

Joshua 19:1-9

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I. Intro

Joshua now brings his readers to special cities within the land of promise, places that apparently had a special place in the heart of God. According Numbers 35:9-28 and Deuteronomy 19:1-13 there were to be three cities located in the land of promise and three cities located within the land of the 2 ½ tribes situated east of the Jordan. Further more according to Numbers 35:6 these were to be found among the 48 cities given to the Levites.

I think many folks become proud of the cities they dwell in. Lots of cities place near the entrance of the city plaques telling of high school state championships won or famous people who were born there. Garrison Keillor writes about his mythical home town "Lake Wobegon" by saying that it is a place where, "*All the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.*" Yet God chose the cities that were special to Him not based upon victories won or important people who heralded for them but rather they were designed to be locations where those in need could come and receive His love and truth. All of this reminds me of what His church is to be today, "Cities of refuge".

II. Vs. 1-6 A place for you

Vs. 1-3 What isn't immediately apparent is the reason for these cities. First one needs to understand that Israel was a theocratic ruled nation, truly they were "*one nation under God*". As such, society centered on being people in fellowship with God and because of that with one another. There was no police force, no prisons to maintain order it was the duty of society to ensure law, order and justice. It was the responsibility of the nearest relative to execute justice upon the individual responsible for taking the life of their loved one. But to insure that this was not abused the person responsible for the death of a person could flee to a city of refuge for safety until the leaders of the city of refuge could determine whether or not the death was in anger or premeditated or accidental. If the death was premeditated or in anger not accidental than the guilty individual was turned over to the closest male relative for their execution. If it was found that the person's death was accidental they were to remain in the city of refuge until the High Priest died, then they could go back home. Their safety was guaranteed only in as much as they stayed within the walls of the city of refuge if they ventured out side the walls they could be killed by the avenger of blood.

The purpose of the cities of refuge was to protect the slayer who kills any person accidentally or unintentionally. They were to protect someone in the case of manslaughter as opposed to murder. The Hebrew word for "*avenger of blood*" is *goel* the same word used to describe what Boaz was to Ruth "*kinsman redeemer*". In this context means the representative from the victim's family charged with making sure justice is carried out against the murderer of the family member.

The principle for capital punishment goes back to Genesis 9:6 where the Lord said, "*Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man.*" There is a great amount of folks who have a problem with capital punishment but it appears God doesn't if the person deliberately killed another person than the guilty person is to lose their life end of story. There was no appeal, no lengthy stay in a jail they were taken out and executed by the victim's closest family member and all of society was safe.

I watched an add appealing for compassion from people to take action and adopt a pet before they are euthanized which I have no problem with. Yet as I watched this add I could help but wonder where the adds are that speak of the 100's of thousand innocent children who have been yanked from the safety of their mother's womb euthanized under the lie of it's just tissue. ***What kind of society do we have where the guilty are protected and the innocent are put to death?*** In Philadelphia the City of Brotherly Love is often now called Murder City, USA or Killadelphia due to the insane number of murders that occur at a rate of sometimes more than 1

per day. And yet most of these crimes go unpunished. According to Deut. 17:6-7 *“Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness. The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall put away the evil from among you.”* So the avenger of blood tracked down the murderer, and if necessary, delivered him over to the authorities for execution. Since the avenger of blood might set himself against a person really guilty of manslaughter (accidental or unintentional killing) instead of murder, the cities of refuge were established to protect the person innocent of murder.

Vs. 4 Deuteronomy 19:3 tells us that they were to *“Build roads to them and divide into three parts the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, so that anyone who kills a man may flee there.”* Ancient Jewish historians tell us that bridges were to be built over ravines so that fugitives could take the shortest route possible. The roads had to be repaired regularly and at every cross road special large signs that read **“Refuge! Refuge!”** had to point the fugitive in the right direction so that in their haste they could without any confusion or delay make their way to safety. The gates of the cities of refuge were always to remain unlocked even at night or during times of war.

Hey friend so too is the arms of Jesus always open to those who will but run to Him. Jesus said in John 6:37 *“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.”* Then in Rev. 22:17 we are told that *“the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.”* Though the cities were open to all ill regardless of who they were there was no hope offered to those who would not run to the city of refuge. Today all are pursued by the avenger called “death” and he will over take all who do not run to Jesus our refuge. In Hebrews 6:18 we read that those *“who have fled for refuge...lay hold of the hope set before us.”*

How amazing is it to realize that the person was to live amongst the people of God in a city given to the Levites until their guilt or innocence was determined. Now if they were determined to be guilty of murder they were given over to the avenger of blood for their execution. But **think of the time that God gave them to get their hearts right amongst the children of God.** Now if they were found not guilty they had to remain in that city until the High Priest died. So **again we see them kept in fellowship with the people of God growing in grace and knowledge.**

Vs. 5 There were two types of cities that were designated by God as *“Special Cities”* as we shall note in chapter 21 there were the 48 cities of the Levites and here in this chapter we see that there were the 6 cities of refuge which just so happened to also be Levitical cities as well. All were scattered about the **12 tribes on both sides of the Jordan.** The avenger of blood had no legal standing to deliver the slayer over to execution. Israel had a sophisticated legal system, with judgments often based on intent and premeditation.

Now that is interesting in its self that **God extended these cities equally towards those who chose to live outside His promise land.** The conclusion I draw from this is that **God is gracious and merciful even towards those who have chosen to live away from what He has for them.** Paul wrote to the Romans in 2:4 that it is *“the goodness of God leads you to repentance”*. **I can only surmise that His intent in providing these special cities to the 2 ½ tribes outside of the land of promise was to give them something that they clearly didn’t serve so that they would see that there was much more of that for them on the other side of the Jordan if they were only willing to cross over.**

Vs. 6 The elders of the city of refuge became the police force, detective, judge and jury to determine if the person was guilty of malice towards the death of another. These cities had no design to let off the person guilty of murder, no provision was given the person who with hate in the heart and killed another it only protected the person who accidentally was responsible for the death of another. And even in that case they had to remain in the city until the High Priest of the nation died and only after that were they free to leave and go back home to continue their life. Francis Schaeffer makes three points with regards to these cities:

1. The instituting of these cities spoke of the fact that **God didn’t treat life lightly.** These cities “emphasized the value of man made in God’s image.” Their institution was motivated by the same concern that required death for a murderer. Human life in God’s image is so valuable that none should be tossed aside or destroyed unless that life has

~~destroyed another life intentionally or to save life from being destroyed.~~ God's existence and character point to the fact that we live in a moral universe and murder breaks the law of God's nature and character.

2. These cites were **open to the foreigner as well as the citizen which suggests that God's law went beyond just His chosen people to all people.** The foreigner enjoyed the same rights as the citizen as God is no respecter of persons as all are under His domain. Thus these are **universal laws and truths not situational or changeable based upon what society they are in.**
3. Finally, the fact that these cites of refuge also were Levitical cities suggests that **God's moral standard was never apart from a relationship with Him.** There was **no civil authority or social morality apart from His character and because of this such things as right and wrong were not ever to be at the whim of people. Law that comes from a loving holy God is fixed not relative and not for sale at the hands of any human government.**

III. Vs. 7-9 Jesus our refuge

Vs. 7-8 First of all this is not the only place where we will find a reverence to these cites, in fact the 20th chapter of Joshua is nothing more than the implication of what God had told Moses in Exodus 21, Numbers 35 and Deut. Chapter 4:41-43 and chapter 19:1-10. It is in reading all of the words from God with regards to these cites that we learn that these 6 cites should be accessible by being scattered around the land, visible being in high places, with roads that are to be regularly maintained and signage that pointed the way. All of this was to make sure that the person who had killed another person without hating him in their heart could flee to a city and be protected from the nearest relative who was responsible for making sure justice was provided for the family of the victim. So we see that Victim's rights as well as the defendant's rights were both established.

Joshua set apart three cities of refuge on each side of the Jordan River. On the west side, Kedesh was farthest north, in the territory of Naphtali; Shechem was in the middle of the nation in the tribe of Manasseh; and Hebron was in the south in the tribe of Judah. On the east side of the Jordan, the cities were Golan in the north in Manasseh, Ramoth in Gad, and Bezer farther south in the tribe of Reuben. Since the Holy Land is about the size of the state of Maryland, no matter where you were in Israel, you were not very far from a city of refuge.

The meanings of the names of the cities are interesting. Taking them in the order listed in Joshua 20:7-8, you have:

- A. Kedesh = "righteousness"
- B. Shechem = "shoulder"
- C. Hebron = "fellowship"
- D. Bezer = "fortress" or "strong"
- E. Ramoth = "heights."
- F. Golan = according to the Gesenius Lexicon says it means "exile."

Hey wait a minute isn't this what happens to you and me when we flee by faith to Jesus? He gives us His "*righteousness*", so that we can never be accused again. Our "*Shepherd*", carries us on His "*shoulders*" as we enter into "*fellowship*" with Him. He is our "*fortress*" where by we dwell in the "*heights*" of His love even though they are "*exiles*" and strangers in this world. So how about it friends have you fled to your refuge in Jesus?

Vs. 9 Based upon this verse we learn that the cities of refuge were not only for the benefit of the Israelite, but also for the stranger who sojourned among them. In other words, God's justice applied to all without partiality.

Now it doesn't take much to see how these cites relate to Jesus:

- Psalm 46:1: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. More than 15 other times, the Psalms speak of God as our refuge.
- Both Jesus and the cities of refuge are within easy reach of the needy person; they were of no use unless someone could get to the place of refuge.
- Both Jesus and the cities of refuge are open to all, not just the Israelite; no one needs to fear that they would be turned away from their place of refuge in their time of need.
- Both Jesus and the cities of refuge became a place where the one in need would live; you didn't come to a city of refuge in time of need just to look around.

- Both Jesus and the cities of refuge are the only alternative for the one in need; without this specific protection, they will be destroyed.
- Both Jesus and the cities of refuge provide protection only within their boundaries; to go outside means death.
- With both Jesus and the cities of refuge, full freedom comes with the death of the High Priest.

The only difference is that the cities of refuge only helped the innocent, but the guilty can come to Jesus and find refuge.