

# CITIES OF REFUGE

by Doug Goins

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We live in an increasingly dangerous world in which there are fewer and fewer places of guaranteed security. As Christians we have the conviction that God is our protector, our hiding place, our refuge, a strong tower in the midst of a frightening, dangerous world. Hebrews 6:18 talks about our fleeing to the Lord Jesus for refuge: "...that...we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us." Joshua 20 begins with a similar image: "Then the Lord said to Joshua, "Say to the people of Israel, 'Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses....'" What kind of place would a city of refuge be?

It's frightening today to think of living in a society where terrorism increasingly reigns, in a world offering absolutely no place of safety, protection, security, asylum, or refuge. I've been thinking a lot about this recently in planning for a study tour to Israel next month. This will be the third time in the last fifteen years that I've traveled to the Middle East, and the second time I've had some leadership responsibility. Because of that, I'm concerned about the safety of the people who are going to be following Ron Ritchie and me to that volatile place. In recent years there has probably been no other part of the world that has showed up more often in the pages of the newspaper, with more violent crises, than the Middle East. A number of people who were considering going with us to Israel have asked whether it was really safe. My response very consistently has been that if we think in terms of probabilities, we have a better chance of being injured or our life endangered going through a major metropolitan city in the U.S. than we have traveling in the Middle East. The nation of Israel is the most security-conscious nation in the world.

There was an exception about ten years ago. I was part of a leadership team organizing a tour for our college and university students to go to Israel, and we did postpone that trip for a year because of the Palestinian Intifada that exploded in Israel at that time. Because of all kinds of threats of terrorism in that country, the U.S. State Department issued a travel advisory against tourism there. So discretion being the better part of valor, wisdom dictated that we wait until things calmed down a bit. When the law of the jungle takes over and people start to resort to terrorism to redress perceived injustices, then nobody is safe.

It has come very close to home for us as a nation this summer, hasn't it? We were all touched in some way by the explosion of TWA Flight 800, which blew up off the coast of New York. We at PBC were especially affected because of the loss Ray and Sherry Luevano's family experienced when Ray's brother was killed in that explosion. We were also frightened when we saw in living color the carnage from the bomb exploding at the Summer Olympics in Atlanta. In both of those incidents, the first possibility that officials considered was a terrorist bombing. The thought of random terrorism touching our lives or our children's lives is indeed frightening.

In Joshua 20 this command by the Lord to appoint cities of refuge underlines the fact that God understands this law of the jungle. It doesn't catch him by surprise; he has observed it since the very beginning. It wasn't long after Adam and Eve disobeyed God that their son Cain murdered his brother Abel in a jealous rage. The life of Abel was sacred, but it was snuffed out. This kind of lawless activity has been going on ever since. It's a hallmark of the human race.

Before the flood in Genesis 9:6, God laid down a basic rule to Noah that anyone who murderously shed blood should pay for their crime with their own blood: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image." This initial rule is amplified in a number of places in the Law. Let's read Numbers 35:33-34, where God says through Moses, "So you shall not pollute the land in which you are; for blood pollutes the land and no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it,

except by the blood of him who shed it. 'And you shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord am dwelling in the midst of the sons of Israel.'" This is God's world; he created it. He lives in the midst of his people, and what is more, his people are created in his image. So murder is a violation ultimately of God.

### **Both justice and mercy must prevail**

But God explained very carefully in Exodus 21, Numbers 35, and Deuteronomy 19 that there was to be a distinction made between premeditated murder, and what today we call manslaughter or a crime of passion, the unpremeditated killing of another person. It's apparent when we read these passages that a person guilty of premeditated murder was subject to capital punishment. But if the death wasn't premeditated, or if a person killed someone by accident, the slayer could seek refuge in the sanctuary of the tabernacle, physically holding onto the altar as a place of safety and protection. Listen to what God said through Moses in Exodus 21:12-14: "He who strikes a man so that he died shall surely be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint you a place to which he may flee. If, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him even from My altar, that he may die." If he was guilty of premeditated, violent murder, hanging onto the altar wouldn't be of any help whatsoever.

This worked well during the forty years that the nation of Israel wandered in the wilderness, and during the seven years of military conquest in Canaan, because the tabernacle was physically at the center of that nation. They were a united people, and they were physically close to that tent of meeting. So any Israelite could flee into the tabernacle and find a place of refuge there. But once the tribes were settled throughout the land of Canaan in their respective tribal inheritances, they needed places of refuge that were scattered out among them. In our passage in Joshua 20, God ordained six cities of refuge, places of compassion, where anyone who had killed another person unintentionally could flee. Look at verses 1-6:

Then the Lord said to Joshua, "Say to the people of Israel, 'Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent or unwittingly may flee there; they shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood. 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. And if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not give up the slayer into his hand; because he killed his neighbor unwittingly, having had no enmity against him in times past. 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 slayer may go again to his own town and his own home, to the town from which he fled.'"

In Israelite society there was no police force to investigate crimes. It was the moral responsibility of the family member who was closest to the victim to investigate and avenge the murder. In our text, he is called the avenger of blood. But this person's own emotional subjectivity, passion, and anger at the loss of their family member would cloud their judgment, and they might not want to go to the trouble to figure out whether it was an accidental killing or whether in fact it was premeditated murder. They might end up avenging the death by indiscriminately killing someone who wasn't guilty of a capital crime. That's why these cities of refuge were needed.

This law as it's laid out is fairly simple. In Exodus 21, Numbers 35, and Deuteronomy 19 there are examples of a slayer or manslayer. In one example, someone is working in his field, and his ax head flies off the handle and kills his neighbor. In another, somebody in a fit of passion fights with a neighbor, who accidentally falls and hits his head on a rock, and dies from that. In each case, there was no desire for the death of the individual, but death did result.

The slayer or manslayer could immediately flee to the gate of one of these cities, and there he would be protected from the avenger of blood until the elders could investigate the circumstances in a preliminary hearing. The passages I've mentioned make clear that if the fugitive was found guilty of premeditated murder, either in the preliminary investigation or in the full, formal public hearing before the entire congregation, then

the elders would execute the person who had come to them for protection. That way the family of the victim would be satisfied. But if it could be established that this person had committed the crime by accident or in a fit of passion, then he would be given the right of asylum in the city, safe from any threat from the avenger of blood. But he was required to stay there even though he had been declared innocent of premeditated murder, because he was still guilty of manslaughter, as long as the high priest who ministered in the temple at that time lived. That could be a short time or an extremely long time. Basically, he was forfeiting his freedom in order to save his own life.

God's intention, obviously, is for us to live in peace. The Numbers passage spoke of the land becoming poisoned or polluted when terror reigned. Anybody who took the life of another person, whether in a premeditated way, in an act of passion, or by accident, had to be dealt with in a way that was fair to that person, to the victim and the victim's family, and to society in general. The cities of refuge didn't repudiate capital punishment; rather, it was God's way of allowing both justice and mercy to prevail. Only the innocent were to be protected, not the guilty.

Look at how the nation responded in obedience to this command in selecting these six specific cities of refuge in verses 7-8:

So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naph'tali, and Shechem in the hill country of E'phraim, and Kir'iath-ar'ba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. 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 Manas'seh.

Verse 7 lists the three cities west of the Jordan from north to south, and verse 8 lists the three cities east of the Jordan from south to north. It was an average day's run to get to the nearest city of refuge.

### **Safe havens for fugitives**

I want to talk about five important features of these six cities. Some of these things we know from the Scriptures, and some we know from extra-Biblical sources. These features will have application to us personally in our spiritual life, as we'll see a bit farther on.

The first feature is that the cities of refuge were to be strategically located so that there would be easy access to them for anybody seeking refuge. The land of Israel is only about the size of the state of Maryland, so nobody could ever be very far away from a city of refuge. In Deuteronomy 19:3 God commanded that the nation build highways-not just foot paths-to the cities of refuge. Sources outside the Bible give us more details about how important it was to maintain these highways so that nobody was ever hindered in getting to these cities. Bridges were to be built across every ravine that the highways came to, so that the person running for refuge wouldn't have to waste time climbing to the bottom of the ravine and then up the other side. The highways were supposed to be rebuilt every spring after the heavy winter rains so that the road surface would be smooth and easy to run on. At every crossroads or intersection on these highways, there were to be big, bold signs pointing the way with the word REFUGE in large letters. If someone was running flat-out, they wouldn't have to lose any time slowing down to read the sign.

The second feature is that the gates of the cities of refuge were never to be locked. That was because if someone had run for thirty or forty miles to get to the city, and then they couldn't get in (e.g., in the middle of the night) they could still be cut down by the avenger of blood.

The third feature is that the city was to be well stocked to provide for any fugitives who came to stay, possibly for a period of years. It was not only a place of guaranteed legal protection, but also a place of material provision of foodstuffs and places to live.

The fourth feature comes out of the Scriptures. Exodus 21, Numbers 35, and Deuteronomy 19 all make it clear that if the killer didn't flee to the tabernacle at first, and to the city of refuge later, there was no other place of guaranteed safety. If they went outside the city once they got there, the city could do nothing to protect them

from the avenger of blood.

Verse 9 is a closing summary of God's law of refuge or asylum, and there we find the fifth important feature of these cities:

These were the cities designated for all the people of Israel, and for the stranger sojourning among them [the Gentiles], that any one 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.

Everybody was welcome in these cities, even non-Jews who were permanent residents of the land. The same justice, the same protection and provision, the same atoning grace were free to all.

What God was doing in establishing these cities of refuge was setting the wheels in motion for what would ultimately be due process of law. Our western legal system finds its roots in this kind of Biblical teaching that declares that a person is innocent until proven guilty. Until everything was investigated by the elders and justice was handed down in a full hearing before the entire congregation, he enjoyed the security of presumed innocence.

### **Jesus, our refuge**

Beyond the legal and ethical implications for a society, there are also profound spiritual implications for each one of us personally. The similarities between the asylum found in these cities and the refuge of our personal salvation in Jesus Christ is striking. In fact, the New Testament itself relates the work of Christ to these cities. Again, the phrase in Hebrews stands out: "...That...we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us." In the full paragraph, the author is writing to Christians, emphasizing how seriously God takes his promises to us and the absolute certainty of our security in Jesus Christ. This letter is written mostly to Jewish Christians, and the writer is constantly quoting from the Old Testament. Here he's referring to cities of refuge and picturing them as our salvation in Jesus Christ.

Let's review our status as redeemed humanity, as those who have found refuge. Apart from the saving work of Christ, we are lost in sin, separated from our heavenly Father. Romans 6:23 warns us that the consequences of our sin is death. We are being pursued by the avenger of blood, if you will. God's appointed Savior is Jesus Christ, and as the apostle Peter boldly proclaimed before the Jewish supreme court in Jerusalem, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). But as sinners on the run, fugitives apart from Christ, we must come to him by faith in order to be saved. Jesus even invited us to come to him: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest [from running and hiding] (Matthew 11:28).

Let's talk now about some of the similarities between the features of the cities of refuge and the work of Christ in our lives. Then we'll conclude by talking about some important differences.

The first similarity is this: Remember, there had to be easy access to the cities of refuge, in terms of the highways, the placement of the cities, and the road signs. Jesus Christ is the same for us. We can always come to him anyplace, anytime. His arms are open for us, he is receptive and waiting. David wrote in Psalm 34:18,

"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,  
And saves those who are crushed [contrite] in spirit."

He is totally accessible when we acknowledge our desperate need, when our spirit is broken over our sin.

This is one of the major messages that we as the body of Christ need to communicate to our friends and neighbors. There is a place of safety in a terrifying world, there is one who is completely accessible to all of us. Our cry ought to be "Refuge! Refuge!" It's almost the last emphasis in the word of God. In Revelation 22:17, John says, "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let him who hears say, 'Come.' And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price." The Spirit of God is sovereignly

at work inviting people to this open access that's found in Jesus Christ. But it also says that the Bride is saying, "Come." We are the Bride of Christ, his body, the church. And it says that those who hear say, "Come." That is referring to us who are hearing this message. This gives us the responsibility of constantly inviting people into refuge. We have heard and accepted the invitation, and now as the bride of Christ we are always inviting others into that same place of refuge where we've found security. God still wants it to be easy for fugitives to find their way to salvation and safety in Jesus Christ.

The second similarity: The gates of the cities of refuge were never to be locked. It's the same picture for us when we come to Jesus Christ. We don't have to worry about finding some weird combination of religious locks and keys, as if it were by a secret, mysterious way that we would get into relationship with Jesus. No, the doors are always wide open. Even if you show up in the middle of the night, you don't have to beat on the door and wake Jesus up, because he is the infinite God, and he is waiting and listening for you.

I remember two different times in the twenty years I've been on staff at PBC when I had the privilege of standing at the bedside of someone who was dying. In one case it was an older man, in the other a younger woman. They were within moments of slipping into eternity. Up to that point each had been a fugitive. And yet I had the joy of praying with them as they experienced entry into this refuge in Jesus Christ. It wasn't complicated, it didn't take a long time, and it wasn't hard for them to get in. It was just a matter of saying, "Please forgive me, accept me, welcome me."

The third similarity: The cities of refuge provided the physical resources of food and a place to live in case the fugitive had to spend months or years there. In the same way, Jesus Christ is our totally sufficient refuge. While in a legal sense his death is completely adequate to meet our need for protection from the condemnation of our sin, he also provides us continuing spiritual resources. The Revelation 22 passage says there is living water, constant refreshment and renewal. Jesus also said that he is the bread of life that we can constantly feed on. He wants to sustain us. Paul says in Ephesians 1:7-8, "In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace which he has lavished upon us." In him we have resources to live life, to triumph, to live victoriously as fugitives who have found a place of refuge.

The fourth similarity: The only place to find protection from the avenger of blood was in the city of refuge. You could be as repentant as you wanted to be, but if you were anywhere else besides the city of refuge, it wouldn't matter. And if we don't flee to the refuge that God has provided us in Christ Jesus, there is no spiritual asylum for us, no salvation apart from him.

The author of Hebrews talks about the possibility of rejecting or ignoring this tremendous invitation of security and refuge in Jesus Christ. He compares dying outside the law of Moses with dying outside the safety in Jesus (10:28-29): "Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?" How does someone end up insulting God's saving activity, profaning the blood of Christ? It's by ultimate rejection, by saying, "I don't need it, I'll find another way of salvation. I'm not entering the city of refuge." Any one of us who hears the truth of the gospel and chooses to walk away from it will end up in the same place of isolation. And we will face death, eternal separation from God and his people. It sounds harsh because it is harsh. We often have to hear bad news before we can hear good news. You may have heard the sentence of cancer in your life, and you know what that can do to you. But then you hear the good news, "But there is a cure, an alternative, if you're willing to undergo surgery or therapy." And in the face of the bad news, there is tremendous good news about the open heart of Jesus for us.

The fifth similarity: Just as the cities of refuge were open to everybody, Jew and Gentile, every tribe and tongue and nation; Jesus' offer of personal salvation is universal in its scope. The apostle Paul says in Romans 10:12-13, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, 'every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.'" Remember the beautiful invitation that Jesus offered, "Whosoever will may come." It doesn't matter who you are, what your ethnic background is, what kind of life you've live, or whether you belong to any particular religious group.

## A refuge without limits

Let me close by emphasizing some important differences between the cities of refuge and the refuge we have in Jesus Christ. Probably the biggest difference is that the cities protected only those people who were innocent of a capital crime, who had killed someone accidentally or in a fit of passion, not with premeditation. But we know from the gospel that Jesus Christ died for those whose crimes were premeditated, for high-handed rebellious sinners.

Think about murder. Maybe you haven't killed anybody in cold blood, but you've probably wished someone out of existence. And Jesus said that if we've done it in our heart or in our thought life, we're as guilty as if we had committed the act of murder. Whether it's murderous intent or some other destructive intent toward another human being, we are guilty before God, premeditating sinners.

How is it possible that a God who is so holy can accept us in our guilt? It isn't that he gives up his holiness or compromises his absolute moral standards. No, it's through Jesus, our high priest and our sacrifice for sin. The reason that Jesus can be our redeemer is that he is the high priest who offers the atoning sacrifice that allows us to be covered by the blood of the Lamb. So our sin is forgiven. But he also became the sacrifice as he gave himself to die on the cross. He is the Lamb that was slain.

There is another important difference between the cities of refuge and our refuge in Jesus Christ. We saw in our passage that the fugitive in Israel had to stay in the city of refuge as long as the high priest who was leading the ministry in the temple was alive. Only when that high priest died was the fugitive free to go back home and resume a normal life in his community and his family. But Jesus Christ is our high priest, and having died on the cross, he lives forever. So even though we are guilty fugitives before a holy God, when we run to Jesus for saving refuge, we are free forever. Listen to this great truth in Hebrews 7:23-27:

"And the former priests [the human high priests in Israel], on the one hand, existed in greater numbers, because they were prevented by death from continuing [the ministry of offering sacrifice, atonement], but He, on the other hand, because He abides forever, holds His priesthood permanently. Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself."

Again, Hebrews 6 describes Jesus as having entered the Holy of Holies as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever. He has entered into God's presence guilt-free, and we can too. We can follow him into security and intimacy with our Father God. The way we do that is by running to Jesus Christ and accepting his forgiveness for sin, accepting his right to be the Lord of our lives, in charge of everything.

Another major difference between the cities of refuge and Jesus' work on our behalf is that no matter how close someone lived to a city of refuge in Israel, when they were on the run, there was no guarantee that they would make it. The avenger of blood might be quicker than they were, and they might be cut down before they ever got to the city, even though their intention was what it ought to be. But the good news is that the Bible guarantees that the person who looks to Jesus will find refuge. Jesus himself said, "...Him who comes to me I will not cast out" (John 6:37).

Furthermore, Jesus doesn't just wait for us to come to him—here the picture shifts from doors of a city of refuge that we have to approach, to the door of our own heart that he approaches. He says to each of us, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). The door is ours, and Jesus is out looking for us as guilty, lost fugitives, knocking on the door and saying, "I know who you are, I know the sin you've committed, I know how messed up you are inside. I want to come inside you and clean up the mess." This

image of eating together speaks of intimate fellowship. He wants to be with us.

The bottom line for you and me is that unless we have fled by faith to Jesus Christ, we have no salvation. It's my sins and your sins that put Jesus on the cross; all of us are guilty of his death. And he is the only Savior. Have you fled to him? Have you responded to his desire to enter your life and forgive your sin?

One of the things that concerns me is the way people settle for hanging around the church. In ancient Israel it wouldn't have done much good to move up close to the city of refuge and set up camp outside the wall or the tabernacle. And just hanging around with God's people doesn't make you a Christian. Unless you have personally acknowledged your guilt and your fugitive status and have run to Jesus for refuge, you're not saved. It is so frightening to me to think of someone hearing this and walking away-in the words of Hebrews, trampling under their feet what God did for them in Jesus Christ.

In a terrifying world with less and less certainty of physical safety, in a condemning world with all the reminders of your sinful failure and premeditated rebellion against God, are you tired of running and hiding? The consequences of sin can be dealt with once and for all. You can experience safety, refuge, security, and protection in the arms of Jesus. You don't have to fear the avenger of blood anymore. You don't have to live with the gnawing uncertainty about death itself and what will happen when it confronts you.

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#### JOSHUA-THE ADVENTURE AND VICTORY OF FAITHH

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Joshua 20:1-9

Eighteenth Message

Doug Goins

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