

Cities of Refuge

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[0:00] And turn in your Bibles to Joshua chapter 20, and we'll read the entire chapter tonight. Joshua chapter 20. 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. So they set apart Kadesh 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.

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.

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.

[1:49] One of the great things about being a Christian parent today is there are so many good children's Bibles and storybooks.

And one by Sally Lloyd-Jones is called the Jesus Storybook Bible, and it has the subtitle that I love. It says, Every Story Whispers His Name.

Every Story Whispers His Name. That is really the loveliest and the best way to read the Bible is listening for Jesus, looking to see how it points to Him.

There are a lot of things that the Old Testament teaches us. The Old Testament teaches us about who God is, about who we are, about what God requires of us, what God has done for us, or what has happened in the world.

It gives us good examples like Joshua and Caleb. But what is the book of Joshua ultimately all about and pointing to?

[2:56] It's pointing to Jesus. Every Story Whispers His Name. And that's what we see in Joshua chapter 20. That's what Jesus thought when He thought about the Old Testament.

When He read His Old Testament, He saw Himself. John 5.39, You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life.

These are the very Scriptures that testify about me. Not me. Every Story Whispers His Name. And so, parents or Sunday school teachers, how do you teach the Old Testament?

Well, Luke 24.27, Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.

How do you teach the Old Testament? How do you teach the Bible? Is it primarily about us? Or is it primarily about what we need to do?

[3:57] And I think Jesus would say, Well, there is things about you in there. And there's things about what you need to do. But beginning with Moses and the prophets, He taught them in all the Scriptures about what it was saying about Him.

I have a book on my bookshelf called Give Them Christ. It's a book for pastors, I think. And basically, it says whatever you do, pastors, you need to give them Christ.

Give your people Christ. Give them Christ born, Christ living, Christ dead, Christ alive. You have to give them Christ. One of my favorite quotes are, I'm not going to get it exactly, but it's from Charles Spurgeon.

And he said, You know, when I can't find Jesus in a passage of the Bible, I cut through all the hedges and I go through all the lanes until I find Him. I don't let the normal roads keep me where they want to keep me.

Instead, I get to Jesus. I find Jesus. And so tonight in Joshua 20, here we are. We're going to be talking about these cities of refuge. And right in the middle of all of this territory and land and names and cities and people, you have these six cities saying, Jesus is coming.

[5:24] He is coming. A refuge is coming. They point to Him. And so the sermon is going to be really divided into two main parts. The first part is just looking at the cities in and of themselves and what they can teach us.

And then looking at how they point forward to Jesus. And so let's first just beginning in Joshua 20, look at what these cities were all about. And they're pretty self-explanatory.

We don't need to spend a lot of time on them, but we do want to take some lessons from them and apply them in the way we think and what we do. And so what were they?

What were they for? And the answer for that question begins with the Levites. Chapter 20 are these cities of refuge. Chapter 21, you'll see if you have the NIV and probably most other translations, it has the heading towns for the Levites.

And those were actually two separate categories. The Levites were given 48 cities altogether. Remember, they never got a land, a piece, a big chunk of territory all themselves.

[6:29] Instead, they received 48 cities scattered throughout all of Israel. And out of those 48 cities, six of them were set aside or designated as cities of refuge.

Now, there were three cities in the east, three cities in the east and three cities in the west, three cities east of the Jordan, three cities west of the Jordan.

And one pair was in the north, one pair was in the middle, and one pair was in the south. And if anyone needed to flee to one of these cities, one was always nearby.

That's the geography of them. They were close. Well, what were they for? Well, you see it right here in verse 3. So that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood.

Now, Joshua 20 is not the first time that these cities of refuge show up. Back in Deuteronomy 19, they are explained in a fuller way.

[7:39] And so what I want you to do is take your Bibles, turn to Deuteronomy chapter 19. Deuteronomy is just the book back there. And Deuteronomy 19. And we're just going to read the first six or seven verses.

And I guess the only thing I want to comment on at the beginning is you're going to see is that in Deuteronomy 19, it says three cities. And I think what they're talking about are three cities in the promised land proper and on the west side of the Jordan.

He's not talking about all six here, but he's just giving the emphasis on these three. So Deuteronomy 19, one through seven. When the Lord your God has destroyed the nations whose land he is giving you, and when you have driven them out and settled in their towns and houses, then set aside for yourselves three cities centrally located in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess.

Build roads to them. Build roads to them and divide into three parts of the land the Lord your God has given you as an inheritance so that anyone who kills a man may flee there.

This is the rule concerning the man who kills another and flees there to save his life. One who kills his neighbor unintentionally without malice of forethought.

[9:06] For instance, a man may go into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood and he swings his axe to fell a tree and 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. 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 of forethought.

This is why I command you to set aside for yourselves these three cities. Now, you see what they are for. It's not just for everyone who wanted to get out of jail free card.

It wasn't something like that. It was if you had killed someone accidentally. Those were the people that could run there. And so you read of these two men, these two friends. They go out into the woods and they're chopping wood.

And one person pulls his axe back and the axe head flies off and hits his friend and kills him. Now, that man could flee to one of these cities to be protected.

[10:19] Now, in that culture, there wasn't police force. There wasn't a big system, a big court system.

Generally, justice was very much handled on a smaller scale. And it wasn't really generally done by the government, but instead it was done by families and cities.

And in that culture, the cities were even clans. And so we're talking families and larger families. And so in that culture, the next of kin, the next person closely related to him, was given the task of hunting down and bringing to justice anyone who had killed someone in his family.

And it was eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life. And it didn't matter in that primitive system.

And it wasn't just in Israel, but this was a system in all of that area. It didn't matter in that primitive system if it was accidental or if it was intentional.

[11:33] If someone killed your brother, it was your right and it was your prerogative to go and take their life from them. The avenger of blood.

You had robbed someone's family. You had robbed someone's family of a father or of a brother or of a son. And so it was your life for his life.

It was a very personal way of dealing justice. Now, into that not altogether perfect system, rather imperfect system, it's better than nothing.

But John Calvin says God was dealing with Israel as he found him at this point. You remember what Jesus said about divorce.

The Pharisees were saying, yeah, it's okay to get a divorce. You just make sure you do the right procedure. You get the certificate of divorce. And divorce is okay. God doesn't mind. But Jesus answered, no, no, no.

[12:36] But because of the hardness of your hearts, God allowed that. He permitted divorce for certain situations. But it wasn't that way from the beginning. Now, so in some ways, the law met Israel.

At least some of these laws met Israel where they were and guided them and kept them from going too far. And I think that's what, to some degree, is going on here.

And so this is a system that will work to some degree, where personal justice is being meted out. But it's a system with certain dangers.

You can read, and history is just marked by these things, of these things turning into feuds. And where, 100 years ago, this feud started, and now the families are killing each other.

And so this system needed qualifications. And one qualification was these cities of refuge. If a man who had accidentally killed a person, he shouldn't die the death of a murderer without any refuge, without any place to hide.

[13:44] And so God, in his mercy, commanded these cities to be built all around the land to rescue men from a punishment that's too harsh for what they had done.

And so that's these cities, and that's what they were for. That's what God was doing with them. And we want to pause here, and we just want to ask, what does all that teach us?

And what can we take away from that? Because it is a very sobering thing. Even in this situation, where it was a total accident, the death of a person was taken very seriously.

And you see, first of all, just the value that God puts on human life. The value that God puts on human life.

You see it in the person who had accidentally killed someone. He doesn't get off scot-free. He doesn't get to go back, at least right away. And maybe not for a long time.

[14:51] He doesn't get to go back to be with his family. Because that city of refuge, as one person put it, is both a refuge and a prison.

Because you don't get to leave. If you leave, your life can be taken. And he can't leave until the death of the high priest. And so if the avenger of blood finds him, he can put him to death.

And so you see the value that God is putting on human life, even if it's accidentally taken. Accidentally killing someone is serious and life-altering. That man had a family.

That man had children. That man was part of a community. And so if the person who had done it, even on accident, if he was going to escape, he had to leave his family.

And leave his job. And leave his town. And he had to flee to someplace else. God takes human life seriously. All the way back in Genesis 9, after the flood, when God is sort of establishing a long-term peace with this world.

[16:04] And providing a context where salvation could come. Part of that covenant that he made with Noah was this. He said, from each man, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.

So who is your brother's keeper? Well, you are. You are. I will hold you accountable for them.

God refuses to let us just live as entities, as people, all to ourselves. Instead, he says, you're accountable for what you do with them and how you treat them.

I will hold you accountable. And then he said, whoever sheds the blood of a man, by man shall his blood be shed. For in the image of God has God made man. And so let me just put it simple and straight.

We're the image bearers of God. And therefore, God takes our lives very seriously. Every single man, woman, boy, girl is an image bearer.

[17:06] And that idea of being in the image of God has just two ideas really put together. The first is it means that you're a child of God in a generic sense, in the sense that we all are.

In the first genealogies in the book of Genesis, it says that Seth was a son, was made or was born in the image of Adam.

And that's telling us something. That just as Adam was made in the image of God, so Seth was made in the image of Adam. They had this father-son relationship.

And Adam himself is called the son of God in Luke chapter 3. And so who are you? Who are you? Well, no matter if you're a Christian or not, you're a child of God in that sense.

You're not the son of God. That's Jesus. You're not a son of God like a Christian is, adopted into the family with all the rights and privileges, but still a son of God, one of his children.

[18:12] And that's not just me saying that. Paul, speaking to the people in Athens in Acts chapter 17, he says, As some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring.

Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we shouldn't think the divine being is like gold or silver. So image bearers are offspring. They're children.

They're image bearers of God. And they're children of God. And they're also these broadcasters. They're picturing what God is like. And that's why Paul says, we can't think of God as being made out of silver and gold because we're his image bearers.

And we're not made out of silver and gold. So when we think of God, we need to think of someone who's talking and moving and active and planning and ruling.

He's a ruling person. And so God takes all human life seriously because we are image bearers. You take your own children's life seriously.

[19:14] God takes all of his children, generically speaking, their life seriously. He's created us to be different and special from his other creatures.

And so that means abortion is wrong. And that means even though that fight is a long fight and an uphill one, we can't give up on that because God takes all human life seriously.

God holds us accountable for our fellow man's life. And that means we can't be reckless drivers. And I'm not just talking about driving too fast, although I'm talking about that.

I'm talking about what we do with these phones and our texting and driving. Not paying attention to what you're doing while you're driving that 15 foot, one ton steel thing down the road.

God takes human life seriously. Your own human life and others. He holds me accountable. Another application is how we should care for our own life.

[20:30] How we should care about our own life. I watched a really sad and yet very enlightening video of this guy who just had bariatric surgery, had surgery on his stomach to make it smaller.

He was extremely overweight. He was like 550 pounds. And he said, he talked about, he used to go to the doctor. And the doctor would say, if you keep eating the way you're doing, if you keep going the way you're going, you're going to be dead in three years.

And that meant, he said, and I would leave the doctor's office happy. And I would go to the buffet and I would eat as much as I could because I wanted to die.

He was hoping to die. But God cares about your life. He cares about how you, what you do.

And so it can't be, oh, this body is just temporary and who cares? That's not biblical. That body is you. That body is part of the image bearing that you have of God.

[21 : 41] And God cares about it and he takes it seriously. And you see that. You see that God takes human life seriously. That's the first lesson here. Your life and others.

The second practical lesson is something in Joshua chapter 20, verse 9. And so maybe you're in Deuteronomy. But Joshua chapter 20, verse 9 answers the question of who are these cities for?

Who can run to these cities? And it says in verse 9, any of the Israelites or any alien, that's an immigrant, living among them who killed someone accidentally could flee to these designated cities.

Any Israelite or any alien immigrant too. So whose life did God care about? Whose life did God say, I want to guard and I want to keep safe?

It just it wasn't just Israelites. It was for even the immigrants who they were looking for a better life or they were living there for whatever reason. If they were there and this happened to them, they could run.

[22 : 56] And the Levites in charge of the town weren't supposed to say, well, sorry, this isn't for you. They were to let him in. He protected them. It wasn't a special rule for the native born and then another set of rules for the foreigners.

And really, I can't emphasize how unusual that would have been for this period. Because it was normal. It was the norm that there were two sets of rules.

Rules for the people who are citizens and then whatever, all the leftovers for everyone else. Even in Rome, which Rome was known for its justice.

We take many of our laws and principles from Rome. And there were privileged citizens and then there were everyone else. And there were basically two ways that you could be treated for any crime based on who you were.

And so you remember Paul. He was taken in front of authorities and they were getting ready to flog him. And he said, oh, can you really flog a citizen without being convicted of a crime?

[24 : 15] And they're like, oh, sorry. Sorry, we didn't know. We didn't know. But Jesus wasn't a citizen. So they beat him.

And they flogged him. Even though Pilate said he's not guilty of anything. But he was a foreigner. Paul was given the quick death as a citizen.

Church history tells us that Paul was beheaded quick and easy. Jesus' death was the death of an alien. Of a foreigner.

He was crucified. And so that's the rules of men. That's the heart of men. Where we say, you're one of us.

Extra privileges. Special rule. Not one of us. Sorry. But God's love and God's mercy and God's justice protects both the homegrown and the foreigner.

[25 : 15] And there's something there for us to learn. There's some attitude there for us to emulate. God's justice and God's mercy does not have borders. God's love does not have the same political borders that our love so often has.

That our attitude has. Some have used these cities of refuge. Some Christians have used this idea of cities of refuge to provide a biblical basis for sanctuary cities.

That you're hearing so much about in the news. And I don't think we can go that far. We can't make that far of a leap. They're way far apart. But I think the Bible does push us to have a position that's neither liberal nor conservative.

That is a distinctly third way. Where it's love and mercy meeting for all. So, those are some practical lessons.

[26:23] Some practical lessons. Now, what I want to do with the second part is just look at how do these cities show us about Jesus? And the Bible does make this connection between Jesus and these cities of refuge.

In Hebrews chapter 6 verse 18, Christians are called those to who are... Christians are those who have fled to Jesus for refuge.

And the word is the very same word. In the Old Testament translation or interpretation in the Greek, the Old Testament Greek, and the New Testament Greek, it's the very same word.

And that's what I want to spend the rest of our time on. There are some ways that Jesus is just like these cities. And there are some ways that Jesus is even better than these cities.

And that's what I want to spend our time on because I want to get to Jesus. And it's good for us to see our Savior painted for us in the Old Testament. Because we're going to have to run to Jesus, each one of us.

[27:31] We've all done it. And all of us as Christians, we have done that. And we're going to have to do it again. And we're going to have to run to Jesus. And so, what do these cities teach us about our Savior?

Well, the first is this, that Jesus is easy to reach. He's easy to reach. You remember there's six of these cities and they're scattered.

And they're all throughout the land. And it wasn't, and did you catch it? You're to build a road to each of these cities. It wasn't go through the woods and go through the forest and down in the ditches and through the briars.

It wasn't any of that. It was build the road so that it's clear sailing. Extra biblical, you know, ancient, non-biblical sources, the ancient Jewish rabbis, said that bridges were built over every river going towards these cities.

And at every crossroads, there would be a huge sign that said, Refuge that way. Every crossroad had a sign pointing, Refuge that way.

[28:37] And Hebrews 16, 6.18 says, That's what we've done. We fled to Jesus for refuge. And just like those cities of refuge, Jesus is easy to reach.

He says, cry out to me. He says, call and I'll be there. I'll save you. You'll find me. I'm here. And Jesus is just like these cities of refuge. Because anyone can run to Jesus.

It's not just for the extra good person. It's not just for the church person. It's not Jew or Greek. Someone could come off the street, never coming to church, living a terrible, sinful, outwardly wicked life.

Come in here and come to Jesus. And he'll receive them. The cities of refuge never locked their gates. The gates were always wide open.

The ancient rabbis said, and who knows if this is true, but they said, even in times of war, these cities kept their gates open so that whoever wanted to run into them could be saved.

[29:42] And Jesus' hands are always wide open. And he said, run into me. I'll keep you safe. I'll rescue your soul from death. Well, how else is Jesus like these cities?

Well, you have to run to him. You have to run to him. If you didn't run, you weren't safe.

It was that simple. If you decided, I'm going to stay here with my family, I'm going to stay here with my things, I'm going to stay here at my farm, you weren't safe. The avenger of blood would cut you down.

You had to run. You couldn't stay where you were. You couldn't stay in that old life. You had to run. You had to go somewhere else. You had to do something different.

And in the same way, you have to get to Jesus. Well, how do you get there? You run. Well, how fast do you have to run? You run as fast as you can. How far do you have to run?

[30:37] As far as you have to. Until you get there. Until you get there. I'm afraid that some people run for a day.

They feel convicted. They feel afraid. And they run for a day. And then they ask, well, am I there yet? Am I saved yet? And they quit running.

I've ran and nothing's happened. Well, if you've ran and nothing's happened, you didn't run far enough. You've got to run to Jesus. Plead with Jesus. Beg Jesus. Until he says, you're safe.

Until he welcomed you in. You can't say, well, I've ran. And I hope I'm saved. Well, you run until you get there. Until Jesus himself, by the Spirit, whispers. You're safe.

You're here. And you couldn't stand around. You can't stand around wondering, am I elect or not?

[31:41] Does God predestine me or not? If your axe flew and hit your friend and killed him, and the avenger of blood came after you, no one ever said, I wonder if God has predestined me to get to the city or not.

I'm not going to run until I know that I'm going to, I know for sure that God is going to make me get there. If it's God's plan to save me, if I'll somehow, I'll make it.

No, you had to run. You had to run. And there was no time for philosophy talks. There was no time for trying to read God's mind. You ran. You ran.

And so, if you're lost here, while you're pondering and pretending to try to think, trying to figure out what God is thinking, I just want to say, the avenger of blood is coming.

He's coming. Consuming fire. It says, vengeance is mine. I will repay. Revelation 19 shows him as a sword coming out of his mouth.

[32:58] And the blood splashing up on his garment. And then what will become of you? Armies and kings will be slaughtered.

And so what will become of you? So you flee to Jesus for refuge. You flee there. And you don't stop running until you get there.

Just in the last few minutes, how is Jesus better than any city of refuge? How is he better than any city of refuge? Well, in some ways, he's closer.

He's closer. The word, the Bible's word is repent. It's turn around. Turn around and face God.

Turn away from your sin. And turning around. It's just turning around. And there he is. Repent. And you'll find him.

[34:04] Another way that Jesus is better than any city of refuge is who is the city of refuge for? This is the big difference. City of refuge, the cities of refuge were for the innocent.

They were for the innocent. Murderers who ran there were handed over to the avenger of blood and the avenger of blood put them to death. So how much better?

I mean, you had to run there and you had to eventually stand trial and you had to prove your innocence. And if you couldn't prove your innocence, you were turned out and you were left for dead. So how much better is Jesus?

Because Jesus doesn't just take, he doesn't take the innocent. He takes the guilty. So what a refuge. He doesn't only hide the good, he hides the bad.

And he's the refuge for me. He's the refuge I need. Because I know I'm murdered in my heart. And I've committed a thousand and million other sins.

[35 : 07] I'm not the innocent one. I'm not going to be able to run up to the gates and present my case and say, this is what happened and this is why it's okay. I'm innocent. I'm not going to be able to say that.

No one can say that. And so that's what Jesus is so much better because we can run to him guilty with no arguments. And Jesus says, I've come to save sinners.

And I'm able to save to the uttermost all who come to God through me. Anyone who takes refuge in me, I can keep them safe and I can hold them fast. Jesus saves the innocent, or the guilty, not the innocent.

And his arms are open wide. He says, today is the day of salvation. Today is the day of salvation. So if you're lost, or even if you're just guilty, feeling the guilt of your sin, well, you have a Savior to run to.

You have a refuge to hide in. And Jesus is there saying, my arms are open. My heart is open. Come. And I'll wash you.

[36 : 29] It is one of the interesting things that it wasn't until the death of the high priest that anyone was released. No one was released from those cities until the death of the high priest.

And there's been a lot of speculation about what that meant. But I think at least points to something, this truth, that someone really had to die for that sin.

Someone had to die before anyone could be set free. And it had to be the high priest. And we've had a high priest who has died for us.

And because he died, we're set free. And so Jesus is not a refuge and a prison. He's merely a refuge that we can run to and hide.

And he sets us free. And he sets us to live. So Jesus is just like these cities of refuge. And Jesus is, in other ways, so much better.

[37 : 30] And so I want to encourage each and every one of us, when you've sinned, you have a city to go to. You have a Savior to go to. And so run to him. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you. We thank you that you've given us such a Savior, such a refuge. So we come just as we are and pray that someone would be coming right here, right now, for the first time, of seeing their sin and knowing that they need to have dealings with the Lord Jesus.

Thank you that Jesus meets us when we run to him. And he welcomes us in. We could hide in his blood and his righteousness.

Pray that you would teach us more of your love and your mercy. Give us more of your wide-open, generous heart. and less of our selfish, small hearts.

Please be our good God this evening and as we go into this coming week. Help us to go with confidence and expectation and hope, trusting in your promises, holding on to the gospel that Jesus saves sinners.

[39 : 01] and I might be the worst of sinners, but he has saved me. So help us to go in the joy of that. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.