

Our City of Refuge
Joshua 20:1-9 & Numbers 35:9-15

The Scottish Highlands are a beautiful, mountainous and one of the most sparsely populated regions in all of Europe.

Picture of Jacobite Train -

- Harry Potter and his friends rode the Jacobite steam train and not Hogwarts Express.
- *Rob Roy* was filmed there, as was
- *Braveheart* and the animated film,
- *Brave* was inspired by the geography.

It is a very rich vacation area but in the Covid-19 pandemic, residents have warned visitors that the Highlands is not the place to retreat from the plague-drenched world.

Regardless of the pandemic, there is no real safe 'place' in the world.

The safest 'place' to be is always in the will of God

But what do you do if you need to hide? Where can you go to be safe?

Exodus 21:12-13 - *Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. ¹³ But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee.*

This is not first, second- or third-degree murder. It isn't justifiable homicide. It's really accidental death. But regardless of it being accidental, the family of a deceased person might seek vengeance.

And so God gave these instructions to Israel.

Then the LORD said to Joshua, ² "Say to the people of Israel, 'Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, ³ that the manslayer who strikes any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there. They shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood. ⁴ 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. ⁵ And if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not give up the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unknowingly, and did not hate him in the past. ⁶ 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 manslayer may return to his own town and his own home, to the town from which he fled.'" So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-

arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. ⁸ 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 Manasseh. ⁹ These were the cities designated for all the people of Israel and for the stranger sojourning among them, that anyone 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.

In these cities, we see God's mercy emphasized to Israel. It's the kind of thing we have been praying for during the crisis that takes lives.

First: The Command to Establish the Cities. 1-2

Then the LORD said to Joshua, ² "Say to the people of Israel, 'Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses

There are six cities where a person who has committed accidental murder may flee for safety.

Seven in scripture is a number of perfection or completion. There are six cities here because they only protect the physical life and not the spiritual life.

These cities represent incomplete refuge because they can't save what is most important; your soul, and their safety is only temporary and not eternal.

Second: The Definition of Murder. 3

Note: These are not examples of proposed sanctuary cities in the United States. These are places of refuge for people who have accidentally killed someone else. The point of a city of refuge was to ensure the accused received a fair trial and it was the job of a city of refuge to see that he/she got it. Modern cities of refuge are replaced by 'due process' in America. Sanctuary cities, in contrast, do not exist to protect due process but to forego it. Cities of refuge ensured a person received their day in court. Sanctuary cities help people avoid their day in court. They exist to enable the guilty to escape punishment. Cities of refuge tempered lawlessness. Sanctuary cities encourage it.

³ that the manslayer who strikes any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there. They shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood.

There is a biblical difference between murder which is killing someone without malice or forethought, and unintentionally causing someone's death. In the first case, the state has the responsibility to address the matter. But, in the second situation, if the state opts not to take action, a family member might be tempted to take matters into their own hands. The Bible calls his person -

V 5 - "Avenger of blood" = HB / *go-el had-am* = also translated kinsman redeemer

A kinsman redeemer is the person who has legal right to fulfil an obligation. The role of kinsman-redeemer is found in Leviticus 25, in the case of an Israelite man's death in which he fails to leave behind a son, the brother of the deceased man is commanded to take his widow as wife and both redeem the land and provide a son to carry on the deceased father's name.

The most famous case of a kinsman redeemer is Boaz who avenged Elimelech's death by taking Ruth as his wife.

But in this case, the avenger is not on a mission to preserve life but to take it. In those cases there are -

Third: The Specific Instructions. 4-6

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. ⁵ And if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not give up the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor unknowingly, and did not hate him in the past. ⁶ 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 manslayer may return to his own town and his own home, to the town from which he fled."

Anyone who committed manslaughter was commanded to flee to a city of refuge and explain the circumstances to the elders of the city.

If the elders were convinced, then the person was welcomed into the city. The elders insured:

- a) An appropriate trial took place in the home city (Numbers 35:24-25)
- b) The person remained there until the high priest dies, at which point the accused person could return home with no fear of reprisal

As long as the high priest lived, the accused person had to remain within the walls. If he ventured outside its walls at any time, the avenger of blood was free to take his life. It was in the best interest of the fugitive to stay securely inside the city.

You remember the High Priest. He represented Israel before God on the day of Atonement when Israel's sins were transferred to an animal sacrifice and guilt was removed for another year.

The death of the high priest symbolically atones for the guilt of the person who committed manslaughter.

Fourth: The Listing of the Cities. 7-8

Three of these cities are on the Western side of Jordan and three of them are on the Eastern side of Jordan. No place in Israel was more than a single day's journey from one of the cities of refuge.

- a) Kedesh, in the northwest, signifying "righteousness."
- b) Shechem, in Central Palestine, west of the Jordan, meaning "a shoulder,"
- c) Hebron, in Southwestern Palestine = "friendship and love."
- d) Bezer, signifying "security."
- e) Ramoth, which means "heights."
- f) Golan, the last, means "a circle," signifying the everlasting things.

Fifth: The Final Instructions. 9

These were the cities designated for all the people of Israel and for the stranger sojourning among them, that anyone 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.

- The cities were not only for Israel but for any Gentile who lived in Israel or any foreigner passing through the nation.
- They were accessible from all places and to all people.
- The roads that led to them were always kept in good repair, at the expense of the government.
- The way was always open, both day and night, for any fugitive that should fly to the asylum.
- The gates of the city were continually open, and persons there to welcome the fugitive the moment he might arrive, and to provide him with every necessity of life.
- No one was allowed to obstruct his progress on his journey. Everybody made way for him.
- There was no possibility of mistaking the way, for at every crossing, and often along the way, were mile posts and inscriptions, pointing in the right direction, and the word "Refuge" written on each post, so that he could read even while he ran.

Habakkuk 2:2 - Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it.

Sixth: The Jesus these Cities Represent.

In the most unique of all circumstances,

a) we are guilty of the death of Jesus

but in the most unique case,

b) His death secures our freedom

Amazingly, we flee to Christ, the very person who died in our place, and state our case. We don't defend ourselves but confess we are sons of Adam and deserve to die. We have taken a life, the life of Christ, but unknowingly and unwillingly.

In his mercy, God grants us entrance into Christ where we are saved by the death and life of our high priest.

Hebrews 7:23-25 - *The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, ²⁴but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. ²⁵Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*

He died. We were saved. Now he's alive forevermore. We are eternally saved.

Think about the six cities again.

- a) Christ is our righteousness. 1 Cor 1:30
- b) He bears us on his shoulders. Luke 15:4
- c) He grants us his friendship and love. 1 John 1:3
- d) In him we are secure. Psalm 91:2; Prov 18:10
- e) He is our security and. Eph 1:13-14
- f) he takes us to eternal heights. John 10:28

Psalm 9:9 - *The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold [refuge] in times of trouble.*

Psalm 62:6-8 - *⁶He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. ⁷On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God. ⁸Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. Selah*

Hebrews 6:18 - *we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.*

We have fled to Jesus Christ, and He is our eternal refuge. As our High Priest, He will never die (Hebrews 7:23-25); and we have eternal salvation.

Seventh: Our Eternal City

Revelation 21:22 – *And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.*

*When overwhelmed with grief
My heart within me dies;
Helpless, and far from all relief,
To heaven I lift mine eyes.*

*Oh, lead me to the Rock
That's high above my head;
And make the covert of thy wings
My shelter and my shade.*

*Within thy presence, Lord,
Forever I'll abide;
Thou art the tower of my defence,
The refuge where I hide.*

Conclusion: The sinner was required to do three things:

- a) Flee
- b) Cry
- c) Stay

We must do the same!

Community Groups:

- 1 - Why were the cities of refuge established?
- 2 - How many were there?
- 3 - Where were they?
- 4 - What is the biblical definition of murder?
- 5 - What is the biblical definition of manslaughter?
- 6 - For whom were the cities of refuge established?
- 7 - Why would a person guilty of manslaughter run to a city of refuge?
- 8 - What must he do when he arrived?

9 – What was the responsibility of the elders?

10 – How long was a person safe in the city of refuge?

11 – What happened when the High Priest died?

12 – How is Christ our city of refuge?

13 – How is Christ our High Priest?

14 – How do the names of the cities of refuge depict all that Jesus does for us?

15 – Are you resting in Jesus as your refuge? What is taking your peace and joy from you even though you are safe in Him?

16 – How might you be a city of refuge for those who are guilty of sin?

17 – For whom particularly are you or could you be a city of refuge during the Covid-19 pandemic?

18 – Like Jesus, what could you do for someone who needs refuge during this crisis?

19 – Take time to pray for those you know who need refuge in Jesus.

Important note: The avenger seeking our death is not Satan but God.

According to John 3:16, our greatest need is to be saved from perishing. But what does *perish* mean? The best way to answer is to consider biblical statements that illuminate this teaching. Two verses earlier Jesus said, “*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*” Jesus was referring to a deadly episode in Israel’s history that we read about only last month in our ‘Read through the Bible’ program. During the exodus, the people had complained against God, so the Lord sent fiery serpents among them, and many people were bitten and died. This illustrates the warning in John 3:16 that without God’s love we will perish—that is, we will die. But the Israelites in Numbers 21:6 were dying because “*the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.*” It isn’t Satan but God who has the keys to death and hades (Rev 1:17-18). It isn’t Satan whom we fear but God.

Those snakes point back to the entry of sin into the world, when the Serpent tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God’s command. God had warned them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “*for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*” (Gen. 2:17b). Again, it was not Satan who gave the prohibition and warned about death. It was God.

about death. It was God. Through their sin as our first parents, and through our own sins, the poison of death has entered our souls. Unless we are saved, we will experience everlasting death. To perish in this sense does not mean to cease to exist, but to be “*tormented day and night forever*” (Rev. 20:10b) by God. Paul says that those who perish in their sins “*will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might*” (2 Thess. 1:9).

This makes God’s love and grace all the more amazing. He knew, when he gave Adam and Eve the original prohibition that they would disobey and that he would send his son to die for our sin. Only an eternal God could punish us forever. And yet, only an eternal God could save us forever. How amazing is God’s love?

*Jesus sought me when a stranger
Wandering from the fold of God
He, to rescue me from danger
Interposed His precious blood*