

# Cities of Refuge

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, with God's help, let's turn back to the passage we read a few moments ago, the second passage in Joshua and chapter 20.

Sometimes we can be hesitant to read certain either books of the Bible or perhaps more specifically, we can be hesitant to read certain passages within certain books of the Bible. And usually, if we're honest, the reason we do that is because for some reason, wrongly, we think some of these passages aren't relevant to us.

And for many people, when they come to the portions of God's law that are specifically directed to the nation of Israel and laws that were really relevant for that time and the days gone by, when they come to passages like that, we can either switch off or if we're going through our daily reading of the Bible, we can just bypass these things.

You know, passages like cities of refuge and other passages in Numbers and the particular laws that were for the Israelites. We have that tendency and that temptation to switch off from them.

[ 1 : 14 ] But we must remember that God has given us all his word for a reason. And although we don't live in ancient Israel and we no longer live under the specific circumstances to which some of these laws particularly apply, yet nonetheless, we can learn from the principles that we find in these passages and we can learn from the principles that we find in these particular laws.

But more than that, and I think even more importantly than that, it's not just that we learn from the principles, but in these laws, we see many amazing parallels and pointers forward to our Lord and our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

We see some of his Persian and we see his work as well in these laws. And that alone is just reason to look at passages like this.

And tonight, I want to focus on this law concerning the cities of refuge. And there's different things you could focus on in this passage.

You could focus on the holiness of God in this passage. You could focus maybe on the justice of God and the particular justice system that we have outlined for us here.

[ 2 : 38 ] But what I really want to do and what I want to focus on this evening is I want to focus on these messianic parallels. That's what I want to bring out.

These messianic parallels that we find in this particular law, in these cities of refuge. So I want to use this law of the cities of refuge, and I want to use it as a lens, effectively.

A lens to see pointers forward to the greater refuge, the eternal refuge, our refuge, the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

So that's what I'm going to get on to. But before we address the parallels with Christ, we need to first of all understand what these cities of refuge actually are.

So where does this law itself come from? Well, to answer that, we have to go back a wee bit in Scripture. We have to go back all the way to the beginning, actually, to the book of Genesis.

[ 3 : 38 ] Because in the book of Genesis, the Lord establishes a law concerning corporal punishment. And it's in Genesis chapter 9 and in verse 6, a fairly well-known verse.

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed. Why? For God made man in his own image.

So this principle of the one who is guilty of murder being put to death, that's a principle that goes all the way back to those early chapters in Genesis.

In other words, the sanctity of the life of man, because we are made in the image of God, the sanctity of the life of man is such that if life is taken, then the life of the guilty party must also be given.

That's a principle that you see laid down there in Genesis. But the problem with the method in the ancient world of actually carrying out this principle was a big problem.

[ 4 : 46 ] It wasn't ideal. The way that they were carrying out this principle was far from ideal. In the ancient Near East, it was common that if a person was killed, if a person was murdered, then the closest male member of the family of the person who was murdered, they would become what was known as the blood avenger.

So the closest male family member of the person who was killed, they would become the blood avenger. And the job of the blood avenger, they were to go out and they were to hunt down whoever it was that was the alleged murderer and they would go out and they would kill this alleged murderer.

In other words, in the ancient Near East culture, justice was administered by the family itself. Now, I don't think it's very difficult to see the potential problems with that particular kind of system.

Because that particular kind of system, it could lead to knee-jerk reactions. And often that was the case. Often the blood avenger, the family member of the murdered man or woman, the blood avenger would go out and they would kill the alleged murderer, sometimes even without much proof at all.

And it didn't matter to them either whether it was an intentional murder or not, whether it was manslaughter or whether it was murder.

[ 6 : 21 ] It was all just treated the same and the blood avenger would go out and the blood avenger would kill whoever it was that was guilty of or alleged to be guilty of this murder.

But God's law, God's law is more compassionate than that. It's more compassionate than that. Because in God's law, yes, premeditated murder was punishable by death.

That is absolutely true. But in God's law, there was also this other category of manslaughter. And manslaughter was not. So you had murder and you have manslaughter.

These two categories. And of course, that's two categories that we still use today in our own legal system as well. So there was these two things. And manslaughter wasn't punishable by death.

Premeditated murder, yes, but not manslaughter. And that's why these cities of refuge here were set up. They were set up in order to protect the manslayer, the person who killed unintentionally.

[ 7 : 28 ] And because, remember, people are going to be after him or her. And this city of refuge, this would be a place where they would be safe and where they would find refuge from those seeking to kill them.

So if you had unintentionally killed someone, you were a manslayer. That's the definition. And the blood avenger was going to come after you.

And the only way that you'd have any refuge, the only way that you'd be safe and secure, the only way that you would be protected, is if you fled to one of these cities of refuge, one of these God-appointed cities of refuge.

So this law here, it's all about one who is guilty fleeing to a God-appointed city for refuge.

That's the basic principle of this law. Now, it's almost impossible to read that law there and to go through that law there without seeing spiritual parallels with the salvation that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 8 : 42 ] Because as I mentioned before, spiritually speaking, he is our city of refuge. The Lord Jesus Christ himself. And what I want to do now is I want to move on and I want to draw or pick out some parallels that we find here in the passage between these cities of refuge and Christ and the salvation that we have ourselves in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, sometimes, you have to be careful here, because sometimes you can fall into the trap of perhaps over-spiritualizing scripture and maybe making parallels which sometimes aren't actually there.

Sometimes that can be interesting to do, but they're not always there. But I think in this case, we're quite right to make the connections because we have New Testament warrant. I read earlier on in Hebrews and in chapter 6, and in verse 17, we read this.

I don't know if you picked up on the language. We read, So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

We who have fled for refuge. So the writer to the Hebrews there, he actually uses that very terminology. He uses the terminology of fleeing for refuge, the very terminology that you find in the passages of the cities of refuge.

[10:30] And he's using that in connection with Christ and in connection with the salvation that we have in Christ. So I think we are quite justified in making parallels here between these cities of refuge and the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

So let's pick out some of the parallels. Now, the first one, the first parallel is fairly obvious and it's really the main parallel that we have.

The first one is, the city of refuge provides refuge for the guilty in the same way being found in Christ provides refuge for the sinner.

So the city of refuge provides refuge for the guilty in the same way being found in Christ provides refuge for the sinner.

Now, you just, for a moment, you put yourself back into this particular day and age in Joshua's time, in the Old Testament period.

[11:31] And you try and imagine the danger that someone would be in in this culture had they actually committed manslaughter, had they actually killed somebody unintentionally or accidentally.

Now, if that happened, you can imagine the sheer panic that would come over them. Absolute panic. They have blood on their hands. They didn't mean to, but that's neither here nor there. They have blood on their hands and they know what that means. According to the culture of the day, they know what that means. They know that the blood avenger, whoever that might be of this person's family, is going to come after them.

And the blood avenger is going to hunt them down and eventually the blood avenger is going to put them to death. And you can imagine the fear. The fear that you'd experience. You would have absolutely no sense of peace whatsoever.

And I suppose you would be constantly looking over your shoulder, looking for this blood avenger to appear. You wouldn't even be able to sleep at night.

[12:36] You'd be sleeping with one eye open, wondering when the inevitable is going to happen, when the blood avenger was going to catch up with you, when death was going to come and take you.

But then, when you're going back to that culture, when you're facing all these fears and this lack of peace, then you hear about this provision from God.

A city. A city of refuge. And that gives you hope. That gives you this sense of a chance of protection and a chance of peace.

And when you hear about these cities of refuge, the first thing you will do is you will flee there. You will run to that city, whichever one was nearest to you. And on your way, you can well imagine perhaps fearing that the blood avenger might be on your tail.

You can well imagine wondering, what if I don't make it to the city? What if he overtakes me? What will happen to me? What if he gets to me? And what if he kills me?

[13:41] And then you make it. You make it to the city. And you make it to the gates of one of these cities of refuge. And at the entrance, according to our passage here, we read that men are there to question you.

The men are there to question you on entry. And here, as you answer, a bit like what we were looking at last night actually, you're not there to plead your innocence. You're not saying, let me into the city, I am innocent.

It's actually the opposite. You plead your guilt. You come and you say, I'm guilty. I am guilty. I am a man slayer. And when you admit your guilt and when you tell them what you've done, then these doors, these doors open and they let you into this city because this city is a place of refuge.

It's a place of refuge for guilty people. Guilty people like me and you. And you come into the city and as you come into the city, again, just imagining ourselves in this context, as you would come into this city, you would almost fall inside the walls and you would just have this almighty sigh of relief.

You're finally safe. You finally have some sense of peace. And what a relief that must have been and what a burden removed. That constant stress of not knowing what's going to happen to you, that constant stress of not knowing whether the blood of injured was going to appear at any moment, that's all gone.

[ 15 : 18 ] You're now safe. In the city of refuge, you are absolutely safe. And when you think about that picture, is that not exactly what it's like for the sinner, for me and you when we come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because Christ, as I've mentioned, he is our city of refuge. And that is a city that we hear a lot about, isn't it? Most of us here, I assume we go to church regularly.

And we regularly hear about our need to flee to Christ, our need to flee to our city of refuge. And perhaps you remember a time before you were converted.

Perhaps you remember a time when maybe you agreed with what you were hearing. You thought to yourself, yeah, city of refuge, Christ. I need to flee to Christ.

I need really to make my way to him. But perhaps at that time, you just didn't feel your urgency.

Perhaps you remember a time when there was nothing really driving you to the city.

[ 16 : 28 ] You were hearing about Christ. You were hearing about the refuge in Christ. But there was nothing driving you there. You were quite happy in the cities of this world. And perhaps there are even people in here tonight for whom that's still the case.

When you had no sense of danger, no sense of your trouble at all. But then, of course, what happens is the Spirit of God begins to work. And when the Spirit of God works, he brings the law of God before us.

And what the law of God does is the law of God opens our eyes. And as I touched on again last evening, the law of God enables us to see our sin.

And like the manslayer, you realize your guilt. And maybe you remember what that was like when the Spirit did that. When you started realizing that you were guilty, you realized that you had blood on your hands, you realized you were a lawbreaker.

All these things would just come flooding to you. And when that happens, you become aware as well that you deserve judgment. You become acutely aware of that.

[ 17 : 34 ] You become aware that you deserve the wrath of God. You deserve the judgment of the Most High God. And it leaves you on edge. Just like the manslayer would have been when he was running away.

On edge. Leaves you on edge. And maybe you remembered attending church before then and hearing about judgment and hearing about hell and things like that.

And you could just brush it off. It wasn't really a big deal. But all of a sudden, when this is happening to you and when you're becoming aware of your guilt and all these things, you can't brush it off anymore. You hear about judgment and hell and you're fearful.

You're absolutely fearful. And like the manslayer, you're looking over your shoulder, wondering when the avenger of blood is going to turn up. Wondering when death is going to come for you.

And again, you don't sleep either. You can't sleep the same. It's like you're sleeping with one eye open because you're aware that judgment could come. Judgment could come and it could come at any moment and it leaves you fearful.

[ 18 : 38 ] But then, you remember about this spiritual city of refuge. And you remember, you recall the gospel message.

You recall that Christ is a place of refuge for guilty sinners like me and you. People who don't deserve to be forgiven. People who deserve the judgment of God.

But yet, we read that Christ is a refuge for us. Not for those who aren't guilty. Not for those who aren't sinners. A refuge for those who are, in fact, guilty themselves.

And at that point, when these thoughts come to you at that point, you drop everything. You drop everything. And as soon as you realize this, you flee to Christ.

Now, that can take a while to come to that realization. Perhaps for many of us in here, that's the case. It can take a while. But when we do realize it, we flee. We bolt and we make our way to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 19 : 36 ] And as soon as we do, he opens the door and he calls us into the refuge of his own person. And like the manslayer, you'd feel this sense of relief.

The sense of peace. The sense that I am safe, finally. And eternally safe. And again, that's no doubt something that many of us in here remember and have experienced.

And for those who haven't experienced it, then you must flee. You must flee and you must come to this city of refuge. The Lord Jesus Christ himself.

And notice in the passage in connection with the same point in verse 5. Notice in verse 5. We read, if the avenger of blood pursues him.

So he's in the city already. But if the avenger of blood pursues him, they shall not give up the manslayer into his hand. So the manslayer at this point is in the city.

[ 20 : 36 ] He is safe in the city. And what we read there is that even if the accuser comes, even if the accuser comes to the gates of the city and if he calls for the manslayer, the city will not give up the manslayer.

And the city will not allow the blood of injuring. The manslayer is absolutely safe. And spiritually, that's true of the Christian as well. Because that's what the devil does.

The devil is the accuser of the brethren. And that's exactly what he does. He comes to the gates of the kingdom of God and he accuses us. He accuses us of our sin and he wants to attack us.

That's what he wants to do. He wants at us. But we are safe in the city of refuge. We are safe in Christ. He, the devil that is, cannot lay a finger on us.

Those who are in Christ, those who are put their faith and trust in Christ, the devil cannot lay a finger on us. And we will at no point be thrown out of this city to face the devil and to face his attacks.

[ 21 : 42 ] You are absolutely safe in this city of refuge. You see, you may hear the roar of the devil from outside the gates of the kingdom of God and you do and we do if we're honest.

We hear his roaring. We hear his accusations. But you will never feel his bite. You will never feel his bite. You might hear and you might even be intimidated by it but you need not fear as we sang earlier on.

You need not fear of his fiery darts. You need not fear these things because he cannot get in. He cannot get in and he cannot get to the people of God. We are protected in Christ, our city of refuge. So that's our first parallel. The next ones are going to be shorter. So that's our first parallel. The city of refuge provides refuge for the guilty in the same way being found in Christ provides refuge for the sinner.

So our second parallel is the city, the cities were accessible to all and so too is Christ. So the cities were accessible to all and so too is Christ.

[ 22 : 57 ] So see in verse 7 and 8 there in our passage you see the cities mentioned and listed and the geography of these cities was designed so that no one tribe would be very far away from one of these cities.

in fact nobody would be more than around 30 miles away from one of these cities and that's roughly speaking about a day's journey.

So everybody is within about a day's journey from one of these cities and the understanding is that access to these cities should be straightforward and easy.

That's the understanding here. It's almost like there would be a law that all the roads should be maintained and everything should be made easy because access to these cities of refuge has to be absolutely easy.

There cannot be any barriers at all to this refuge and so it is with salvation in Christ. It's the same. Salvation in Christ it's within the reach and grasp of everyone.

[ 24 : 06 ] What I mean by that is we're not asked to embark embark on some long spiritual religious quest before we find Christ.

That's not the case. We're not asked to jump over lots of different barriers and hurdles in order that we might find refuge in Christ.

We're not asked to navigate through some kind of difficult spiritual maze before we find Christ.

That's not the case at all. The way is straight.

the path is open and straight and it has been prepared for us and it has been prepared for us by Christ himself. Our Lord has prepared it as Isaiah tells us.

He has made the crooked places straight and the rough ways smooth. Our Lord has done that. He has paved the way to the city of refuge.

[ 25 : 04 ] How has he done that? How has he prepared that way? Through his death. It is death that has done that. It is death that has opened up this way. It is his death that has removed all the barriers that are there.

Removed the flaming sword from Eden. It is his death that has opened up that access that we have to the Lord. And like every road there's a signpost on this on.

And it's very simple. The signpost says put your faith in me. Nothing complicated in that sense. Put your faith in me. That is the way. That is the way to this city.

Faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. And again connected with that it's interesting too that the cities of refuge they weren't just for Jews.

We actually read that in Joshua chapter 20 but it's also in Numbers chapter 35 as well. So Numbers 35 gives us the details of this particular law. And in Numbers 35 and verse 15 we read this.

[ 26 : 05 ] These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel and for the stranger and for the sojourner among them.

And so it is with Christ. We don't have to be from a particular background to come to Christ and to come to the city of refuge.

We don't have to come from a particular kind of family, a Christian family to find refuge in Christ. We don't have to come from a particular culture to find refuge in Christ.

We don't even have to have been brought up in the church to find refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is open to all. The offer of this place of refuge is there for everyone.

Christ is on offer to all. And that was a big part of this city of refuge. Accessible to all. So then, the city of refuge is accessible to all as is salvation in Christ.

[ 27 : 11 ] So what are some of the other parallels that we find here? Well, thirdly, we see that here in the city of refuge, the death of the high priest results in the freedom of the manslayer.

Notice that in verse six. 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, in other words, after the death of the high priest, then the manslayer may return to his own town and his own home to the town from which he fled.

So the manslayer, he would remain in the city of refuge, the whole time because obviously the blood avenger was out to kill him, so he stayed in the city of refuge, and even while he was there and even while he got the shelter of that city, he was still guilty.

Just because he entered into the city of refuge, that didn't take his guilt away as such. He was still guilty. He was guilty of manslaughter. Now, yes, it wasn't punishable by death, but he was still guilty of having committed this crime.

[ 28 : 27 ] However, once the high priest died, that seems to almost change his status in some way, and he was then allowed to go back home as a free and innocent man.

And it's almost as though, I say almost as though, because it's not quite clear, but it's almost as though the death of the high priest is acting in some way like a picture of substitutionary atonement. It's not necessarily precisely that, but you see it there. The high priest is dying, and then the man is going free. The man is going back to his home. You see, we are used to seeing in the Old Testament, we're used to seeing the high priest as being the one who offers sacrifices.

Whenever you read about the high priest, he's offering sacrifices. That's generally how we read about the high priest, but here, it's the high priest himself almost that looks like the sacrifice, because it's the death of the high priest that somehow changes things.

It's the death of the high priest that then results in this man going off and this man being able to go back home free and safely. And of course, that's exactly what happens to us in the gospel as well, because Jesus is our high priest.

[ 29 : 52 ] The writer to the Hebrews makes that very clear, plainly clear. Jesus, he is our great high priest. And just like this picture of the high priest here in the passage, our high priest, he doesn't just offer a sacrifice.

That's the amazing thing about our high priest. He doesn't just offer a sacrifice. He does offer a sacrifice, but he is himself the offering. That's quite amazing.

He is the one who offers the sacrifice, and at the same time, he is the sacrifice. Because with the death of our high priest, with the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, that atones for our sin, that cleanses us, it washes away that guilt and the iniquity within us, and as we were thinking about last night, it removes the wrath.

The wrath is turned aside because the wrath has fallen on our great high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. So, just as here in the city of refuge, the death of the high priest seems to result in the freedom of the manslayer, so too in the gospel, the death of our great high priest is what removes the guilt of our sin.

That's how we get that peace that we were thinking about earlier on, and I mentioned in prayer, all because of his death. And lastly, the last parallel that I want to make, notice the emphasis here on fleeing to the cities.

[ 31 : 31 ] So, in verse 3 and 4, twice you read of this language of fleeing to one of these cities. And the last parallel that I want to make is, just as the city of refuge is a place where the guilty one must flee to, so too as sinners we must ensure that we flee to our refuge, the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, that word fleeing is important. It's repeated for a reason because fleeing implies some kind of urgency. Now, this is something I touched on earlier on in our first point, but I just want to highlight it again here in closing.

The fact that these cities, they're all nearby and they're all within the reach of everyone so that they'll be accessible in order that people can flee there.

That's the whole point, to be accessible in order that people might flee there. That urgency is there, fleeing to one of these cities. Urgency is really one of the key points in the passage.

When we're thinking about these cities, urgency, urgency to actually get to one of these cities is very much to the fore. How there ought to be that same urgency in our coming to Christ.

[ 32 : 58 ] How often we are told to flee to Christ. We hear it all the time. Yet, how often people respond with apathy and with utter indifference.

You hear it all the time. You see it all the time as well. People respond to this plea by saying things like, maybe next year. I know I need to flee.

I know I need to get there. Maybe next year. Maybe next communion season. That's another one.

Maybe next communion season I'll make my way to the refuge that is the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's like many people are just sauntering towards the kingdom. That's what it's like, isn't it? You come across them in our churches all the time, every Lord's Day perhaps, and they're just sauntering towards the kingdom, sauntering towards this city of refuge, sauntering towards the Lord Jesus Christ with absolutely no sense of their danger, absolutely no sense of the trouble they are in or the urgency of the situation.

And I wonder, perhaps there may well be someone in here tonight for whom that is the case. And when you hear of the cities of refuge, you know you want to get there, you know that, and you know that you need to get there, and you know when you hear about Christ and you hear about salvation you know yourself that that is something you absolutely need.

[ 34 : 37 ] But at the same time, you've got no urgency to actually flee to Christ. No urgency at all. And perhaps you're quite happy just sauntering on the outside, close, near the door, looking in, but not inside, sauntering on the outside.

And the only reason that someone wouldn't run as fast as they could to one of these cities of refuge, the only reason someone wouldn't flee as fast as they could was quite simply because they didn't realize what danger they were in.

That's the only explanation. And that may well be the case for those known to us, or perhaps, again, perhaps those in here as well. It may well be that we're not fully aware of the danger that we are actually in.

And we have to ask ourselves, are we blind to that danger? Do you realize that in a moment, and I mean a moment, in a split second you can go from time to eternity, in a moment you can find yourself before the judgment seat of God, in a moment the blood avenger can catch up with you. It could happen at any time at all. It can happen of course even before we leave this place tonight. And when you stand, if you were to stand at the judgment seat of God in that situation, it wouldn't be enough for you to turn to him and say, I was making my way there.

[ 36 : 07 ] I was making my way to the city of refuge. I was making my way to put my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is meaningless. You're either inside or you're outside.

Supposing you're within touching distance of the door. If you're outside, you're outside. It is only those who are inside who are saved. Hence, our urgent need to flee to this city of refuge to the Lord Jesus Christ while we still have opportunity to do so.

Before the avenger of blood catches up with us, we must find ourselves in Christ. And my hope and prayer tonight, certainly for all present here, is that we have been found in that refuge.

And even for our families and our neighbors and loved ones. That's our desire for them, that they might be brought in to this refuge, this place where we are safe.

There's lots of people today and they're looking for safety, they're looking for shelter. We live in a messed up world, a confused world. People are struggling, people are hurt, people are broken. [ 37 : 18 ] They are in need of a refuge. And the refuge is there in Christ. I hope and pray that you are there, but I hope and pray as well that you will go out, that you will make known this place of refuge and that you will invite others to this refuge as well.

Because there are many people out there tonight who need that very refuge from Christ. Let's pray. Thank you.