

ESF, Lord's day service message  
3/24/2019

## **A Place of Refuge**

Joshua 20:1-9

*Then the Lord said to Joshua: 2. Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed you through Moses, 3. So that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood. 4" When he flees to one of these cities, he is to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state in his case before the elders of that city. Then they are to admit him into their city and give him a place to live with them. 5. If the avenger of blood pursues him, they must not surrender the one accused, because he killed his neighbor unintentionally and without malice aforethought. 6. 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. 7. So they set apart Kedesh 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. 9. 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.*

There is an ancient door on display in St. Patrick's cathedral in Dublin, Ireland. The door has a rectangular hole hacked out in its center. It is called the "Door of Reconciliation." In 1492, two prominent Irish families, the Ormonds and Kildares, were in the midst of a bitter feud. As the feud grew and turned into an all out fight, the Earl of Ormand was besieged by the Earl of Kildare. The Earl of Ormand and his family and followers took refuge in the chapter house of St. Patrick's cathedral

and bolted themselves in. However, as the siege wore on, the Earl of Kildare concluded the feuding was foolish. Here were two families worshipping the same God, in the same church, living in the same country, trying to kill each other. So Kildare called out to the Earl of Ormand and pledged that he would not seek revenge or indulge in villainy — he wanted the Ormands to come out and the feud to be over. But the Earl of Ormand was convinced that it was a scheme and refused to come out of the cathedral. So Kildare grabbed his spear, chopped a hole in the door with it, and thrust his hand through. There was a tense moment until his hand was grasped by another hand inside the church. The door was opened and the two men embraced, thus ending the family feud. The cathedral was used as a refuge which brought reconciliation between the two families in a bitter feud.

God told the Israelites to appoint several towns in their land to be the “cities of refuge.” These cities were for someone who might have killed another person by accident. The person could flee to one of these cities and be protected from revenge. What lessons does God give us today by the cities of refuge?

First, we all need a place of refuge.

Second, the refuge is available to all of us.

Third, we must enter the refuge.

### **We all need a place of refuge (verses 1-3)**

In ancient time, the nation of Israel didn't have anything equivalent to our legal system today. When someone was murdered, the penalty for murder was death. And the penalty was carried by the family of the victim to avenge that death. But there could be cases where some people killed others accidentally. If the victims' families still avenge the death on the killers who killed their family members accidentally, it could be too harsh of a punishment. Those who killed others accidentally needed protection from the avengers of the blood to get fair trial. They also

needed to be treated with mercy. To protect them from harsh revenge and to treat them with mercy, God provided the Israelites places of refuge: *Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, ...So that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood.*

Anyone who killed someone by accident would run to one of these cities and plead his case before the elders of the city. They would then allow him to come in and give protection from the family of the victim. Without such a law, the accused would never receive proper judgment because the avengers would return death for death without a trial. With such a law of refuge, God was not sanctioning violence, but provided the way for a fair and merciful trial to those who might kill others accidentally.

What does this ancient law of refuge have to do with us today? It is a means of refuge for our soul. Just as the cities of refuge were places to which a killer could flee in times of trouble, so God provides a place where sinners can flee to in times of condemnation.

We are born sinners. Even though it isn't our fault to be born as sinners, it is our fault that we stay that way. As we grow older and reach an age when we can make a choice, we all choose sin. So, we are guilty by birth and practice. Now since this is true, we are in deep trouble. Just like there was a death sentence for all who took another life, there is also a death sentence for all born into the sinful human race.

But God provides us the place of refuge. Isaiah 25:1-4 says: *O Lord, you are my God;.....You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.*

To provide a refuge for our souls, God has provided Jesus Christ to us. Jesus is our refuge! In Christ, we can find refuge from condemnation of

our sins and all penalties for our sins. Romans 8:1 says that there is no condemnation for those who are in Him.

The New Testament uses the phrase “in Christ” many times. It pictures our relationship with Jesus as being safe in Him. 1 John 2:1 says that He is our advocate and our defender, one who speaks up for us when we need it.

The only place to find protection from the avenger of blood was in the city of refuge. The only place to find refuge for our sin-stained and troubled souls is in Christ. Acts 4:12 reminds us that “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*” Christ Jesus is the only one in whom all sinners can find a refuge.

### **The refuge is available to all (verses 7-8)**

In following God’s instruction on the cities of refuge, the Israelites set three cities of refuge on each side of the Jordan River. On the west side of Jordan, Kedesh was in the north, Shechem was in the middle and Hebron was in the south. On the east side of the Jordan, Golan in the north, in the middle was Ramoth, and Bezer was in the south. The cities of refuge were located evenly in the land, so no one was ever far from a city of refuge.

Also they set those cities of refuge in the hill countries or prominent places. The cities of refuge were in elevated positions so that they could be seen from far away. They were located at prominent places which all people could find easily. The direction toward those cities was never

The roads leading to these cities were kept clear and available in all seasons. The gates should be never locked but always remain open.

As God set up those cities of refuge for those who sought His merciful

protection, God has set Jesus as the way of refuge for all sinners who seek His merciful forgiveness and protection. Through Christ, God provides a clear road that brings the guilty sinner to the place of refuge. God let Jesus be crucified on the hill of the Calvary, so that all people could see His death on the cross and find the refuge in Him for their troubled souls.

Just as the cities of refuge were open to everybody, Jew and Gentile, every tribe and tongue and nation; Jesus' salvation is universal in its scope. The apostle Paul says in Romans 10:12-13, *"For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile- the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on Him, for, Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

We no longer have the cities of refuge as in the Old Testament times, but the church would take over the role of the cities of refuge. Jesus has put churches in this world to provide His refuge to the people who have no chance to be accepted in this world.

God's intention by the cities of refuge was that while there had to be justice, His people should be willing to demonstrate mercy as well. It does not mean that we must nullify the guilt of people's crimes. But it means that we accept the people who are condemned and rejected in this world of justice and share God's mercy with them.

As the door of the cities of refuge should be open always to all people who need refuge, our church should be open to all kinds of people, to both good people and bad people, to both the likable and the unlikable, to both peace makers and trouble makers.

Some people are complaining that church is filled with many bad people. In some sense it may be true. In fact, if people are good enough not to need a refuge for their sins, their troubles, they don't need to come

to church. Just as sick people come to hospitals to be healed, so sinners come to church to be forgiven. When some holy people complained that Jesus easily got along with sinners and bad people, He replied to them: *It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick, I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners* (Mark 2:17).

Especially in today's world where people cannot easily find a place of refuge for their troubles, our church must be a place where they can find a refuge of unconditional love. Our church must be a place where hopeless people can find hope in the God of second chances.

How can we, as a church, be such a place of refuge? By remembering that we are all sinners. By remembering that without Christ's unconditional acceptance and forgiveness, we would be hopeless just as they are. By sharing that unconditional love of Christ with others. By always being thankful to Christ for being the refuge of our souls. By recognizing that Jesus has called us to be a church of refuge for all without any favoritism or discrimination or prejudice. By obeying His word to forgive and love all, even those who hate us and hurt us. By being anointed with the Holy Spirit who gives us gifts of evangelism. By exercising the gift in reaching out to those who need refuge but do not know where the refuge is.

### **We must enter the refuge (verses 4-6, 9)**

To be protected by the cities of refuge, the person who might kill other person accidentally should flee into the one of the cities. If the killer did not flee into the one of the cities, he could not be protected from punishment or revenge.

God has prepared a place of refuge but we must "flee" to it. Although God has provided the way of protection from the punishment for our sins, we cannot receive the protection if we do not believe the way and accept the way. We have to come to Jesus with faith that He is God's

refuge for our troubled souls. Hebrews 6:18 encourages us to do so: *we who have fled to Him (Christ) for refuge might have mighty indwelling strength and strong encouragement to grasp and hold fast the hope appointed for us and set before us.*(Amplified Bible)

Then how can we flee to Christ to find refuge for our troubled souls?

Frist, we must trust that God forgives us of all our sins if we believe in the cross of Christ.

There is no condition except believing that Jesus died on the cross to forgive all our sins. If you are tired of running from your sins and of feeling trapped in a hopeless situation, come to the cross of Jesus. If you will come to Him by faith, He will become a refuge for your troubled soul (Matthew 11:28). He will put peace in your heart (Romans 5:1). It doesn't matter who you are and what kind of life you've lived. Jesus will never reject anyone who comes to Him. In John 6:37 Jesus assures all who may come to Him of that: *...whoever comes to me I will never drive away.*

Secondly, we must bring all our anxieties to the Lord.

1 Peter 5:7 says, “ *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*” When we cast our anxieties to Christ, he assures us that God is with us, takes care of us and helps us get through all troubles.

During a Sunday class the question was asked, "In your time of discouragement, what is your favorite Scripture?"

A young man said, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" Psalm 23:1. A middle age woman said, "God is my refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" Psalm 46:1. Another woman said, "In this world you shall have tribulations, but be of good cheer, I have overcome this world" John 16:33-35.

Then old Mr. John who was 80 years old, with head of white hair and dark black skin, stood up and said with as much strength as he could

muster, "It says, 'And it came to pass...' 85 times in the Bible." The class started to laugh a little, thinking that old Mr. John's lack of memory was getting the best of him.

When the snickering stopped, he said, "At 30, I lost my job with six hungry mouths and a wife to feed. I didn't know how I would make it. At 40, my eldest son was killed overseas in the war. It knocked me down. At 50, my house burned to the ground. Nothing was saved out of the house. At 60, my wife of 40 years got cancer. It slowly ate away at her. We cried together many nights on our knees in prayer. At 65, she died. I still miss her today.

The agony I went through in each of these situations was unbelievable. I wondered where God was. But each time I looked in the bible I saw one of those 85 verses that said, 'And it came to pass' I felt that God was telling me, my pain and my circumstances were also going to pass and that God would get me through it."

During our life time, we will experience heartache, disappointment, and sheer helplessness. The Lord is our most precious resource in those hours of trauma. "The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble (Psalm 9:9). So let's cast our anxiety, fear, discouragement, hopelessness to the Lord. The Lord will surely provide us peace, confidence, strength and hope. The Lord will enable us to get us through all troubles.