

~ The Sinners Refuge ~

Text: Joshua 20 & Hebrews 6:16-20

Theme: There is only one refuge to which the repentant sinner must flee and that refuge is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Intro:

1. Having divided the land between the tribes, Israel now came to the task of assigning cities to the tribe of Levi. In Joshua chapter 20 we find the cities of refuge are selected out of the tribes, and these cities are the first 6 cities that would be given to the tribe of Levi.
2. In the chapter we will note:
 - I. The Purpose of the Cities (Josh 20:1-6)
 - II. The Location of the Cities (Josh 20:7-9)
 - III. The Picture in the Cities (Heb 6:16-20)

Main:

- I. **The Purpose of the Cities** (Josh 20:1-6)
 - A. The cities of refuge were for the benefit of man
 1. The cities of refuge were designated places where people could find safety in certain times of trouble.
 - a. There is a specific set of circumstances that necessitated the use of these cities of refuge.
 - i. Under the Levitical Law, if a man murdered another person, the nearest male relative of the slain person had the responsibility of carrying out justice and ensuring the murderer was executed.
 - **Numbers 35:19** *"The revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer: when he meeteth him, he shall slay him."*
 - The purpose in this law was not to encourage personal vengeance but to ensure that the crime of murder didn't go unpunished.
 - ii. However, the problem then arises that a man may have accidentally killed someone, but the avenger may not recognise the event as an accident and may still seek revenge.
 - iii. The cities of refuge were set up for the protection and safety of anyone who had accidentally killed another person.

- **Numbers 35:15** *“These six cities shall be a refuge, both for the children of Israel, and for the stranger, and for the sojourner among them: that every one that killeth any person unawares may flee thither.”*
- b. There were certain rules regarding the use of a city of refuge.
 - i. The first rule for the cities of refuge is that they were not to be used by anyone who had intentionally killed another person.
 - **Numbers 35:16-19** *And if he smite him with an instrument of iron, so that he die, he is a murderer: the murderer shall surely be put to death. And if he smite him with throwing a stone, wherewith he may die, and he die, he is a murderer: the murderer shall surely be put to death. Or if he smite him with an hand weapon of wood, wherewith he may die, and he die, he is a murderer: the murderer shall surely be put to death. The revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer: when he meeteth him, he shall slay him.*
 - It is important, in a day and age when evolution and atheism have sought to undermine the value of a human life, that we remember that God values every life and the Bible still supports the death penalty for murderers. Of course, we aren't to take these matters into our own hands, but our government would do well to follow the biblical pattern of capital punishment for those who wilfully kill another person.
 - ii. Furthermore, the one seeking refuge would need to remain in the city pending his day of judgement before the congregation.
 - iii. Finally, if he was acquitted, he would still be required to remain in the city of refuge until the death of the current High Priest. If he left the city of refuge during that time he would be placing his own life at risk.
 - **Numbers 35:26-28** *“But if the slayer shall at any time come without the border of the city of his refuge, whither he was fled; And the revenger of blood find him without the borders of the city of his refuge, and the revenger of blood kill the slayer; he shall not be guilty of blood: Because he should have remained in the city of his refuge until the death of the high priest: but after the death of the high priest the slayer shall return into the land of his possession.”*

B. The cities of refuge were commanded by God

1. The cities of refuge were commanded by God in Numbers 35:6-28

- a. Moses was commanded to give the tribe of Levi 48 cities, of which 6 would be cities of refuge for anyone who had accidentally slain another person.
 - i. We serve a God of both justice and mercy. He provided a plan for the judgement of the murderer as well as safety for the accidental manslayer.
 - While God desires to see justice exacted upon the wicked, he also delights in mercy for those who have sinned without knowing it, or by accident.
 - This keeps the justice and mercy of God in balance.
 - ii. According to Jewish tradition, "Clear, open roads were to be kept leading from all parts of the land to one or other of these cities, with definite signs indicating the nearest one, so that the man who had slain another in Israel without hating him in his heart or intending to kill him, might flee at once to the city of refuge and so be protected from the avenger of blood."¹

II. The Location of the Cities (Josh 20:7-9)

A. The cities and their locations

1. The cities West of Jordan:
 - a. The city of Kedesh is located in the very centre of the inheritance of the tribe of Naphtali. The tribe of Naphtali is in the extreme north of Israel's inheritance.
 - b. Shechem is located in the extreme northern border of the inheritance of the tribe of Benjamin. The inheritance of Benjamin is slightly south of central within the inheritance of Israel, effectively making Shechem the dead centre of the land.
 - c. Hebron is in the inheritance of the tribe of Judah and is located slightly northeast of central Judah.
2. The cities East of Jordan:
 - a. The tribe of Ruben is the southernmost of the three tribes that remained on the East of Jordan. The city of Bezer is in the extreme north-eastern border of the tribe of Ruben.
 - b. Gad is the central tribe of the three, East of Jordan. The city of refuge in Gad was Ramoth-Gilead, which is also located in the extreme north-eastern border of this tribe's inheritance.

¹ H. A. Ironside, [*Addresses on the Book of Joshua*](#). (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1950), 126–127.

- c. The final city mentioned is within the inheritance of East Manasseh. The city of Golan is practically dead centre of Manasseh's inheritance
- B. The cities priestly owners
 - 1. In chapter 21 we will see that each of the cities of refuge were occupied by the tribe of Levi.
 - a. Since the tribe of Levi had the responsibility of teaching Israel the Laws of God, they would be very careful to uphold the laws of the refuge cities.
 - i. This is the wisdom of God, to give the responsibility of dealing justice to those who would be the most knowledgeable in the Law of God.
 - ii. The further a people move away from the Word of God, the more we should expect to see injustices committed by those who ought to uphold the law of the land without prejudice.
 - b. The tribe of Levi was closely connected with the Aaronic priesthood, whose ministry of sacrifice and intercession pointed forward to the Lord Jesus Christ, our great High Priest.

III. The Picture in the Cities (Heb 6:16-20)

- A. The picture of our Saviour
 - 1. The book of Hebrews draws a parallel between the slayer seeking refuge in a city and the sinner seeking refuge in Christ.
 - a. The sinner is already guilty and facing God's judgement.
 - i. Although the slayer who ran to the cities of refuge was one who had slain someone unwittingly, we are all sinners who have chosen to sin against God.
 - **John 3:19** *"And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."*
 - ii. We are all guilty before God because of our sin.
 - **Romans 3:10** *"As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one."*
 - **Romans 3:23** *"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;"*
 - b. Since we have all chosen to sin against God we are all guilty already and the judgement is sure, the penalty for sin must be paid.
 - **Romans 6:23** *"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."*

- **Romans 14:12** *“So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.”*
- c. The question arises then, if our sin has left us owing a debt which we cannot pay, where then might the guilty sinner find refuge and security, and escape the judgement of God?
- B. The refuge in the Saviour
 1. The refuge that is offered to the guilty sinner is the Lord Jesus Christ and his sacrificial death on our behalf.
 - a. The writer of the book of Hebrews describes the need for the sinner to flee for refuge to God’s chosen provider of salvation.
 - i. The refuge that God has offered to the sinner is a refuge that he provided for us through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - **Romans 5:6-9** *“For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.”*
 - The Lord Jesus Christ has been made our refuge through his sacrificial death on our behalf.
 - b. The refugee, in Joshua chapter 20, would need to remain in the city until the death of the High Priest.
 - i. By comparison, it is the death of our Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, that we have been set free from the penalty and judgement of our sin.
 - ii. “The reference is to those who, though conscious of their own sinfulness, have availed themselves of the salvation procured for them by our Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross. All who find a refuge in Him are safe forever from the judgment of a Holy God.”²
- 2. The counterpart to this is that those who do not take refuge in Christ will be left to face the judgement of God.
 - a. The sinner who rejects the offer of refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ will, one day, find himself standing before the judgement seat of God and he will bear his own punishment for sin.
 - i. The Bible makes it clear that by choosing not to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, you are

² H. A. Ironside, [*Addresses on the Book of Joshua*](#). (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1950), 127.

effectively choosing to take God's punishment for you sin upon yourself.

- **John 3:18** *"He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."*
- ii. "What fools men are who now deliberately refuse the security that God offers in Christ Himself, and. so by spurning Him become guilty before God of the murder of His Son."³
- b. God's justice and mercy are perfectly balanced in the offer of refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ but the promise of judgement for all who reject that judgement.
 - i. In Israel, the one who refused to flee into a city of refuge could be slain by the avenger of blood without any further legal consequences for the avenger.
 - ii. So, the sinner who refuses to seek refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ will be without defense when he stands before the judgement seat of God, having spurned God's offer of mercy.

Conclusion:

1. So, we have seen how God's mercy and justice are perfectly balanced, giving the sinner the choice between accepting God's offer of mercy or facing the wrath that is to come.
2. If you are here today and you have never trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, accepting him as your refuge from the wrath of God, then I exhort you to make that decision today. If you are not 100% certain that you are saved from sin and on your way to heaven, then make sure of it today.

³ H. A. Ironside, [*Addresses on the Book of Joshua*](#). (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1950), 129.