kinsman-Redeemer. But if the person were found to be innocent of murder, he was allowed to live in the City of Refuge free from the avenging hand of the Kinsman-Redeemer. He was to live there until the High Priest died according to the regulations of the law. After the death of the High Priest, he could return back to the land of his inheritance and the Kinsman-Redeemer was no longer allowed to touch him.

Now you might be wondering, how are these Cities of Refuge relevant to 20th century Americans? We certainly live in a different cultural setting. We have our own judicial system today, and it does not require or allow for Cities of Refuge.

Well, these Cities of Refuge not only were important for the practical value of safety and security that they gave to the people, but they also were very clear pictures of the Lord Jesus Christ. And this is what we want to focus our attention on this morning as we prepare our hearts for the celebration of the Lord's Table. For in these Cities of Refuge, we see 2 powerful pictures of the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. First, the Cities of Refuge remind us that the Lord Jesus Christ is our refuge and strength in times of trouble.

There word Refuge is found 93 times in the O.T. 18 of these times, it is used with regards to these Cities of Refuge. Almost every other time this word is used, it is used of God as our place of refuge. Listen to just a few of these references:

**Deuteronomy 33:27 27 The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.*

**2 Samuel 22:1-3 ¹ David sang to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. ² He said: "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; ³ my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior -- from violent men you save me.*

**Isaiah 25:4 ¹ O LORD, you have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.*

**Jeremiah 17:17 You are my refuge in the day of disaster*

Now I could go on and on giving reference after reference demonstrating this point, but I think this is sufficient. Throughout the O.T., the word refuge is consistently used of God. This pattern is not isolated to certain authors or specific sections of the Scriptures. It is a common reference used throughout the O.T. So we should not think it happenstance that God chose this very word to designate these 6 cities that would be havens for an innocent victim from the revenge of the Kinsman-Redeemer. For these cities picture the Lord Jesus Christ himself who is a refuge for His people.

Many Christians have found this truth to be a precious one during the storms of life. There is a tradition that an English preacher was making a journey on foot in the mid 18th century when he walked right into a violent thunderstorm. As he began to feel the rain drops hitting his face, he quickly looked around for any shelter available. He saw a large, overhanging boulder nearby, and he rushed under its shelter. For an hour or so he enjoyed the shelter of that Rock as he witnessed the violent power of the thunderstorm. Lightning bolts were flashing all around him, the thunder was deafening, and the rain continued to come down in sheets as he sat protected under that craggy overhang. It was during this time that many Scripture passages came to the mind of Pastor August Toplady as he witnessed the thunderstorm from the shelter of his rock, and he wrote his thoughts down in a poem - a poem that we still sing today. *Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in thee; Let the water and the blood, From thy riven side which flowed, Be of sin the double cure, Cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r. . . While I draw this fleeting breath, When my eyes shall close in death, When I soar to worlds unknown, See thee on thy judgment throne, Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.*

There are many storms in life. It doesn't matter how well one prepares, it doesn't matter how many precautions are taken, trials and afflictions will come in life. And the final great inevitability is death itself. What a comfort it is to realize that the Lord Jesus Christ is a City of Refuge for His people. In times of trouble, He invites us to come to Him. He delights in giving wisdom and strength and courage to His people as they rest in the shadow of His refuge.

2. But there is another picture that I would invite you to see with me this morning - one that is not so obvious but is most appropriate for this time.

Frankly, there is a part of the Scriptural account of the city of Refuge that disturbed me for a long time. Perhaps you have questions about this part as well. I could understand the necessity of the Cities of Refuge. I could understand the security and protection that they would afford the Israelites. But I couldn't understand why a person who was determined by the elders of the city to be innocent of murder would have to remain in the City of Refuge until the death of the High Priest. His family obviously could come and live with him in the City of Refuge, but why couldn't he return back to his home?

Deuteronomy 19 gives a case study of an example. *Deuteronomy 19:5-6 5 For instance, a man may go into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood, and as he swings his ax to fell a tree, the head may fly off and hit his neighbor and kill him. That man may flee to one of these cities and save his life. 6 Otherwise, the avenger of blood might pursue him in a rage, overtake him if the distance is too great, and kill him even though he is not deserving of death, since he did it to his neighbor without malice aforethought.*

Now here is a case in point. 2 people are out cutting wood. The ax head flies off one man's ax and strikes his neighbor in the head, killing him - purely accidental. And we can see why this man would need to have a place of refuge for the deceased man's brother might become very angry. And we can see why it might be necessary for the innocent person to be protected while the Kinsman-redeemer cools down. But to be forced to remain in the City of Refuge until the High Priest dies, this seems a bit extreme, doesn't it? This could be years, even decades. So this man who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time is exiled from his home for years until the high priest dies. That's what the provision required: *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. Josh. 20:6.*

I wish that I could say that I have adequate answers to totally satisfy my curiosity on this point, but I must admit that I still have a ways to go here. I don't think that anyone has all of the answers to Biblical questions. But as time has passed, I have come to appreciate the type or picture that this gives of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I am rather confident that this is the main reason for this specific requirement.

In the epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus Christ is presented as the fulfillment of the high priest in the O.T. The High Priest was the one who represented sinful people before a holy and righteous God. He was the one who went in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to sprinkle the blood of the goat on the mercy seat. Now the blood of bulls and goats was not sufficient to permanently take care of the sin question. That is the reason for sacrifices continually being made. But with Christ's blood, it was different. When the Lord Jesus Christ offered himself as a sin sacrifice, God was completely satisfied. The blood of the Lord Jesus Christ completely cleansed sin in the eyes of God. That is the reason for the Lord Jesus Christ being the final sacrifice. We do not offer animal sacrifices today. We do not have to. For Jesus Christ has completely paid for sin. No more sacrifices need to be made. When the Lord Jesus Christ died as the perfect high priest, the depravity of sin, death and the Devil were all conquered. Jesus Christ was pictured in both the sacrificial lamb and the high priest because he offered himself voluntarily as the sin sacrifice.

Now remembering these truths from Hebrews, we can see the significance of the specific O.T. requirement given concerning the City of Refuge. When the high priest died, the person who had sought refuge was completely free. He was no longer under the shadow of death. He could return to his home

without fear. The avenger of death could no longer legally touch him. And so it is that because Jesus Christ our high priest has died, all of his children can know complete freedom in Him. We no longer need to live under the fear of the shadow of death. And the avenger of death can no longer touch us. It is interesting that in the picture of the Kinsman-Redeemer that we looked at a couple of months ago, the Kinsman-redeemer was a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. But in the picture of the City of Refuge that we are looking at this morning, the Lord Jesus Christ is pictured in the City of Refuge while Satan is pictured in the avenger of death. For in the former picture, the Kinsman-Redeemer avenged those who were guilty; this time the City of Refuge is seen as a haven for those who are innocent, declared to be not guilty.

Those who seek refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ are completely cleansed of their sin. They are declared to be righteous, not guilty in the eyes of God. They are given a secure place of refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ himself. And because their redeemer and high priest has died once and for all, the perfect and complete sacrifice for sin, they have freedom from that great avenger of death who has hounded the human race from the beginning of time.